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Arab states seek Libya no-fly zone

Regional bloc calls on UN Security Council to take steps to protect civilians from air attack by Gaddafi forces. *Al Jazeera*, 12 Mar 2011

The Arab League has called on the United Nations Security Council to impose a no-fly zone over Libya in a bid to protect civilians from air attack in the ongoing battle against the more than 41-year rule of leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Youssef bin Alawi bin Abdullah, Oman's foreign minister, announced the decision at a press conference on Saturday following a meeting of the bloc's ministers in the Egyptian capital, Cairo.

Abdullah, who chaired the meeting, said the decision was agreed upon by all of the member states that attended Saturday's talks.

Amr Moussa, the secretary-general of the Arab League, said the main goal of the decision is to protect the civilian population of Libya.

"The Arab League has officially requested the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone against any military action against the Libyan people," Moussa said.

Earlier, in an interview with a German magazine, Moussa acknowledged that he did not know "how nor who [would] impose this zone, that remains to be seen".

"The Arab League can also play a role, that is what I will recommend," he said.

The bloc also stressed that it had rejected any "foreign military" intervention in Libya, and Moussa said the no-fly zone must be lifted once the crisis has ended.

Foreign ministers from the 22-member bloc also appeared to leave Gaddafi increasingly isolated, saying his government had "lost its sovereignty".

They also conferred legitimacy on the rebels' opposition National Libyan Council, saying they would establish contacts with the umbrella group and calling on nations to provide it with "urgent help".

Al Jazeera's James Bays, reporting from Cairo, said another topic of debate at the Arab League meeting was the bloc's diplomatic relationship with Libya.

Libya has been suspended from the league, and the body decided not to allow a delegation sent by Gaddafi to attend.

Catherine Ashton, the EU's foreign policy chief, will be in Cairo on Sunday to discuss the situation with Arab leaders.

'Domino effect'

Support from the West for a no-fly zone appeared to hinge on the outcome of the meeting as consensus is sought for such an action.

Robert Gates, the US defence secretary, said on Saturday that it remains unclear whether imposing a no-fly zone over Libya would be a "wise" move.

"This is not a question of whether we or our allies can do this. We can do it," Gates said.

"The question is whether it's a wise thing to do and that's the discussion that's going on at a political level."

Before the meeting, Oman's foreign minister had warned that Arab inaction on the Libyan crisis could lead to "unwanted foreign intervention" and fighting among Libyans.

"If the Arab League does not take responsibility to prevent a downward spiral, that could lead to internal fighting or

unwanted foreign intervention," he said.

Al Jazeera's Anita McNaught, reporting from the Libyan capital, Tripoli, said there had been no response on the prospect of foreign intervention. She said that the Libyan opposition's calls for foreign intervention are not enough, and the EU, the US and NATO are waiting for a clear legal mandate and regional support.

"The European Union and the [UN] Security Council are not going to do anything unless they get support from the Arab League," Qatar University's Youcef Bouandel told Al Jazeera.

The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) has also backed the measure to impose a no-fly zone and has said the regime of Muammar Gaddafi is illegitimate.

Steven Clemens, the director of the new strategy programme at the New American foundation, told Al Jazeera he is against a no-fly zone on Libya.

"My problem with a no-fly zone is that it doesn't fundamentally change the military equation much. There are so many other things that we can do to help the opposition succeed.

"What we have seen in Egypt and Tunisia is an accomplishment without foreign intervention, when you have British, French and NATO troops, the frame of all of our TV cameras changes to that.

"I think it would rob the people that are working so hard and are so inspiring of their own narratives of taking back their government."

'African Union panel'

A day earlier, Barack Obama, the US president, said the United States and its allies were "tightening the noose" around Gaddafi and European Union leaders meeting in Brussels said they would consider all options to force the Libyan leader to step down.

However, the 27 leaders meeting in Brussels stopped short of endorsing air strikes, a no-fly zone or other military-backed means to achieve that goal. Libyan rebels said their three-week-old insurrection could fail without a no-fly zone.

The summit sidestepped a British and French initiative for a UN Security Council resolution that would authorise a no-fly zone.

NATO has released pictures of another spy plane about to begin monitoring Libya's skies, as it continues its surveillance of Libyan airspace.

Meanwhile, the leaders of South Africa, Uganda, Mauritania, the DRC and Mali will form a panel that will travel to Libya shortly to help end the violence there, the African Union announced on Friday.

"The ad hoc committee was set up ... to engage with all parties in Libya, facilitate in an inclusive dialogue among

them, and engage AU partners ... for the speedy resolution of the crisis in Libya," the bloc said.

At a meeting of heads of states on Thursday, Ramtane Lamamra, the head of the AU's Peace and Security Council, said events in the North African country needed "urgent African action" to bring about an end to the hostilities.

The AU has rejected foreign military intervention in Libya, where forces loyal to Gaddafi are battling with rebels seeking to end his almost 42-year-old rule.