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Western militaries conduct NEO missions out of Libya

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Key Points

- Military assets have been used to evacuate Western nationals from Libya
- UK AWACS aircraft remain on station to provide the air picture over Libya in case further operations are necessary

UK Boeing E-3D Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft are flying round-the-clock surveillance missions over the central Mediterranean region to monitor Libyan airspace as the crisis continues in the North African country.

The Royal Air Force (RAF) aircraft began operations to provide surveillance for UK non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs) in Libya on 26 and 27 February. Since then they have continued to operate, flying from RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, to maintain a recognised air picture of Libya in case further evacuation missions are required, say RAF officers. Vickers VC10 tankers are also forward-deployed to RAF Akrotiri to provide air-to-air refuelling of the E-3Ds to remain on station for extended periods.

Two UK evacuation missions were flown into the eastern Libyan desert by RAF Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules aircraft to pick up some 300 British and other foreign oil workers. The UK mission on 26 February coincided with a similar mission by German Luftwaffe C-160 Transall aircraft, Operation 'Pegasus', to transport 132 foreigners, including 22 Germans, from Nafurah airstrip in eastern Libya to safety in Crete.

Details of the UK evacuations, codenamed Operation 'Deference', were revealed to *Jane's* by senior RAF sources who described them as "humanitarian operations" that were not flown with armed fighter support to avoid being seen as "provocative".

Operation 'Deference' was controlled by the UK Joint Force Headquarters, which had deployed into the British High Commission (embassy) in the Maltese capital of Valletta on 25 February. Its commander, British Army Brigadier James Bashall, is also at the helm of an ad hoc multinational NEO co-ordination cell to choreograph international NEO missions.

The UK evacuation task force established its forward base at Malta International Airport near Luqa on 24 February. An RAF C-130J aircraft flew an evacuation mission into the Libyan capital, Tripoli, on the same day. On 25 February the Royal Navy Type 22 destroyer HMS *Cumberland* evacuated 170 civilians from the port of Benghazi, which was by that time controlled by anti-regime forces. Later that day three RAF Boeing Chinook HC.2 heavylift helicopters arrived in Malta to augment the growing evacuation force, which included a ground force element of the UK's 22 Special Air Services Regiment.

The first evacuation into the Libya desert without the permission of the Tripoli government was flown on the afternoon of 26 February by two C-130Js, a few hours after an RAF BAe 146 regional jet successfully extracted the British ambassador and his staff from Tripoli airport. A second non-permissive mission was flown by two C-130Js and a C-130K

on 27 February. The UK Ministry of Defence revealed that one of its C-130s came under small arms fire during this mission but returned safely to Malta.

Canada also deployed military air assets to Malta under the codename Operation 'Mobile'. Two Lockheed Martin CC-130Js and a Boeing CC-177 Globemaster flew evacuation missions from Tripoli. The Canadian ambassador to Libya and his staff were flown out of the country on 26 February.

On 1 March Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that HMCS *Charlottetown* would deploy from Halifax the following day to take part in Canadian and international operations already under way in Libya.

The UK has reinforced its naval forces in the region with the deployment of the Type 42 destroyer HMS *York* and troops of the 3rd Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland, which forms the UK's spearhead lead element, have been put on short notice to move.

Military transport aircraft operating from Malta during the Libyan evacuation included Irish Defence Force Learjets and Airbus Military CN-235s, a Romanian Air Force C-130E and C-27J Spartan, a Spanish Air Force C-130H, a French Navy Dassault Falcon, an Austrian Air Force C-130K and a Kuwaiti Air Force Lockheed L-100-300.

A Dutch Dornier 228-212 Marine Patrol maritime surveillance aircraft and border control officials of the paramilitary Royal Netherlands Marechaussee deployed to Italy in late February for a five-week mission. The objective is to monitor the Mediterranean region for refugees fleeing North Africa; the mission operates under the direction of the European agency for external European borders, Frontex.



An RAF C-130 at Malta International Airport on 26 February, which has flown a number of missions that have extracted UK and foreign nationals from Libya. (PA News)
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