

Pentagon Offers Plan to Cripple ISIS in Libya With Airstrikes

By ERIC SCHMITT

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has presented the White House with the most detailed set of military options yet for attacking the growing Islamic State threat in Libya, including a range of potential airstrikes against training camps, command centers, munitions depots and other militant targets.

Airstrikes against as many as 30 to 40 targets in four areas of the country would aim to deal a crippling blow to the Islamic State's most dangerous affiliate outside Iraq and Syria, and open the way for Western-backed Libyan militias to battle Islamic State fighters on the ground. Allied bombers would carry out additional airstrikes to support the militias. The military option was described by five American officials who have been briefed on the plans and spoke about them on the condition of anonymity because of their confidential nature.

Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter outlined this option to President Obama's top national security advisers at a so-called principals meeting on Feb. 22. But the plan is not being actively considered, at least for now, while the Obama administration backs a diplomatic initiative to form a unity government from rival factions inside Libya, administration officials said.

Even so, the United States military is poised to carry out limited airstrikes if ordered against terrorists in Libya who threaten Americans or American interests, just as it did against an Islamic State training camp in western Libya last month.

"We will continue to use the full range of tools to eliminate ISIL threats wherever they are," Mr. Obama said on Feb. 25, after convening the National Security Council to discuss combating the Islamic State, also called ISIL or ISIS.

But the broader scale of the airstrikes option, prepared by the Pentagon's Africa Command and the highly secretive Joint Special Operations Command, illuminated differences in perspectives and short-term goals within the administration. The scope of the military plan surprised some senior administration officials, and it drew warnings from some State Department officials that such airstrikes, if not coordinated properly, could jeopardize the United Nations-led effort to forge a unity government from Libya's fractious political actors.

The detailed military planning does expand the choices available to Mr. Obama in the coming months as he and his advisers, along with allies like Britain, France and Italy, try to manage a tricky balancing act: nurture a fragile political process but not wait so long that the Islamic State grows too big for defeat by a limited — and politically ac-



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American warplanes bombed an Islamic State training camp in Sabratha, Libya, about 50 miles west of Tripoli, last month.

ceptable — military action.

Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, summed up the current thinking about this juggling of priorities and the possibility of taking more aggressive military action in the future, at a news conference last week.

"Where there is opportunity to conduct operations against ISIL, to disrupt them at this point and not undermine the political process, that is where we are," General Dunford said. "At some point in the future, if I believe we are at risk with that strategy, I will certainly come back to the secretary and make some different recommendations."

Having actual options in hand, even if they are not imminent, forces the government to weigh more rigorously the consequences of such actions, officials said. And revealing details of the planning, which had not been previously shared with Congress, draws the scrutiny of lawmakers such as Senator John McCain, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, who questioned the approach at a hearing on Tuesday.

Gen. David M. Rodriguez, the head of the Africa Command, declined to answer Mr. McCain's questions about the options in open testimony, but he warned that Libya had become a failed state, a situation that the Islamic State was rapidly exploiting.

The spread of the Islamic State in Libya "continues to be a challenge because of the lack of gov-

ernance, as well as the breakup of the military and the multiple militias on the ground," General Rodriguez said.

The newly refined Pentagon planning comes amid increasing reports that British, American, French and possibly even Italian Special Operations forces have been on the ground in Libya for months. They have been conducting reconnaissance, gathering intelligence, vetting and possibly advising Libyan militias deemed good partners to fight the Islamic State in its strongholds such as Surt along a 150-mile section of territory the terrorist group controls.

As recently as last fall, senior American commanders and intelligence officials said they lacked sufficient information about the Islamic State in Libya to even identify targets to bomb.

But this effort on the ground among special operators does not appear to be well coordinated, and seems to reflect the individual concerns of the various clandestine forces should they be called upon suddenly to speed up any unilateral military strikes against the Islamic State.

Pressure is growing on the United States and its Western allies to intervene militarily. Britain announced last week that it was sending 20 military trainers to Tunisia to help counter illegal cross-border movements from Libya. Tunisia has already built a 125-mile earthen wall that stretches about half the length of its border with Libya in an at-

tempt to prevent militants from infiltrating.

