

Moscow builds up Libya for war

by Thierry Lalevé

President Reagan's July 8 denunciation of Libya as a center of international terrorism did not result in the isolation of Libya and its mad leader, Muammar Qaddafi. Quite the contrary, Qaddafi has been sought out by foreign guests as never before. As his widely publicized tour of Central Africa in May showed, the Libyan leader has been building his credibility for sometime. But what kind of credibility?

It is no secret that Libya is close to financial bankruptcy, and has been trying to negotiate a \$15 billion loan from Saudi Arabia—so far unsuccessfully. Nor can Libya's credibility be based on the kind of development expertise which is so badly needed in Africa.

As the Western position has disintegrated in the Middle East, or led pro-Western countries into deep troubles, Libya's Moscow connection has become more and more attractive to many. Admittedly, Moscow's relation with Libya is an unstable one, as it is also based on Libyan connections to certain Western intelligence circles whose interests are best served by Qaddafi's antics. However, Moscow's decision to build up Libya as one of its major launching pads in the North African/Mediterranean region is clear. Libya is to be that region what Syria is in the Middle East.

As early as June, NATO intelligence sources in Italy officially reported that satellite observation of Libyan territory had revealed that the Soviets are building an airport runway for use by Soviet strategic Backfire bombers. A report in the July 15 issue of the French magazine *Le Point* said that the Soviets are building SAM-5 launching pads on the outskirts of Tripoli. *Le Point* also reported an increase of Soviet reconnaissance overflights over the American Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, apparently coming from Libya or its territorial waters.

Over recent weeks, military-related diplomacy has been at the top of the agenda in Tripoli. On July 8, a treaty of defense cooperation was signed between Libya and Sudan. The following day, Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas arrived in Tripoli for a week-long visit. Then, on July 10, a high-level Bulgarian delegation arrived, led by Lt.-Gen. Dimitrii Dimitrov, deputy chairman of the state planning commission, and Gen. Doyan Sabir of the office of the Bulgarian chief of staff. At the same time, a Maltese delegation arrived, and it was announced in Kuwait that the foreign minister would soon visit Libya.

Libya is already waging war on several fronts. On July

7, a treaty was signed between the Libyan government and the little known Kurdish Socialist Party (KSP) of Iraq, a splinter group from the better known Kurdish Democratic Party of the Barzani brothers. The treaty implied full Libyan backing to the KSP in its war against the Iraqi government. This was Libya's answer to the July 7 creation in Baghdad of a "Libyan national movement" committed to the overthrow of Qaddafi.

Similarly, according to a London report of the Israeli newspaper, *Ha'aretz*, Qaddafi's cousin and troubleshooter, Ahmed Qaddafi, has been put in charge of a large task force, involving Syria and Iran, planning the assassination of PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and Jordan's King Hussein. The task force includes Soyyed Mahmoud Hashemi of the "Organizations of the Liberation Movements" in Iran. However, Qaddafi's presence is of special importance, since he is Libya's plenipotentiary and roving ambassador. On July 9, he was in Paris meeting with French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas. The discussions focused on improved French-Libyan relations. A glimpse of what that means, was the scandalous deal exposed in early July in France, a deal Mitterrand made with Qaddafi as early as October 1983. Promising to Qaddafi, and hence to the Soviets, the "independence" of strategic New Caledonia in the Pacific, Mitterrand had asked for the withdrawal of Libyan troops from Chad in exchange.

This is not likely to be very much appreciated by Libya's immediate neighbors, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, which all consider Qaddafi their security problem number-one. Cairo feels surrounded and is being trapped into a military confrontation with Libya. Tunisia is witnessing direct Libyan interference which Qaddafi never dared before. At the beginning of July, Libya's Arab People's Congress, a state organization, distributed leaflets in the street of Tunis, denouncing the government and justice apparatus for the sentencing of a Tunisian member of the Arab National Movement to one year in jail.

But this is mild by comparison with what Tripoli and Moscow are plotting in the Western Sahara. Diplomatic sources say that during a series of meetings in June in Damascus, the Syrians and Iranians decided to sell ground-to-ground SCUD-b battlefield missiles to the Polisario guerrillas, the kind which Tripoli has been selling to Iran on Moscow's orders. This will make a joke out of Moroccan King Hassan's carefully built Saharan walls. SCUD missiles fired against Moroccan towns mean a totally new ballgame in the Saharan war, especially if the Libyans, Syrians, and Soviets can make it appear that America's new-found ally in the region, Algeria, made the delivery. A Morocco-Algeria war would ensue, with very much the same consequences, and worse, of the five-year-long Gulf war.

Diplomatic sources have stressed for sometime now that Northern Africa, from Morocco to Egypt, will be a crisis spot, aimed against NATO's southern flank. This may unfortunately prove true.