

International

UN chief urges ceasefire to avert 'bloody battle' for Tripoli

Libya fighting kills 56; thousands flee homes

TRIPOLI: The UN chief warned Libya is on the brink of "a very dangerous situation" as forces loyal to the internationally recognized government and a rival strongman battle for control of the capital. Thousands of people have fled heavy fighting on the outskirts of Tripoli that has left dozens dead and prompted mounting global alarm. UN chief Antonio Guterres on Wednesday appealed for a halt to hostilities to prevent the situation spiraling out of control.

"It's still time to stop," he told reporters after briefing the UN Security Council in a closed session in New York. "It's still time for a ceasefire to take place, for a cessation of hostilities to take place, and to avoid the worst, which would be a dramatic, bloody battle for Tripoli." Nearly a week of fighting on the city's doorstep has already killed 56 people and wounded 266, the World Health Organization said. "Thousands of people have fled their homes, while others are trapped in conflict areas. Hospitals inside and outside (Tripoli) are receiving daily casualties," it said. The UN chief was in Libya when forces loyal to military strongman Khalifa Hafta last week launched an offensive to capture the capital, which is controlled by a UN-backed government and an array of militias. Haftar backs a rival administration based in eastern Libya that

refuses to recognize the authority of the Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj. Guterres said Libya was facing a "very dangerous situation" and urged a halt to the fighting to allow political negotiations to start anew. "It is very clear for me that we need to restart a serious political dialogue and a serious political negotiation but it is obvious that cannot take place without a full stop to the hostilities," he said. The council met for more than two hours behind closed doors to consider how to address the fresh fighting that has derailed efforts to end instability that has been exploited by jihadists and people-smugglers. The United Nations postponed a national conference that was to open on Sunday to draw up a roadmap to elections, meant to turn the page on years of turmoil since the NATO-backed overthrow of dictator Moamer Kadhafi in 2011.

Cat and mouse

Heavy clashes shook Ain Zara, a town dotted with farms on the southeastern outskirts of Tripoli where pro-GNA fighters managed to reverse an advance by Haftar's forces. On the town's main street, lined with shops and houses, a sand barrier erected by pro-GNA forces separated the two camps. "Today, the criminals of



TRIPOLI: A Libyan fighter loyal to the Government of National Accord (GNA) fires a machine gun during clashes with forces loyal to strongman Khalifa Haftar south of the capital Tripoli's suburb of Ain Zara.—AFP

Haftar's group have advanced, but we destroyed a tank and two armored vehicles," said a pro-GNA fighter who gave his name as Youssef. "The situation is good now," he said.

Behind him, artillery fire stirred up a cloud of sand as the sound of machine guns and anti-aircraft guns rang out. Suddenly a shell sliced through the air and hit a nearby house. "You see, he (Haftar) wants to destroy our houses and all

of Tripoli," one of the fighters shouted. Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), which controls swathes of the country's east, said on Wednesday it had seized a barracks in the Aziziya area around 50 kilometres (31 miles) south of Tripoli after "ferocious clashes".

It said several fighters loyal to the UN-backed government had been detained and their weapons seized.—AFP

On the Sahara's edge, fight to protect children against measles

ADRE, Chad: Dinar Tchere is fighting time and the sun, and he fears he may be losing. This morning, the health worker is expected in a remote village of eastern Chad, where he will administer the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine to poor children. But he's behind schedule—and there is limited time before his enemy, the blistering Sahelian heat, will destroy his precious drugs.

Tchere takes his gear and the ice-packed cooler that shields the vaccines, puts them in an NGO pickup and heads out from his clinic in Hilouta, in Ouaddai province, on the dusty untarmacked road. Twenty minutes later he is in Agang, a village of 400 people, and there, another private dread has turned to reality. No-one is there to be vaccinated. "It's just what I feared—most of the mums have gone off to the market to do their shopping," groans Tchere, a stocky, shaven-headed man in his fifties.

