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Presenter: Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa, Adm. Samuel Locklear

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DOD News Briefing with Adm. Locklear via Teleconference from USS Mount Whitney

COL. DAVID LAPAN (deputy assistant secretary of defense for media operations): We're pleased to be joined today by U.S. Navy Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa. He is joining us today via phone from his command ship, the USS Mount Whitney, currently underway in the Mediterranean. Admiral Locklear assumed command of U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa on October 6th of 2010. He's also the commander of Joint Task Force Odyssey Dawn, the task force established to provide operational and tactical international response to the unrest in Libya, and to enforce U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect the Libyan people.

Again, he's joining us from his ship in the Med, so this will be an audio-only feed from the ship. And with that, Admiral, I'll turn it over to you.

ADM. SAMUEL LOCKLEAR: Well, thank you, and good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It's afternoon here. USS Mount Whitney, we're operating in the Mediterranean Sea.

Now, before I give you an overview of Operation Odyssey Dawn, let me just take a moment to address the U.S. F-15 aircraft that went down. It has been in the news in the last hours.

Late last night Central European time, two U.S. Air Force crew members ejected from their F-15E Strike Eagle after the aircraft encountered an equipment malfunction in eastern Libya. Both crew members ejected and are safe. Crew member -- one crew member was recovered by coalition forces, the other crew member was recovered by the people of Libya. He was treated with dignity and respect, now in the care of the United States.

The F-15 was assigned to conduct a strike mission against Gadhafi regime missile capabilities -- action in compliance with the provisions of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973. And we all know military operations are inherently dangerous, and I am continually impressed by the bravery and courage of the young men and women who put themselves forward to protect others day in and day out.

Now, let me address operations under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973. International forces have

been authorized to use all necessary measures to protect civilians that are under threat of attack from forces loyal to Libyan leader Moammar al-Gadhafi.

Yesterday, you heard from General Carter Ham, commander of U.S. Africa Command, the combatant commander responsible for this operation. He briefed you on how coalition forces are working together to encourage Gadhafi to end hostilities. But today, I'd like to discuss what Joint Task Force Odyssey Dawn has achieved to date, how these operations have affected the -- affected the environment.

First, let me talk about the countries that have come together to defend the Libyan people. Here on the Mount Whitney with me I have coalition leadership representation from the French Navy and the U.K. Navy. I have LNOs [Liaison Officers] from a variety of other navies. I have Vice Admiral Jean-Pierre Labonne from the French Navy, Rear Admiral Russ Harding from the U.K. Navy.

We're coordinating closely with coalition partners. In fact, there's 13 nations that are either here or moving forces in this direction. Together, we have formed a partnership to support international responses to this crisis.

Today, in the area of our responsibility, our coalition has multiple ships and submarines, highlighted by the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, which I had the opportunity to visit yesterday; the Italian aircraft carrier Garibaldi; and the amphibious assault ship USS Kearsarge. There's numerous coalition land- and sea-based aviation assets, to include reconnaissance, early warning, ACC [Air Combat Command] fighter aircraft and support aircraft that are airborne daily in increasing numbers to enforce the no-fly zone. And here on the Mount Whitney, as I've said, I'm accompanied by flag liaison officers, and we are coordinating closely as we conduct the operation.

Now, let me briefly recap what we have done to date. On March 18th, the coalition forces began a graduated, sequenced campaign against the government of Libya -- to establish a no-fly zone in order to protect innocent civilians. Following initial operations in Benghazi by our French partners, United Kingdom and U.S. cruise missile attacks, accompanied by significant coalition air strikes, rendered Gadhafi's long-range air defenses and his air force largely ineffective; thus enabling the coalition to establish a no-fly zone and opening the door for international and nongovernmental organization humanitarian assistance effort.

We continue to expand the effectiveness of our coalition no-fly zone and our other coalition capabilities. It's my judgment, however, that despite our successes to date, that Gadhafi and his forces are not yet in compliance with the United Nations Security Council resolution, due to the continued aggressive actions his forces are taking against the civilian population of Libya.