Italy last month agreed for the first time to allow American armed drones to take off from an air base in Sicily to defend coalition forces fighting Islamic State extremists in Libya.

Last Friday, Italy's Foreign Ministry confirmed the release of two Italians kidnapped in Libya in July. That good news came a day after ministry officials grimly announced that two other Italian hostages in the country had likely been killed in clashes between Islamic State fighters and local militiamen near Sabratha.

Last month, American warplanes bombed an Islamic State training camp in Sabratha, 50 miles west of Tripoli, killing a militant commander linked to attacks on Western tourists. Those strikes targeted Noureddine Chouchane, a Tunisian militant, whom the Pentagon said helped arrange the arrival of Islamic State recruits from across Africa into Libya.

The strikes demonstrated the United States' growing concern over Libya becoming a new base for the Islamic State and its willingness to use air power against militant commanders and infrastructure. So far, though, it has been a power limited by political constraints on the ground.

"We'd like nothing better than to have a government in place in Libya with whom we could work and from whom we could gain consent for engaging militarily in Libya," James R. Clapper Jr., the

director of national intelligence, told Congress last month.

Mr. Clapper said that in addition to Surt, the Islamic State is operating in Benghazi, Tripoli and other areas of the country.

Indeed, the reason so many military officials were willing to discuss classified war planning, including the option of aggressive airstrikes, was to show that the administration was taking the Islamic State threat in Libya seriously. At the same time, though, the administration hopes to show that it is exercising restraint for the time being to allow the political process a chance to succeed. The Pentagon produced the options at the White House's request, but did not offer any formal recommendations, officials said.

Libya's political leaders are divided between two loose political alliances in the capital, Tripoli, and the eastern city of Tobruk. The United Nations' effort to form a unity government, led by the German diplomat Martin Kobler, has been stymied by the factional differences.

Last month, Mr. Kobler warned the West to move carefully if a unity government was formed, and not press it immediately to support foreign military intervention.

He said that "very intense" anti-foreigner feelings run deep among Libyan politicians and that pressuring a new government to support outside military action against the Islamic State could undermine it.

Eating Leaves, and Other Ways Besieged Syrians Try to Survive

By RICK GLADSTONE

Medical workers in parts of Syria have been forced to let the wounded bleed to death for lack of bandages, and have opted to use catheter bags meant for urine to administer intravenous fluids to newborns because proper drip bags are gone.

Expectant mothers in areas vulnerable to shelling and bombing give birth by cesarean section rather than risk natural childbirth in an attack. Malnourished children are eating animal feed and leaves, in some cases only miles from warehouses full of food. Families are burning mattress stuffing and plastic scraps for heat.

Those are among some of the details in a Save the Children report issued Tuesday night about the challenges confronting Syrian civilians in 18 areas across the country that the United Nations has defined as besieged, meaning they are surrounded by armed antagonists who have severely restricted aid delivery and freedom of movement.

At least a quarter-million children are among the inhabitants of such areas, which have been effectively turned into "open-air prisons," the report said. It drew on data from the United Nations and other organizations, as well as Save the Children's interviews with local aid groups, doctors, teachers and civilians, including 126 mothers, fathers and children who reside in these areas.

"They and their families are cut off from the outside world, surrounded by warring groups that illegally use siege against civilians as a weapon of war, preventing food, medicine, fuel and other vital supplies from entering and stopping people from fleeing," the report said.

The war has shown little or no sign of ending, despite a partial cease-fire reached last month under international pressure between the forces of President Bashar al-Assad and an array of insurgent opponents.

Issued as the war is entering its sixth year, the Save the Chil-

dren report did not provide new statistics about the extent of suffering in the country, where half the population has been displaced and 250,000 to 470,000 have been reported killed.

Yet the details in vignettes provided by civilian victims in the besieged areas added to the sense of desperation in a conflict in which images of bombed hospitals and maimed and starving children are no longer considered shocking.