There is nothing to do but hope that the mothers and their children will return. He stretches out a mat on the soil, under a mango tree. His luck starts to turn. One by one, mothers with their children make their way to the spot, and soon there is no room on his mat for youngsters waiting for their jab.

Always worried by the heat—the thermometer now reads 40 degrees Celsius — Tchere dips his finger into the cooler to check that the ice has not melted, and starts the vaccination. "Our biggest headache is ensuring that the vaccines are always kept cold," says Tchere, who heads one of 21 health centers in the region. "Since the troubles of 2007, we no longer have a solar panel or fridge."

The "troubles" refer to years-long violence by armed groups on the tense border between Sudan and Chad. Hilouta, which lies less than two kilometers from the border, became a combat zone.

With no power, how does Tchere keep his vaccines cool? "I stock them in Sudan, in a clinic on the other side of the border. They've got a fridge," he explains. But there's a problem: because of security concerns, Sudan refuses to let people cross the border by motorbike—Tchere's only form of transport when he cannot use the pickup. So on the eve of every immunization session, Tchere walks into Sudan, carrying his cooler, fills it up with vaccines, and walks back into Chad. His clinic administers to about 60 villages. He says he does four vaccination sessions per month—two in the clinic, and two in the villages. Most often, he does the outside trips on his motorbike, always taking care never to take the same route back home, in order to avoid holdups.

The state no longer pays the running costs of his health centre—a French NGO, *Premiere Urgence Internationale* (PUI), has stepped in, using financial help provided by the European Union. In Arkoum, about 50 kilometers from Hilouta, Felix Djembonoudji, a nurse who runs the health centre, says that the stockpile of vaccines—held in the district's main town of Adre, several hours away by road—has run out. "The people (in Adre) sometimes don't receive any—we've been without MMR (vaccine) for five days," he says.

Measles is often dismissed by so-called anti-vaxxers who oppose immunization as a disease of the past or non-threatening. Experts say that it is neither—measles is on the comeback trail. And out of every 20 children who catch measles, as many as one will suffer from pneumonia, according to the US Centers of Disease Control (CDC). Blindness, encephalitis and severe diarrhea are also serious complications. Only one child in five in Chad is fully vaccinated against measles, according to a 2017 survey.

"Measles can also cause malnutrition in non-vaccinated children, which in itself is a cause of premature death," said PUI's mission chief in Chad, Fabienne Mially. According to UN figures, more than one child in 10 in Chad will die before their fifth birthday. In Agang, the measles vaccination session comes to an end, and Tchere is packing up his gear when a horse appears on the horizon, its hooves kicking up dust, bearing a man and his six-month-old baby.—AFP

Syria Kurds to send 31,000 displaced Iraqis back home

QAMISHLI, SYRIA: Syria's Kurds yesterday announced a deal with Baghdad for 31,000 displaced Iraqis, mostly women and children, in camps in northeastern Syria to return home to Iraq. Tens of thousands of people live in the camps, which swelled enormously during the months-long battle that culminated in the defeat of the last vestige of the Islamic State group's "caliphate" by a Kurdish-led alliance.

"A delegation from the Iraqi cabinet visited the autonomous administration to discuss the return to Iraq of displaced Iraqis, estimated to number 31,000, and an agreement was reached," Kurdish official Mahmud Kero said. "So far 4,000 people have signed up and we are waiting for the Iraqi government to open up the Iraqi border to start," he said. Kero said many of the displaced did not have Iraqi identity papers, including children born on Syrian soil. "We have asked the Iraqi government to find a solution," he said. An Iraqi official said on Tuesday that Baghdad was making preparations for the return of tens of thousands of citizens, most of them "women and children". Those expected to return do not include suspected IS fighters being held in Kurdish-run jails, after surrendering or being caught fleeing the jihadists' last stand. "We have asked for the return of all Iraqis including those accused of belonging to IS," Kero said.—AFP