I will now take your questions.

COL. LAPAN: Bob.

Q: Admiral, this is Bob Burns from Associated Press. I have a question for you about the limitations of the mission as it's been described by President Obama and others, and particularly how it applies in a place like Misurata, where reports on the ground say that conditions for civilians are growing increasingly dire, where Libyan forces are in the city and there's fighting going on there. How can you protect civilians in a situation like that, and distinguish between rebels and civilians and government forces?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Well, that's a great question. As we put together our operational plans, first of all, protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure -- number-one priority for us -- work very carefully. Fortunately,

the coalition brings together a wide array of capabilities that allow us to minimize the collateral damage when we have to take kinetic operations.

In the case of Misurata, I won't talk about operational construct, but we're aware of the difficulties of that situation. We are aware of what we believe the intelligence situation in the city is. And we will -- under the Security Council resolution mandate that we have, we will continue to do operations that we believe will be ultimately effective in ensuring that we be in state prescribed by the Security Council and our individual leadership of our individual countries in the coalition.

Q: Just a quick follow-up. Are you saying that air power alone will effectively protect civilians in that kind of a situation?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: I think your question was -- you're a little bit light, a little weak. I think your question was, will air power alone effectively protect civilians in that situation?

At this point in time, the Security Council resolution has given us a mission to complete our mission using the no-fly zone, using those powers that are specified in the Security Council -- those expanded things in the Security Council resolution. I'm not going to comment on future operations, what future operational designs might be. Right now we are building the no-fly zone and that's our primary goal.

COL. LAPAN: Dave.

Q: David Martin with CBS.

There's a report, I think a British report, that during the rescue of one of the F-15 -- the F-15 pilot, I guess, the Marine Osprey opened fire on villagers and actually killed five villagers. So I'd like to ask you if that report is true.

And also, yesterday, General Ham made a point of saying that there was no official communication with the rebel forces during this operation. Were there any communications with the rebel forces in the course of recovering either of these two airmen?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Let me answer your second question first. I had no communication with anybody from the rebel force in this coalition during the recovery operations.

First question you asked was about was there any collateral damage during the recovery operations. Recovery operations, (inaudible) -- of course, any time we have an aircraft malfunction and we lose that aircraft, there will be a complete investigation conducted, so I'm not prepared to talk about the -- what's -- what that investigation may or may not reveal. I will say that the recovery mission from my perspective was executed as I would have expected it to be, given the circumstances.

Q: You can't even say if you opened fire?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: What I'm going to say is that we are doing an investigation. We are only hours away from having that incident occur. We have no -- we're in the middle of a major operation out here. This investigation will take time, and it will be looked at very carefully, I'm sure, by the (inaudible) as we go forward. I've got ongoing operations throughout this campaign, and so we're going to focus on those from my office here.

COL. LAPAN: Elisabeth.

Q: Two questions. When do you anticipate handing over command of this operation to the allies? And is it possible that you would assume command as under a NATO auspice?

And secondly, there's been reports that there -- that Gadhafi tried to put a plane in the sky, and that was shot down. Could you -- do you know anything about that?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Let me first talk about the transition of the coalition to another command and control structure. That also is something I'm not focusing on out here. I've got a -- (laughter) -- we've got a pretty busy plate. That's things, I think, for political leadership to decide.

What I can assure you is that the coalition will be prepared to transition it to whatever command and control relationships as decided by the leadership of the nations involved. And we'll ensure that there won't be a break in the coverage or the break in the capabilities that we provide to enforce the Security Council resolution.

I have no knowledge of the second question about Gadhafi's jet you're talking about; been our stated policy that Gadhafi nor his family have been the -- targeted in this case. I'm not focusing on whereabouts or the actions of Colonel Gadhafi. I'm focusing on the protection of civilians in Libya.

