A month-long uprising in Libya has become a war. On March 20, international forces began launching air strikes on the North African desert country. A coalition, or group of, nations that includes the United States, Britain and France, is leading the charge. Coalition leaders say that their goal is to prevent further attacks on civilians by Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi.

Protecting Libya's People
On March 17, the United Nations Security Council voted to authorize a no-fly zone over Libya. The zone is an area in which aircraft, especially military planes, are forbidden to fly. The U.N. also allowed the use of "all necessary means" to protect civilians. The coalition forces are helping to enforce the U.N. resolution.

According to U.S. military officials the campaign is targeting Libyan air bases and aircraft, and some ground forces loyal to Gaddafi. The U.S. claims that Gaddafi is not a target. But on Sunday, a missile hit Gaddafi's compound in Tripoli, Libya's capital. It is unclear whether or not Gaddafi was there at the time.

On Monday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that the U.S. would not continue to have a leadership role in the operation. The U.S. is expected to turn over "primary responsibility" within days, most likely to Britain or France, Gates said. "I think this is basically going to have to be resolved by the Libyans themselves," Gates told reporters.

A Country in Turmoil
The conflict started brewing more than a month ago, on February 15. That's when Libya's people began demonstrations in Benghazi, the country's second-largest city. Before long, the unrest had spread to Tripoli and several other eastern cities.

Inspired by other Arab revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the protesters have been calling for Gaddafi to resign and for a democratic government. Gaddafi, 68, has been in power for 41 years. He has ruled Libya with an iron hand. Libya's oil reserves provide more than 90% of the country's money. But Libya's economy is weak. Little of the oil wealth reaches the people, and unemployment is high.

The Libyan leader has refused to step down. Instead, Gaddafi ordered his security forces to launch deadly attacks against the protesters. It is believed that hundreds of people have been killed since the rebellion began.

President Barack Obama spoke of the air campaign while on a visit to Chile, in South America. "Our military action is in support of an international mandate from the Security Council that specifically focuses on the humanitarian threat posed by Colonel Gaddafi to his people," the President said. "Not only was he carrying out murders of civilians but he threatened more."

Not all world leaders agree with the air strikes, however. Russian Prime Minster Vladimir Putin criticized the U.N. resolution as "deficient and flawed." Officials in China have also voiced their opposition to the campaign.