

[Comment] Was Eufor Libya an April fool's joke?

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The international community's action was crucial to prevent a massacre in Benghazi. The military intervention in Libya, legitimised by UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973, also had a historical dimension by putting into practice the UN concept of the 'Responsibility to Protect'.



Libya rebels - Gomes says the EU should play a direct role in Libyan security (Photo: BRQ)

When I visited eastern Libya in mid-May, I saw Gaddafi's wrecked tanks on the road just 20 minutes from the city centre of Benghazi. The French-led military strike was launched just before it was too late ... and the Libyans know it: I was warmly greeted in the streets and on the frontline, near Adjabya, with young people shouting cheerfully: "Merci, Sarkozy!"

Two days after I left, the EU's high representative for foreign relations, Catherine Ashton, opened an EU delegation in Benghazi. The EU flag is now flying above the courthouse in the newly-named Freedom Square as a symbol of European solidarity. The EU also provided already more than €140 million for humanitarian needs.

But in the security sphere, the EU has failed to act together.

Instead, EU member states took action unilaterally and with limitations under the aegis of Nato. Eufor Libya - the name of the EU's mooted military-

humanitarian mission, announced on 1 April - is now seen as an April fool's. It was never launched because it was made dependent on a request from the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) - which never came. Nor does it need to come - a mandate, UNSC 1973 - is already in place.

Because EU capitals could not reach agreement on a full-scale Common Security and Defence (CSDP) operation, Eufor Libya was presented as a mission to support humanitarian assistance.

This was a mistake: as a CSDP operation, it should have military and civilian components (namely police for supporting security sector reform and disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration operations). It should aim at the enforcement of the EU-UN arms embargo, surveillance of borders and, chiefly, the protection of civilians in Libya.

On top of this, portraying Eufor Libya as an answer to humanitarian needs risks jeopardising existing humanitarian operations. Humanitarian organisations shun links with the military in order to protect their image of impartiality, which is crucial to ensure access to victims of conflict on all sides.

Eufor Libya could also help open up space for humanitarian work, by establishing safe corridors, such as those needed for assistance to the besieged villages in the mountains west of Tripoli.

As for Nato's role in Libya, it must not serve as an excuse for EU inaction in the security field.

The EU is missing a tremendous opportunity to act in a co-ordinated manner, within the CSDP framework and in close co-operation with Nato. Eufor has the opportunity to genuinely change the stalemate on the ground.

At the political level, the EU's top priority should be to release part of the regime's frozen assets, which belong to Libya, to enable the Interim Transitional National Council (ITNC), under UNSC oversight, to respond to the basic needs of the population and to keep running the administration in the liberated zones.

In the post-Gaddafi period, Libyans and the international community will expect even more from Europe.

The European External Action Service needs to prepare now to be ready to provide technical assistance for the construction of a democratic state in Libya.

Key priorities will be demobilisation and reintegration of all the civilians-turned-combatants, national reconciliation, constitutional, electoral and judiciary reforms, creation of democratic political parties, support for independent media and civil society, with human rights, gender equality and environmental sustainability as main concerns.

It is a great challenge in the EU's neighbourhood. It is also an opportunity not to be missed by the EU to invest in the values it preaches: democracy and human rights. Only in this way will EU strategic interests be served.

The author is a member of the European Parliament and its rapporteur on Libya