

NATO Is Not Yet Willing to Halt Its Libya Operations
The New York Times
October 6, 2011
By STEVEN ERLANGER and STEPHEN CASTLE

BRUSSELS — NATO is not ready to halt its combat operations in Libya even though the war is winding down, the American defense secretary, Leon E. Panetta, said Thursday, pointing to prolonged fighting around the town of Surt, the birthplace of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

After two days of meetings, the consensus among NATO defense ministers is that a significant threat remains from forces loyal to Colonel Qaddafi, the ousted Libyan leader, and that civilians remain at risk, though the hope and expectation is that the military operations can end soon, a senior NATO diplomat said.

Mr. Panetta said that NATO's commanders would continue to analyze the security situation in Libya and recommend when the operations should end to political leaders, who have the final say.

"It is very important that we make the right decisions," Mr. Panetta said at a news conference.

He laid out guidelines for ending NATO's involvement, which was authorized by the United Nations Security Council to protect Libyan civilians.

Mr. Panetta said the fighting over Surt, the main vestige of Colonel Qaddafi's support, needs to end, and an assessment must be made as to whether organized armed units loyal to Colonel Qaddafi still exist and, if so, whether they represent a threat to civilians. Pro-Qaddafi fighters also control the small desert enclave of Bani Walid.

Mr. Panetta also said that NATO must determine whether the Transitional National Council, Libya's post-Qaddafi provisional government, has the capacity to protect civilians.

"There is eagerness to end the mission, but also concern that we don't end it too soon and give inspiration to the pro-Qaddafi forces," said another senior NATO diplomat. A third diplomat quoted the Canadian defense minister, Peter MacKay, as saying, "We shouldn't go before having put out the fire."

But there was unwillingness at the meeting to make Colonel Qaddafi's capture a condition for ending the NATO operation, diplomats said.

The French defense minister, Gérard Longuet, whose country has been a prime mover in the aerial bombardments, said they would continue as long pro-Qaddafi forces continued to fight in the remaining holdout area and until there was "normal functioning of the state." He specifically cited Bani Walid and Surt and said that the Transitional National Council should request an end to NATO's Libya operations.

The NATO secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said it was "clear the end is in sight" in Libya. "The threat to civilians is fading away," he said. "The recent positive developments in Libya are irreversible."

Mr. Rasmussen said that NATO would be willing to help Libya's new government with security and defense advice if requested. Asked about reports of a deteriorating humanitarian situation in Surt, where residents stranded by the fighting have little food, fuel or water, Mr. Rasmussen said that NATO was operating in the air and at sea but did not have "boots on the ground," leaving it with few tools to protect the civilians in Surt.

After the Brussels meeting, Mr. Panetta flew to the NATO command center in Naples, Italy, to confer with officers in charge of the Libya operation.

Copyright © 2011 The New York Times Company

Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/07/world/africa/nato-not-yet-willing-to-declare-end-to-libya-operations.html?ref=world>