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## UN must intervene to end the Libyan crisis

The democratic uprising in Libya and the brutal crackdown by the Gaddafi regime have brought Libya to the brink of a failed state. Eastern parts of Libya have come under the control of protesters, while in other areas around Tripoli, the regime retains its grip. The situation threatens to degenerate into chaos and civil war. Libya is a huge country (54 per cent of India's area) of 6.4 million people with the largest proven oil reserves in Africa, and one of Africa's highest per capita incomes (\$14,880, 2010). Half the population is below 15 years, and there is considerable ethnic diversity along tribal lines.

Libya's oil sector has been disrupted, foreign companies have stopped operations, and the oil prices have surged over fears of stoppage of oil exports from Libya. Apprehension of trouble in other countries such as Algeria has led some analysts to suggest that oil prices could go up as high as \$220 per barrel, which could cause severe damage to countries such as India. India's capital markets have already reacted negatively to these fears.

Some 18,000 Indian nationals and Indian companies working in various parts of Libya have been caught up in the crisis. The government has taken a series of measures to handle this crisis, and arrange for the evacuation of Indian nationals by sea and air. But the widely dispersed locations of the Indians and the risk of armed conflicts in many areas render the evacuation difficult. It has rightly condemned violence in Libya, and called for such acts to stop.

Independent media reporting from Libya has been severely restricted. Gaddafi persists in holding on to an ever reducing area centred on the capital city of Tripoli which has become a zone of terror for the inhabitants. Growing number of members of the establishment, including diplomats, officials, and armed forces personnel have denounced him and have joined the protest movement. Protesters have taken control of large parts of the country, including major cities of Benghazi, Al Bayda, Tobruk, Misurata, etc, while the pro-Gaddafi elements are in control of Tripoli, Sidra and Sabha. This fracturing of state authority is likely to widen and deepen in the next days, as the Gaddafi regime gets increasingly isolated.

The immediate priority is to avert bloodshed, stop violence, and restore the authority of the state under a broad-based democratic coalition. Unless this is done very soon, Libya will rapidly descend into a failed state status, with the ensuing chaos impacting on its key oil sector, and violence resulting in the displacement and movement of refugees out of Libya into neighbouring countries including southern Europe. The only way to avoid an escalation of the crisis is for the international community to step in with effective and coordinated action.

The UN Security Council is the most appropriate body to take action, under the rubric of the right to protect. The growing international consensus on intervention to spare unnecessary suffering of Libyan people and foreign nationals would bring pressure on some reluctant members of the UNSC. So far, the UN Security Council has adopted (Resolution 1970 of February 26) a set of sanctions and assets freeze against Gaddafi and those close to him, as well as make a reference to the International Criminal Court. The US and the EU have also imposed their own sanctions against the Gaddafi regime. However, care needs to be taken to target the measures so that the Libyan people do not suffer the effects. The UNSC needs to do more at the earliest to stop the violence and get Gaddafi out of power.

The Libyan case clearly merits strong UN intervention. Robust UNSC action would receive broad-based international support, including from the G20 and key Arab and African countries. It would be important to have support from organisations such as the Arab League, the AU, the EU, and the OSCE which has a vast experience of transition of regimes in East and Central Europe. India is a member of the UNSC at this critical juncture. It has an important role to play as the world's largest democracy and major developing country, in fashioning the UN and international response to the crisis. It may be recalled that in 1971, India had vigorously sought international action in the wake of a military crackdown in East Pakistan, which ultimately led to a war and the establishment of Bangladesh.

Some important elements of international response can be identified. To end violence, all flights carrying mercenaries into Libya must be halted. A contact group should put pressure and induce Gaddafi to make a graceful exit. A ceasefire must be put in place, with the agreement of all major players, enforced by an international intervention force. All transport and infrastructure facilities should be restored to normalcy. Evacuation of foreign nationals should be facilitated, by suspension of requirements such as exit visas. Law and order should be restored by the security forces, under impartial supervision.

Longer term measures are needed. A transitional administration including participants from all major political forces in the country should be set up. The umbrella National Libyan Council which is the political face of the revolt could provide the core for a provisional government. Within a designated time frame, an interim constitution and free and fair elections should be held. A truth and reconciliation process should be initiated. In these areas, the Libyan people need the support of the international community and specialised bodies such as the OSCE could be critical.

Past experience shows that in such situations, if international response is weak or delayed, the crisis can escalate, ultimately resulting in the intervention of neighbouring states and non-state actors who enter the vacuum. In the end, the problem would still require international intervention, but at a far greater cost in resources and suffering.

*(The writer is a former ambassador who has served in the region)*

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