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U.S. Gives Its Air Power Expansive Role in Libya

By ERIC SCHMITT

WASHINGTON — Even as President Obama on Monday described a narrower role for the United States in a NATO-led operation in Libya, the American military has been carrying out an expansive and increasingly potent air campaign to compel the Libyan Army to turn against Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

When the mission was launched, it was largely seen as having a limited, humanitarian agenda: to keep Colonel Qaddafi from attacking his own people. But the White House, the Pentagon and their European allies have given it the most expansive possible interpretation, amounting to an all-out assault on Libya's military.

A growing armada of coalition warplanes, armed with more precise information about the location and abilities of Libyan Army units than was known a week ago, have effectively provided the air cover the ragtag opposition has needed to stave off certain defeat in its de facto eastern capital, Benghazi.

Allied aircraft are not only dropping 500-pound bombs on Libyan troops, they are also using psychological operations to try to break their will to fight, broadcasting messages in Arabic and English, telling Libyan soldiers and sailors to abandon their posts and go back to their homes and families, and to defy Colonel Qaddafi's orders.

The Obama administration has been reluctant to call the operation an actual war, and it has sought to emphasize the involvement of a dozen other countries, particularly Italy, Britain and France. In his speech on Monday night, Mr. Obama, as he has in the past, portrayed the mission as a limited one, and described the United States' role as "supporting."

But interviews in recent days offer a fuller picture of American involvement, and show that it is far deeper than discussed in public and more instrumental to the fight than was previously known.

From the air, the United States is supplying much more firepower than any other country. The allies have fired nearly 200 Tomahawk cruise missiles since the campaign started on March 19, all but 7 from the United States. The United States has flown about 370 attack missions, and its allied partners have flown a

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similar number, but the Americans have dropped 455 precision-guided munitions compared with 147 from other coalition members.

Besides taking part in the airstrikes, the American military is taking the lead role in gathering intelligence, intercepting Libyan radio transmissions, for instance, and using the information to orchestrate attacks against the Libyan forces on the ground. And over the weekend the Air Force quietly sent three of its most fearsome weapons to the operation.

The strategy for White House officials nervous that the Libya operation could drag on for weeks or months, even under a NATO banner, is to hit Libyan forces hard enough to force them to oust Colonel Qaddafi, a result that Mr. Obama has openly encouraged.

"Certainly, the implied though not stated goal here is that the Libyan Army will decide they're fighting for a losing cause," said Gen. John P. Jumper, a retired Air Force chief of staff. "You're probably dealing with a force that may not be totally motivated to continue this for the long haul."

Ten days into the assault, the officials said that Libya's formidable integrated air defense has been largely obliterated, and that the operation was shifting to a new phase devised to put even more pressure on the country's armored columns and ground troops.

For the Americans, six tank-killing A-10 Warthogs that fire laser-guided Maverick missiles or 30-millimeter cannons arrived on the scene this weekend. The United States also deployed two B-1B bombers, as well as two AC-130 gunships, lumbering aircraft that orbit over targets at roughly 15,000 feet, bristling with 40-millimeter and 105-millimeter cannons. The gunships' weapons are so precise that they could operate against Libyan forces in cities, which so far have been off limits for fear of civilian casualties.

On Sunday, allied warships and submarines fired six Tomahawk cruise missiles at the headquarters of the Libyan 32nd Brigade, based in Tripoli and commanded by one of the Libyan leader's sons, Khamis Qaddafi. Colonel Qaddafi has used the brigade in the past for internal repression.

"This is one of Qaddafi's most loyal units and are also one of the most active in terms of attacking innocent people," Vice Adm. William E. Gortney, the director of the military's joint staff, told reporters on Monday.

Despite this increased pressure on Libya's elite forces, Admiral Gortney insisted that the military was not going beyond the mandate of the United Nations resolution.

"I would definitely not say mission creep," he said.

Over all, commanders say they are trying to create havoc among the Libyan forces, cutting off their

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logistic pipeline, severing their communications back to headquarters in Tripoli, and stoking fear within the ranks with round-the-clock attacks.

"You want to create confusion at the front, go in after command and control at the rear and supply lines in between and ammunition facilities anywhere that we can find them," Admiral Gortney said Monday, describing the overall effect the campaign is trying to achieve.

On Sunday, an EC-130J Commando Solo aircraft broadcast messages in English and Arabic, to warn Libyan armed forces. "Libyan sailors, leave your ship immediately," the message warned. "Leave your equipment and return to your family or your home. The Qaddafi regime forces are violating a United Nations resolution ordering the end of hostilities in your country."

Air commanders provided an example of the role of American intelligence-gathering. Air Force eavesdropping planes intercept communications from Libyan troops and relay that information to a Global Hawk drone flying high overhead. The Global Hawk zooms in on the location of armored forces and determines rough coordinates. In some cases, the drones are the first to detect moving targets. The Global Hawk sends the coordinates to analysts at a ground station, who pass the data on to the command center for targeting. The command center beams the coordinates to an E-3 Sentry Awacs command-and-control plane, which in turn directs F-16 and Harrier jets and other warplanes to their targets.

"Our message to the regime troops is simple: Stop fighting, stop killing your own people, stop obeying the orders of Colonel Qaddafi," Admiral Gortney said last week. "To the degree that you defy these demands, we will continue to hit you and make it more difficult for you to keep going."

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