

AFRICA

Obama Cites Limits of U.S. Role in Libya

By **HELENE COOPER** MARCH 28, 2011

WASHINGTON — President Obama defended the American-led military assault in Libya on Monday, saying it was in the national interest of the United States to stop a potential massacre that would have “stained the conscience of the world.”

In his first major address since ordering American airstrikes on the forces and artillery of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi nine days ago, Mr. Obama emphasized that the United States's role in the assault would be limited, but said that America had the responsibility and the international backing to stop what he characterized as a looming genocide in the Libyan city of Benghazi.

“I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action,” Mr. Obama said.

At the same time, he said, directing American troops to forcibly remove Colonel Qaddafi from power would be a step too far, and would “splinter” the international coalition that has moved against the Libyan government.

“To be blunt, we went down that road in Iraq,” Mr. Obama said, adding that “regime change there took eight years, thousands of American and Iraqi lives, and nearly a trillion dollars. That is not something we can afford to repeat in Libya.”

Speaking in the early evening from the National Defense University in Washington, Mr. Obama said he had made good on his promise to limit American military involvement against Colonel Qaddafi's forces — he did not use the word “war” to describe the action — and he laid out a more general philosophy for the use

of force.

But while Mr. Obama described a narrower role for the United States in a NATO-led operation in Libya, the American military has been carrying out an expansive and increasingly potent air campaign to compel the Libyan Army to turn against Colonel Qaddafi.

The president said he was willing to act unilaterally to defend the nation and its core interests. But in other cases, he said, when the safety of Americans is not directly threatened but where action can be justified — in the case of genocide, humanitarian relief, regional security or economic interests — the United States should not act alone. His statements amounted both to a rationale for multilateralism and another critique of what he has all along characterized as the excessively unilateral tendencies of the administration of George W. Bush.

“In such cases, we should not be afraid to act — but the burden of action should not be America’s alone,” Mr. Obama said. “Because contrary to the claims of some, American leadership is not simply a matter of going it alone and bearing all of the burden ourselves. Real leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well; to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all.”

Mr. Obama never mentioned many of the other nations going through upheaval across the Arab world, including Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, but left little doubt that his decision to send the United States military into action in Libya was the product of a confluence of particular circumstances and opportunities.

He did not say how the intervention in Libya would end, but said the United States and its allies would seek to drive Colonel Qaddafi from power by means other than military force if necessary.

Speaking for 28 minutes, Mr. Obama addressed a number of audiences. To the American public, he tried to offer reassurance that the United States was not getting involved in another open-ended commitment in a place that few Americans had spent much time thinking about. To the democracy protesters across the Middle

East, he vowed that the United States would stand by them, even as he said that “progress will be uneven, and change will come differently in different countries,” a partial acknowledgment that complex relations between the United States and different Arab countries may make for different American responses in different countries.

“The United States will not be able to dictate the pace and scope of this change,” Mr. Obama said. But, he added, “I believe that this movement of change cannot be turned back, and that we must stand alongside those who believe in the same core principles that have guided us through many storms: our opposition to violence directed against one’s own citizens; our support for a set of universal rights, including the freedom for people to express themselves and choose their leaders; our support for governments that are ultimately responsive to the aspirations of the people.”

The president’s remarks were timed to coincide with the formal handover of control over the Libya campaign to NATO, scheduled for Wednesday. But in the wake of criticism from Congressional representatives from both sides of the aisle that Mr. Obama overstepped his authority in ordering the strikes without first getting Congressional approval — and the return of lawmakers to Washington after their spring recess — Mr. Obama had another audience: Congress.

Mr. Obama said that he authorized the military action only “after consulting the bipartisan leadership of Congress,” which White House officials have maintained is sufficient for what they have described as a limited military campaign.

Whether his comments will do much to calm the criticism on Capitol Hill remains unclear. Some liberals remain unsettled by the fact of another war in a Muslim country, initiated by a Democratic president who first came to national prominence as an opponent of the Iraq war, even as others backed the use of force to avert a potential massacre.

Some Republicans continued to criticize Mr. Obama for moving too slowly, while another strain of conservative thought argued that the intervention was overreach, a military action without a compelling national interest.

“Since the allied military campaign began in Libya, President Obama’s seeming uncertainty about the parameters and details of our engagement has only inspired a similar uncertainty among the American people,” Representative Tom Price, Republican of Georgia, said in a statement after the speech. “The president’s speech this evening offered very little to diminish those concerns.”

From the start, Mr. Obama has been caught between criticism that he did not do enough and that he had done too much. He continued to try to explain some seeming contradictions on Monday evening, including that while the United States wants Colonel Qaddafi out, it would not make his departure a goal of the military action.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, he said, will attend a meeting in London on Tuesday where the international community will try to come up with a separate plan to pressure Colonel Qaddafi to leave.

“I know that some Americans continue to have questions about our efforts in Libya,” Mr. Obama acknowledged. “Qaddafi has not yet stepped down from power, and until he does, Libya will remain dangerous.”

But, he said, “if we try to overthrow Qaddafi by force, our coalition would splinter. We would likely have to put U.S. troops on the ground, or risk killing many civilians from the air. The dangers to our men and women in uniform would be far greater. So would the costs and our share of the responsibility for what comes next.”

Aaron David Miller, a State Department Middle East peace negotiator during the Clinton administration, said Mr. Obama described a doctrine that, in essence, can be boiled to this: “If we can, if there’s a moral case, if we have allies, and if we can transition out and not get stuck, we’ll move to help. The Obama doctrine is the ‘hedge your bets and make sure you have a way out’ doctrine. He learned from Afghanistan and Iraq.”

White House officials said the American strikes in Libya did not set a precedent for military action in other Middle East trouble spots. “Obviously there are certain aspirations that are being voiced by each of these movements, but there’s no question that each of them is unique,” Deputy National Security Adviser Denis McDonough said on Monday. “We don’t get very hung up on this question of

precedent.”

But the question of precedent is one that Mr. Obama is clearly still grappling with. “My fellow Americans, I know that at a time of upheaval overseas — when the news is filled with conflict and change — it can be tempting to turn away from the world,” he said.

But, his conclusion was ambiguous at best: “Let us look to the future with confidence and hope not only for our own country, but for all those yearning for freedom around the world.”

A version of this article appears in print on March 29, 2011, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Defending Strikes, Obama Says He ‘Refused to Wait’.