

Libya: International Peace Bureau condemns military strikes and urges political negotiations to protect the civilian population

21 March 2011. A new historical era opened three months ago with the popular uprisings in Tunisia and then Egypt, the first of the 'Arab spring' season. These rebellions brought hope to millions and youthful energy to societies suffering decades of repression, injustice, inequality, especially gender inequality, and increasing economic hardship. The Libyan revolt was inspired by these largely nonviolent victories, but, as the world has witnessed with dismay, has rapidly become militarized and is now embroiled in a full-scale civil war.

NO MORE ARMED INTERVENTIONS

The western powers' fateful decision to push through the UN Security Council a resolution to authorize military strikes and a no-fly zone has transformed the situation into one reminiscent of the Iraq crisis of 2003. While supporting the objective of protecting the civilian population, in Benghazi and elsewhere, IPB condemns yet more armed attacks by western powers on yet another Muslim country. Have these same powers learned nothing from their disastrous failures over the last 10 years? It is clear that non-military methods have not been utterly exhausted. Were all economic sanctions imposed and enforced? Was massive electronic jamming put into operation? Were all oil and gas sales cancelled? – and will we ever be told?

WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN?

Western media fascination with the minutiae of battle tends to obscure historical memory, without which any clear assessment is impossible. Have we all forgotten who sold arms to, and struck energy deals with, Col. Gaddafi in the first place? Do the phrases 'no-fly zone' and 'air strikes' not bring back painful memories of the slide into disastrous occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan?

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

There is no lack of alternative courses of action. In IPB's view, the most urgent task, and the most effective way to carry out the UN-mandated 'Responsibility to Protect' the civilian population, is to engage immediately both the Gaddafi regime and the rebels in serious negotiations. These should focus, first on a genuine and multi-lateral ceasefire, and then on the foundations of a political settlement based on participatory democracy. The UN already has a special representative in place in Tripoli. Cynical or not, Gaddafi has made a ceasefire gesture – which could be used as a starting point. Western states, especially the US and the former colonial powers, should keep out. The UN Secretary-General and a panel of highly respected figures from the Muslim world should be invited to take part in whatever talks can be arranged. An offer to call off the air strikes could be used as a confidence-building measure. In the medium-term, consideration should be given to a UN-authorized peacekeeping presence, preferably not composed of western military forces, with a classical peacekeeping (not peace-enforcement) mandate. Why is it that investment in mediation, diplomacy, trust-building and similar efforts is always a tiny fraction of the money spent on armed intervention?

UNLOCKING CREATIVITY

Arab peoples have shown that they have the courage to break away from past habits and have demonstrated impressive discipline and dignity in confronting their oppressors. The western world should now respond by finding the courage to break with its own past habits, and to apply the enormous creativity of its own societies in the search for new ways of resolving conflicts. Success in Libya - or indeed elsewhere in the region - would offer tremendous inspiration to peoples locked in deadly conflict in other regions.

REVERSING COURSE

It is still not too late for those leading this latest military gamble to pull out of the quagmire that looms ahead. We urge the world to mobilise now against war and foreign intervention, and in favour of negotiated solutions.

What is done in the coming days and weeks will determine the possibilities for a long-term settlement. Foreign bombing only threatens a wider conflagration with unpredictable consequences.

WIDER ASPECTS

There are all kinds of wider considerations to be explored, and important lessons that need to be assimilated. In particular, that the five permanent members of the Security Council cannot continue to police the world as if we were still in 1945; and that it is time for a global outcry against the massive expenditure devoted to the military system (\$1,500 billion per annum), and in particular the international arms trade, with its accompanying corruption and double standards.

The International Peace Bureau is clear on its own priorities. We need to disarm in order to develop. The basic needs of the population must be catered for as the absolute priority, not as a by-product of 'national security'. We appeal to the arms-producing countries and industries to urgently start converting military research and production to civilian purposes. The world will never achieve the Millennium Development Goals if it fails to abandon the military-dominated way of thinking and action. We have learned in recent years that democracy cannot be imposed, and that regime change is only a matter for the population itself. The time is now ripe to assist the people in the Middle East/North Africa region in building societies based on the vision of a culture of peace, as hoped for by peoples everywhere. Such a programme was agreed by the UN in the preparation of the International Year for a Culture of Peace in 2000 and the following Decade on a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence that has just come to an end, and that must now be energetically renewed.

The International Peace Bureau is dedicated to the vision of a World Without War. We are a Nobel Peace Laureate (1910), and over the years 13 of our officers have been recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize. Our 320 member organisations in 70 countries, and individual members, form a global network which brings together expertise and campaigning experience in a common cause. Our main programme centres on Sustainable Disarmament for Sustainable Development. We welcome your participation.

*Current project: **Global Day of Action on Military Spending**, April 12, 2011: <http://demilitarize.org>*