Q: Based on what you know now, how soon would you be ready to hand over command to one of the European allies? We've been hearing days. So is that -- are you still on course for that?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Well, like I said, the C2 [command and control] discussion structure will have to be decided by the leadership, political leadership, of the nations, and that hasn't happened to my knowledge. The actual turnover of the operation, this is a -- militaries do this all the time, we transition between organizational constructs. It's not difficult for us. We largely, as a -- around the coalition, we have similar procedures that we operate together, we exercise together, we speak a similar language, we have similar procedures. And that part I don't think anyone should be too concerned about, once the political leadership decides how they'd like to manage it.

COL. LAPAN: David.

Q: Admiral, hi. It's David Cloud with the L.A. Times.

I wanted to return to Misurata for a second. What is your understanding of the situation on the ground there now? Are you aware of forces loyal to Colonel Gadhafi carrying out attacks on civilians? And if so, are your -- coalition aircraft carrying out tactical strikes in an effort to prevent that?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: First, my intelligence tells me that there are Gadhafi forces in Misurata, they are conducting attacks against civilians in Misurata, and -- in violation of the Security Council resolution construct. I'm not going to talk about future operations, but I am aware of it and we are considering all options as we look across the entire country of Libya.

This country is just about the size of Alaska. The forces of Gadhafi are -- were a fairly significant land force that he has arrayed in various locations around that country. We are dealing with it. The no-fly zone is in place, no-fly zone is effective. We have diminished his ability, I think, from an air defense and an air force perspective to the point where I'm comfortable with a no-fly zone. And then we're going to continue to pursue all actions necessary to make him comply with the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973.

Q: Right, but as of now, there have not been tactical air strikes in Misurata? I'm not asking about future operations, I'm asking about past operations.

ADM. LOCKLEAR: There have been tactical operations, airstrike operations throughout the coastal areas of -- military targets throughout Libya.

Q: Okay, Admiral, Jim Miklaszewski, NBC News.

There are reports out of Ajdabiya that Gadhafi forces are dug into the city and that armed rebel forces are attacking the Gadhafi forces and being repelled by their overwhelming air power.

But at the same time, we were told that Marine Harrier jets dropped bombs on Gadhafi military positions in and around Ajdabiya. Isn't that essentially the U.S. coalition forces providing air cover for the rebels? And are there specific orders or understanding, or whatever you would call it, that coalition forces will in no way prevent rebels from carrying out armed attacks on Gadhafi forces?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Well, that's a great question. I would -- I view it this way. I think our president was pretty clear when he laid out the construct in his POTUS [President of the United States] speech on 18 March of what his expectations were; one of those, that the regime forces of Gadhafi have to stop advancing on Benghazi; they have to pull back from Zawiyah, Ajdabiya, Misurata. They have not done that. Benghazi, we have -- we basically have forced him out of Benghazi. In the other three places, they have not complied -- (audio break) -- direction from our president.

And so if I take a look at how I -- my mission here, I apply that type of standard to operations that are occurring. If Colonel Gadhafi would meet that requirement, would have a cease-fire implemented; stop all attacks against citizens and withdraw from the places that we've told him to withdraw; establish water, electricity and gas supplies to all areas and allow humanitarian assistance, then the fighting would stop. Our job would be over.

COL. LAPAN: Tony.

Q: Sir, Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News. Two quick questions.

Can you give the public a sense of the ISR [intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance] aircraft flying over Libya right now to enforce the no-fly zone -- some specific examples, like Global Hawk and JSTARS [Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System]?

And then I have a second question follow up.

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Well, again, I'm not going to give you a laydown of our ISR forces as they go over the country of Libya. But I can assure you that, across the coalition, that we have moved sufficient ISR assets into the theater, that include some of the ones you mentioned, as we prepare the environment here to ensure that we can properly enforce a no-fly zone, the conditions mandated by Security Council Resolution 1973.

Q: To what extent are allied attacks being focused on the 32nd and 9th Special Brigades of Colonel Gadhafi, his best conventional units apparently? And how -- what's your assessment right now of whether they have been degraded sufficiently to stop attacks, or do they need to be attacked some more?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Well, I think your question is well-articulated in that the 32nd Brigade we have recognized is a premier force for Colonel Gadhafi. We have been watching that closely. It initially had been widely arrayed around Tripoli in defense of Tripoli, and it appears to me that some of that force has moved to other areas to reinforce places that were being pressurized by the coalition. However, I can tell you that we will continue to watch carefully their positions. We will take our operations to include ensuring that they comply with the U.N. Security Council resolution mandate.

