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NATO Warplanes Attack Libyan Ships in 3 Ports

By ERIC SCHMITT

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NAPLES, Italy — NATO warplanes attacked eight Libyan ships on Thursday night in three coastal locations, including the port of Tripoli, expanding the air campaign against what allied officials said was an increasing seaborne threat from Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's forces.

On Monday, allied warships thwarted an effort by Qaddafi loyalists to use small inflatable boats packed with high explosives to threaten ships carrying relief supplies to the contested port city of Misurata, 130 miles east of Tripoli, the capital.

That episode was the third time in recent weeks in which NATO forces had confronted pro-government maritime forces off the Libyan coast, after intercepting boats laying mines in Misurata's harbor on April 29 and defeating an attack by small boats on the port last week.

The allied attacks late Thursday against Libyan vessels in the ports of Tripoli, Al Khums and Surt were the first time in the two-month-old air campaign that the alliance had carried out planned airstrikes against Libyan ships, military officials said. NATO warplanes have previously returned fire at Libya ships that shot at them.

“All NATO’s targets are military in nature and are directly linked to the Qaddafi regime’s systematic attacks on the Libyan people,” Rear Adm. Russell Harding, the deputy commander of the NATO mission, said in a statement. “Given the escalating use of naval assets, NATO had no choice but to take decisive action to protect the civilian population of Libya and NATO forces at sea.”

Admiral Harding said that the eight vessels attacked were all “naval warships with no civilian utility.”

Allied officials here in Naples at the alliance’s southern headquarters said there were no indications that civilians were aboard any of the vessels that were attacked.

The airstrikes came as the alliance has tried to increase pressure on Colonel Qaddafi and loyalist troops by stepping up attacks against “command and control” centers in and around Tripoli that allied officials say allow the Libyan leader to direct his forces. So far, however, Colonel Qaddafi has remained defiant.

Allied officials said, in particular, that the episode last Monday underscored the need to take action against the seaborne threat. That morning, NATO sent warships and helicopters after detecting two rigid-hull inflatable boats that appeared to have come from around Zliten and were headed toward Misurata on the western coast, allied officials said.

As the allied forces approached, one of the small boats escaped at high speed back toward Zliten, abandoning the second vessel. A bomb disposal team found about one ton of explosives and two human mannequins inside the abandoned boat.

The allied warships used small-arms fire to destroy the explosives.

Qaddafi loyalists fighting a rebel army in Misurata retreated last week, losing control of the city’s airport. The shift in tactics by the Qaddafi forces to use ships to threaten civilians and civilian aid coincides with rebel gains in Misurata, alliance officials said.

A total of 21 NATO ships are patrolling the Mediterranean as part of an arms embargo against Libya.