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The National

'Mission creep' feared in Libya campaign

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Nato military operations over Libya today enter their second month with forces loyal to Muammar Qaddafi still effective and pushing an offensive against opposition forces. As European countries start sending military advisers, the international effort is beginning to show signs of going beyond its original mission.

Trying to assuage concerns of mission creep, the US maintains it will not send any ground troops into Libya and that any US involvement on the ground will be for purely humanitarian reasons. But some US legislators are publicly worrying that the situation in Libya could develop into a stalemate unless greater military force is applied.

Analysts say that absent, the political objectives of the intervention are unlikely to be secured. UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which sanctioned the intervention, called on coalition members to use all available means short of a full-fledged invasion to protect Libyan civilians.

But with fighting increasingly moving to urban warfare in Misrata in the west of the country and other cities, airpower alone is proving less effective at stopping government troops from defeating rag-tag opposition forces.

Barack Obama, the US president, most European leaders and the Libyan opposition, have also repeatedly called on Col Qaddafi to step aside.

The Libyan leader is unlikely to relinquish power willingly. And though Abdul Ati al Obeidi, Libya's foreign minister, in interviews with foreign media on Tuesday said that the government was willing to hold free elections that could determine whether Col Qaddafi stayed or "should retire", he rejected the suggestion that Col Qaddafi first had to resign.

The Libyan opposition, however, remains adamant that there can be no resolution if Col Qaddafi remains in power.

"It is impossible for Qaddafi or his family to stay in Libya or rule any part of Libya," Ali Aujali, the former Libyan ambassador to the US and now a representative of the opposition Transitional National Council in Washington, said on Tuesday.

"If it takes long or short [time], Qaddafi and his family have no future in Libya. That's the most basic thing."

Analysts say the international coalition now either needs to move the political goalposts or adapt the military engagement.

"The inherent problem of the campaign all along has been that the military force allocated to it, airpower, is insufficient to achieve the political goals that continue to be thrown around," said Nathan Hughes, the director of military analysis at Stratfor, a Texas-based global intelligence company.

This emerging picture on the ground is what on Monday prompted John McCain, the ranking Republican member on the US Senate's Armed Forces Committee, for the second time in a week to warn that greater airpower was needed.

"All we need to do is get sufficient air power in there to really nail Qaddafi's forces, and we can succeed," Mr McCain said on a local radio station.

Mr Hughes said that airpower alone was insufficient and loosening the rules of engagement from the air risked increasing the number of civilian casualties incurred by coalition air strikes. This could undermine regional support for the campaign.

"A big political consideration, at least ostensibly, for most of the western governments involved in this was support from Arab governments. And support on the Arab street remains a critical question. If you get more aggressive, this thing could easily turn around on the coalition. They could become the bad guy. Real quickly."

Compounding the problem for the coalition, said Mr Hughes, was that the opposition had not proven a capable fighting force and that providing arms and training to make them more effective would take too long. The "couple of advisers" that Britain and France intend to send in are not going to have any effect.

"It's easier to remove airpower from the equation, just leave, then it is to commit ground troops and get enmeshed in the problem," Mr Hughes said.

But international involvement is already too deep for the coalition to simply walk away, said Marina Ottaway, the director of the Middle East Programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a Washington-based think tank.

"I think it's going to be very difficult to avoid mission creep, because we went in for humanitarian reasons, we went in to protect civilians, and therefore it's almost impossible to stop at this point."

Ms Ottaway said the protection of civilians is an "urgent short-term issue" that the coalition cannot escape. The US administration, as the main power in Nato, will sooner or later have to take a clear position on what to do next.

"Obama is still pretending that the operation in Libya was a limited operation that had a beginning and an end and there is no mission creep. But this is what's happening at this point and it is going to be a terrible dilemma for Obama to really decide what he is going to do in the end," she said.