Q: (Off mic) -- so besides just watch them?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Say that again. I'm not sure I heard you.

Q: (Off mic) -- those units versus just watching them.

ADM. LOCKLEAR: We're not watching. I mean, we're conducting a wide range of operations across Libya. I'm not going to talk about the specifics of those, but certainly the 32nd Brigade is always considered in the calculation of how we expand the no-fly zone and how we conduct operations in the future.

COL. LAPAN: Phil.

Q: Admiral, Phil Ewing with Politico. Can you give us your assessment as of now of the Libyan air forces? How many fixed-wing and helicopters have you destroyed? And how many are you willing to leave extant as you stand up this no-fly zone? Or are you going to try to destroy as much of that capability as possible before you get to the point where you can get the no-fly zone where you want it?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Well, when we began this, my estimation of his air force was not in -- generally in good repair, compared to most -- what you would consider most world standards for air forces. He had a lot of equipment that was aged. Much of it was sitting, parked on the runways and could not be used. He was, however, effectively employing a tactical air force, a helicopter air force, of -- I would say on the order of several dozen rather than in large numbers.

When we began the coalition strikes, one of our objectives was to fray the effectiveness of the remaining -- those remaining air force assets. I believe that we have done that and to date we have not seen any significant movement of those forces. We have good indication that our airstrikes were very effective. And I am completely confident that the air force of Colonel Gadhafi not -- will not have a negative impact on the coalition, and that we will be able to manage if there are -- if there were anything that we didn't see or that we didn't able to influence by our initial campaign that he would -- that we'd be able to manage that.

COL. LAPAN: Anna.

Q: This is Anna Mulrine with the Christian Science Monitor.

I wanted to ask -- you all have said that there have been no official communications with rebel forces on the ground. I was just wondering if you could talk about the unofficial communications and what they've involved, and I have a follow-up.

ADM. LOCKLEAR: I haven't had any unofficial communications or official communications with the -- I think what you refer to as the opposition forces. I'm spending most of my time talking with the coalition and planning our coalition activities to enforce the Security Council resolution.

COL. LAPAN: Follow-up?

Q: And to what extent have there been communications, or even psychological warfare outreach, to Libyan ground forces? I mean, in the past, there's been leafleting, saying things like, if you point your tanks, you know, east, or west rather than east, you know, you're considered officially stood down, we won't fire on you. I mean, you know, to what extent are Gadhafi's forces considered, if not surrendered, then sufficiently stood down not to sustain an attack?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Well, with this type of operation, a key component of it is information operations. We are executing some information operations to ensure that that type of information could be -- is made -- being made available to the Gadhafi forces, and that's all I'll say about that at this time.

Q: Admiral, Chris Lawrence from CNN. You mentioned that the downed crew member was treated with dignity by the rebels. How do you know that? Did -- is that what he told his American rescuers when they came to pick him up? And how long -- how many hours did he spend with the rebels?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: I haven't gone through a debriefing with that downed pilot yet. He is in U.S. custody and he's safe. His injuries were minor. I understand that the Libyan people who treated him with dignity and respect ensured that he had medical care. That's the extent of my understanding of the situation at this time.

Over.

COL. LAPAN: All right, let's see. We have a couple more minutes.

Yes, sir.

Q: Admiral, Nathan Hodge of The Wall Street Journal. Two questions. First, are aircraft from Qatar flying in support of the no-fly zone?

And second, we were told yesterday that there was a shift in focus from the first day of heavy strikes, the cruise missile attacks, to more of overwatch. Would it be correct to characterize activity today as stepping back up strikes on ground forces?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Let me answer your first question about Qatar. Qatar has -- as you know, has been planning to enter the coalition here. They are in the process of moving their forces in this direction. I believe that we have worked with the French to look at their bed-down and their support requirements, because they are operating a long way from where they usually operate. I anticipate that they would be available, so when all things work the way I think it's going to work, that they will be up and flying in the coalition by the weekend.

