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A Plan for Libya

By Robert Pape

With Muammar Gaddafi digging in, many have called for international intervention in Libya. Thus far, the focus has been on regime change, but most proposals would surely be viewed as an effort at Western domination of an oil-rich Muslim country. That focus takes our eyes off the crucial problem — an exploding humanitarian crisis.

Half of Libya's population of 6.5 million lives in Tripoli and just five other cities, all of which have experienced significant fighting and large refugee flows. Over 200,000 have fled to Tunisia, Egypt and Niger, and nearly 100,000 are in makeshift camps in Libya and Tunisia. With Gaddafi fighting to the last bullet, the number of internally displaced people could escalate rapidly. (See exclusive photos of rebels fighting Gaddafi.)

But refugees are only part of the potential humanitarian disaster. Libya imports 90% of its food, much of it through a handful of ports on the Mediterranean that have been damaged by fighting. Early signs of shortages are emerging even in areas reportedly under rebel control. At the moment, the humanitarian problems are not dire. The real issue is the potential for truly massive shortages in the coming weeks, which is why the international community should begin to prepare a framework for action now.

Libya is already a failed state. Gaddafi is simply the largest warlord in a country where it will be difficult to restore unity. As a result, the nature of the humanitarian challenges is different in eastern and western Libya. The east is now relatively stable; the major port in the region, Benghazi, remains open and functional, and the roads are largely uncontested. Still, there is serious concern about the importation and distribution of resources to the over 1.5 million people who live along the coast from Ajdabiya to Tobruk. The worry arises because suppliers are reluctant to continue trade into the region given the current lack of oil revenue for payment along with other uncertainties. (See what a day is like in Gaddafi's Tripoli.)

So in the east, there is a manageable and potentially highly beneficial opportunity for humanitarian intervention. The west is far more unstable and unpredictable, and intervention, even for humanitarian reasons, has the potential to become an open-ended, costly commitment. At this point, the U.S., working with the international community, should continue to watch the situation in the west and take four steps to mitigate the emerging humanitarian problems in the east.
First, it should build a true coalition, especially including Middle Eastern and Asian countries. This is the best way not only to prevent creating the impression of U.S. imperialism but also to keep a humanitarian intervention from escalating into a geopolitical contest. Already, China has deployed a frigate off Libya, while Turkey, Syria and other regional actors are monitoring the situation. (See "Libya: The Case for U.S. Intervention.")

Next, create an international Libyan relief fund of approximately $1 billion to cover the cost of resuming food imports to coastal cities in the east. Unlike the usual humanitarian intervention, this plan would utilize existing commercial networks, seeking to re-establish preconflict trade flows by decreasing the risk to suppliers. Over time, as oil exports resume, this cost can be transferred back to the Libyans.

Third, coordinate coalition air and naval power to provide basic security for ports and sea lanes in the east. This would not require a no-fly zone over any large portion of Libya but instead establish a sea denial zone from Benghazi and other coastal cities through important commerce lanes in the Mediterranean. One aircraft-carrier battle group in international waters combined with an international flotilla should do the trick. Military action need occur only if Gaddafi bombs the ports or commercial ships. (See "March of the Volunteers: Can the Rebels Take Tripoli?")

Finally, the U.S. and others should engage a broad range of international relief agencies to monitor and help distribute resources to the coastal cities in the east. Small contingents from Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, Islamic Relief and the World Food Programme are already on the ground. Their size should be increased, and they should be augmented by other official agencies and NGOs. This plan will not impose a new government in Libya; nor will it solve every future problem. It will, however, head off a potentially large humanitarian crisis, with great benefit in the short term, and improve prospects for nearly all Libyans in the long term.

_Pape is a professor, the director of the University of Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism and a co-author of Cutting the Fuse: The Global Explosion of Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It_