"The medical station here is no more than a table, a sterilizer and piece of gauze," a mother in eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, said in the report. "Even the wounded are left to die because there are no materials available to save their lives."

Others said surgeons improvised by operating in candlelight and using old water hoses as ventilation tubes. "Families scour the streets for discarded blankets, cloths or scraps of cloth that can be boiled — in an attempt to sterilize them — and used as bandages," the report said.

In some areas where there are no doctors, the report said, others step in, including poorly trained volunteers. In one besieged community, the main health provider was a veterinarian. Three of the eight doctors left in Moadamiyeh, a besieged suburb of Damascus, were trained as dentists.

Medical workers in Moadamiyeh faced a dilemma when they ran out of intravenous drip bags for newborns and could not get more. "Their only option was to

use bags normally used for catheters," the report said. "Many lives were saved, but three infant children died of infections."

In the city of Deir al-Zour in eastern Syria, where water is available once a week for three hours, chlorine supplies ran out last June, the report said, drawing attention to what it called the irony of chlorine's dual use. "While many besieged areas struggle to find chlorine to purify water," it said, "parties to the conflict have reportedly used chlorine gas to attack and kill civilians."

Despite repeated United Nations Security Council demands and the tenuous "cessation of hostilities" agreement, the report

said, only a fraction of the emergency aid needed has reached the besieged areas.

In a separate report on the depths of the Syrian crisis, World Vision International, a Christian relief advocacy group, collaborated with Frontier Economics, a European consultancy, to calculate the cost of the war to Syria, based partly on the country's economic projections had the war never happened. Should peace be somehow achieved this year, their report said, the cost could total nearly \$700 billion. If ended by 2020, the cost would grow to \$1.3 trillion, roughly the annual gross domestic product of Spain.

"This is lost money," Conny Lenneberg, World Vision's re-

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gional leader for the Middle East and Eastern Europe, said in the report's introduction. "It will never be recovered, never be spent to provide education, health care, safe environments, livelihoods or a future for children."

U.S. Broadens Its Sanctions On Warlord And His Group

By RICK GLADSTONE

The United States on Tuesday broadened longstanding sanctions against the Lord's Resistance Army, one of central Africa's most violent guerrilla groups, and its founder, Joseph Kony, a warlord and self-described prophet who has eluded the authorities for nearly three decades.

Sanctions announced by the Treasury Department add to American restrictions on Mr. Kony first imposed in 2008 by widening the network of contacts that could face penalties if they do business with him. The Treasury sanctions also put the Lord's Resistance Army on a financial blacklist for the first time, which forbids Americans to have any contact with the organization and freezes any assets it may have under United States jurisdiction.

The State Department placed the Lord's Resistance Army on its Terrorism Exclusion List in 2001, but that restriction empowered officials only to bar people associated with the organization from entering the United States.

American officials said the actions were taken partly in response to tightened measures against Mr. Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army by the United Nations Security Council. They are also a response to reports that the organization has sharply escalated its abductions and plundering in Central African Republic this year compared with 2015.

The LRA Crisis Tracker, a project by rights groups that monitor the Lord's Resistance Army's activities, described the surge in a report issued this month, calling it a demonstration of "the grave threat L.R.A. fighters pose to civilians."

Paul Ronan, who manages the LRA Crisis Tracker, said the new sanctions were partly a symbolic effort. But he said they could put pressure on the Lord's Resistance Army by constricting its ability to sell poached ivory, one of the organization's most important sources of revenue.

Mr. Ronan said he had seen a "disturbing upward trend" this year in the number of children abducted by the group's fighters. "It could be a sign that they're feeling emboldened and are trying to recruit kids to rebuild their fighting force," he said.

The Lord's Resistance Army originated as a Ugandan rebel force in the mid-1980s. It evolved into an organization of fighters who pillaged parts of Uganda, southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic.

Disciples swore fealty to Mr. Kony, who became known for ordering village massacres, mutilating victims, kidnapping children for soldiering, and keeping a harem of prepubescent brides. American military officials have been helping in the hunt for him since 2011. Mr. Kony has been wanted for more than a decade by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

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