Second question was -- we started out with a large missile campaign and then we went to the no-fly zone. So let me just -- I kind of talk about that in my -- on my opening remarks, but in any type of military campaign like this, where you have a significant force that has significant strategic air defenses, that has an air force, that there may have some or less credibility, the initial phases of a campaign have to be able to produce an environment where our forces can operate in there with what we'd call air superiority. So that's why you would see the first day or so where we fired a hundred and -- or -- I can't figure the exact number. I think it's 161 or something Tomahawk missiles from coalition ships. Those were directed primarily at preparing that battlespace so that a no-fly zone could be set up.

The coalition was forming in the early -- first few hours of that. So as coalition forces flowed in, we initially established a -- what I'd call a smaller no-fly zone, primarily centered over Benghazi, because that was our center of focus from the beginning. Now that we have been able to shape the battlespace more, that no-fly zone now has expanded, robust, and it requires -- you know, it requires the coalition to be well-coordinated to manage the fuel and the resupply of the forces that maintain the no-fly zone; as we are -- as the capability of the coalition grow, be able to provide more support, more missions, to what I would call -- what you would call towards ground forces; what I would call more towards time-sensitive targeting, where we are looking at the battlespace as it changes, looking at the disposition of those -- of Gadhafi's forces that are not complying with the U.N. Security Council resolution, and we are able to produce more of effect because we have those.

So I think that's what -- how I'd characterize the coming hours and days.

COL. LAPAN: It's our last question.

Q: Spencer Ackerman with Wired. Sir, NATO says it's going to put some forces under the command of Admiral Stavridis into the Mediterranean for help interdicting and enforcing the weapons embargo and also have some role in the no-fly [zone].

What have you been told about that, and what will the relationship with that force be with your command?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: I think I got the question -- have I been told about the proposals from, I think it was -- was it Admiral Stavridis? Would you repeat the first part? You got cut off a little bit.

Q: Sure. What is going to be your role with the NATO force that was just announced under the command of Admiral Stavridis to help enforce the arms embargo and contribute in some fashion to the no-fly zone?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: I understand the question now. I have -- as I was introduced, I have three roles here in Europe -- I -- in Naval Forces Africa, U.S. Naval Forces Europe. And that's -- the U.S. -- those two -- the Africa role is what I am -- my duties here as joint-force -- joint task-force commander of Odyssey Dawn. On my NATO hat, I am JFC [Joint Forces Command] Naples, southern -- basically the southern regional commander for NATO under SACEUR [Supreme Allied Commander Europe], and Admiral Stavridis is SACEUR.

If NATO has a role in this, I can't tell you how I would play in that, because that'll be a decision for North Atlantic Council and for SACEUR, nations that are in NATO.

However, I do have a staff in Naples and I have component commanders that are able to carry out NATO operations of a similar type to the operations we're doing now, should that be requested. I can't tell you who would command it and what the command structure would be. That's a political decision, not a military decision.

(Pause, background noise.)

Q: We ran out of quarters. (Laughter.)

COL. LAPAN: Admiral Locklear, do we still have good comms?

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Yeah, I got you back. It sounded like the Pentagon communication system took a hit there.

COL. LAPAN: Back in time to wrap up. We've gone the allotted time, so I'll send it back to you for any closing remarks you'd like to make.

ADM. LOCKLEAR: Well, I appreciate y'all taking the time. We got a lot of great folks out here from a lot of countries that are interested in making sure that this U.N. Security Council resolution's done right.

Thank you for taking the time today. Really appreciate your interest in the coalition efforts. This is a coalition effort, with a lot of folks out here from a lot of countries. They're doing some amazing work, and I'm personally very proud of what they are accomplishing.

Thanks again.

COL. LAPAN: All right. Thank you, sir.