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British forces have been on operations over Libya for 100 days. Both maritime and air assets have been involved in a variety of missions, from National Evacuation, to humanitarian aid as well as strike missions. The message from an MOD briefing this afternoon was that flexible forces are worth the investment, if the outcome is timely intervention. One of the roles of armed forces, after all, is to give politicians thinking time. They also provide a variety of scalable options.

After UNSCR 1973 was approved on 17th February, the first RAF assets were warned on 18th, and the first strike mission was flown on 19th. HMS Cumberland on passage through the Suez Canal, after completing an anti-piracy mission was diverted to the Libyan coast. She arrived on 21st February. She was able to effect an evacuation of British and other civilians, eventually removing 454 people from danger. HMS Liverpool has now replaced Cumberland, and the total number of RAF personnel now deployed on operations is 900.

As NATO has undertaken interdiction missions against the Gaddafi regime forces, their tactics have altered. Their tendency to hide among the civilian populations has required NATO to adopt a cautious approach to striking them. The ability to provide loitering observation means that the NATO command is able to develop a "pattern of life" picture which highlights everyday bustle and isolates unusual looking activity. This is then investigated and if found to be attackable a strike mission is tasked. The RAF has been using Brimstone which can achieve a high degree of precision.

In addition to naval gunfire and air strikes by fast jets, the UK has been using Apache helicopters from the deck of HMS Ocean. 656 squadron from 4 Regiment AAC with an element of 4 aircraft has been operating in theatre since 3rd June. They are able to engage targets with Hellfire missiles, as well as with rockets and 30mm cannon. They operate in conjunction with Sea King Mk 7s, which provide additional radar coverage. This was also the first opportunity for British forces to co-operate with French assets, following the recent enhanced Franco-British defence arrangements.

Two things emerge from this. The first is the complexity of developing an air and sea operation of this sort, joint force and multi-national, at short notice. One of the key factors for the European NATO members to reflect on is that such contingency operations are likely to become more frequent, in these turbulent times. Having a deployable capability is going to be increasingly important. The second matter is that getting this capability working will be the test of those countries whose militaries are actually useable. This calls to mind US defence secretary Gates' recent remarks about a two speed NATO. The eventual outcome of this operation will depend on how the political game plays out. In the meantime the UK's component will continue to play their part.

Editor's note : The monthly Op Ellamy round up will be published shortly