

East Libyan forces' push for Tripoli stirs foreign divisions

Qatar wants to cut off arms supplies to Haftar

TRIPOLI: Qatar called yesterday for a blocking of foreign arms supplies to eastern Libyan forces commander Khalifa Haftar, whose push to seize the capital Tripoli is causing rifts around the Gulf and Europe. Nearly two weeks into its assault, the veteran general's eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA) is stuck in the city's southern outskirts battling armed groups loyal to the internationally-recognized Tripoli government.

Yet Tripoli's roughly 2.5 million people were maintaining a semblance of normality - even as the occasional artillery boom echoed across the city. "We are still carrying on, thank God. What else can we do?" said Mohamed Taha, 23, in a street where students still packed a nearby school. Cafes and shops also remained open and busy.

Foreign powers are worried but unable to present a united front over the latest flare-up in the cycle of anarchy and warfare that has gripped Libya since dictator Muammar Gaddafi was toppled in 2011. The conflict has brought a growing humanitarian toll - 174 people, 756 injured and 18,250 displaced according to latest United Nations tallies - and sunk for now an international peace plan. It threatens to disrupt

oil flows, foment migration across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, and allow militants to exploit the chaos.

Qatar said an existing UN arms embargo on Libya should be strictly enforced, to prevent Haftar, 75, from receiving arms. The Benghazi-based Haftar enjoys the backing of Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who view him as an anchor to restore stability and combat Islamist militants. Those three nations cut ties with Qatar in 2017, accusing it of support for militants and Iran.

Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani told Italian daily La Repubblica that a postponed UN peace conference should be rescheduled and Haftar's troops forced to withdraw. The arms embargo must be implemented "to prevent those countries that have been providing munitions and state-of-the-art weapons from continuing to do so," he said. Past UN reports say the UAE and Egypt have both supplied Haftar with arms and aircraft, giving him air superiority among Libya's multiple factions. East Libyan authorities say Qatar and Turkey back rival, Islamist-leaning factions in western Libya.

The Gulf diplomatic divisions echo those

in Europe, where former colonial ruler Italy and France have sparred over Libya. Paris has given Haftar support in the past, viewing him as the best bet to end the chaos since a NATO-backed rebellion to end Gaddafi's murderous four-decade rule. Italy, with considerable oil interests in the OPEC member, supports the Tripoli government of Prime Minister Fayez Al-Serraj and was furious with French reluctance to back a recent European Union resolution urging Haftar to halt his advance.

Nevertheless, Serraj has managed to keep the LNA at bay, thanks largely to armed groups who have rushed to aid them from other western Libyan factions. The UN Security Council is considering a British-drafted resolution that would demand a ceasefire and urge all nations with influence over the warring parties to ensure compliance. The 15-member council has expressed concern but been unable so far to issue a more formal statement, diplomats said, as Russia objected to a reference to the LNA while Washington said it could not agree a text that did not mention Haftar's forces.

Though Haftar presents himself as a champion against what he calls terrorism, opponents cast him as a would-be dictator



TRIPOLI: Libyan demonstrators hold placards against foreign intervention in Libya during a protest outside the municipality yesterday. — AFP

in the mold of Gaddafi. About 70 people protested against him at the central Algiers Square in Tripoli yesterday. "We are against Haftar and military rule," said demonstrator Assam Dirbiq. Haftar was among officers who helped Gaddafi rise to power in 1969,

but fell out with him during a war with Chad in the 1980s. He was taken prisoner by the Chadians, rescued by the CIA, and lived for about 20 years in Virginia before returning in 2011 to join other rebels in the uprising against Gaddafi. — Reuters

Omar caught in a political...

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the role of an outspoken first-year congresswoman who challenges the White House and makes her own party's leadership chafe. Omar's remark that US political backing for the Jewish state is fueled by money from a pro-Israel lobbying group, and her open support for a boycott and divestment movement against Israel led to vocal criticism from both sides of the political aisle.

Belligerence against the lawmaker has ramped up dramatically after a clip emerged of her characterizing the Sept 11, 2001 attacks in the United States as "some people did something". On Friday, Trump tweeted a video that juxtaposed the snippet - which some Democrats say was taken out of context - with images of the hijacked planes crashing into the World Trade Center's Twin Towers in New York.

Omar said Sunday in a statement that many of the increased threats she had received were "directly referencing or replying to the president's video". Trump's startling tweet prompted House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the most high-ranking Democrat in the country, to denounce his "hateful and inflammatory rhetoric" and demand he take the video down, as she ordered a security review to safeguard Omar and her family.

Even before Trump's post, a man was arrested April 5 and charged with threatening to murder Omar, after he called her office and said "I'll put a bullet in her (expletive) skull," according to Omar's statement. The threats on social media were equally graphic. "She needs to be executed," one Twitter user wrote.

The president, perhaps believing that making her the progressive face of the Democratic Party will help rally his base in the early stages of his 2020 re-election bid,

maintained the pressure Monday, tweeting that Omar is "out of control". Democratic leaders "should look at the anti-Semitic, anti-Israel and ungrateful US HATE statements Omar has made," he added.

Seizing on a chance to target Omar anew, Trump held a roundtable near Omar's Minneapolis, Minnesota congressional district. The subject was the economy, but Trump strayed into immigration politics as he criticized the US asylum process and called for an end to the visa lottery. "Who do you think these countries are giving us? They're not giving us their finest, that I can tell you," Trump said.

Opposing groups of protesters gathered outside the venue, including Trump opponents who held "Stand with Ilhan" placards. Many Democrats have rushed to Omar's defense, among them multiple 2020 presidential candidates. "The disgusting and dangerous attacks against her must end," tweeted Senator Bernie Sanders, a frontrunner for the Democratic nomination. Some 200 Democratic activists, teachers, local officials and Jewish and Muslim leaders signed a statement of solidarity with Omar and demanded an end to the attacks.

Omar was just eight years old when she and her family fled Somalia's civil war. As a refugee in America, a teenage Omar arrived in the big city of Minneapolis, where she rose to become a Democratic member of the state assembly. Last year, she won the Democratic nomination for her congressional race in a district that has not been represented by a Republican in half a century. The lack of serious conservative opposition in that race perhaps helped lead to her wake-up call when she landed in Washington.

"This whole process has really been one of growth for me," she told Colbert. But Omar, who is married, has three children and is the only member of Congress to wear a religious headscarf in the House chamber, has pushed back hard on the "offensive" accusation that her religion and refugee past make her less of a US citizen. "I took an oath to uphold the Constitution," she said. "I am as American as everyone else is." — AFP

Seals, caviar, oil: Caspian faces ...

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Bordered by Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan, the Caspian is the world's largest inland body of water, about the size of Japan. As well as the seals and other endemic species including Caspian turtles and the famed beluga sturgeon, the sea boasts vast energy reserves, estimated at 50 billion barrels of oil and 300,000 billion cubic metres of natural gas. Pollution from the extraction of that oil and gas, along with declining water levels due to climate change, pose a threat to many species and put the future of the sea itself at risk.

The UN Environment Program has warned that the Caspian "suffers from an enormous burden of pollution from oil extraction and refining, offshore oil fields, radioactive wastes from nuclear power plants and huge volumes of untreated sewage and industrial waste introduced mainly by the Volga River". A few kilometres from downtown Baku, fishermen along the seashore watch small drops of oil appearing on the surface of the sea and spreading in varicolored strains. "Some fish seem to prefer polluted water, so they tend to congregate here," said 26-year-old Rashad. "The water is dirty," he said, displaying a plastic bag that was caught on his fish hook.

Besides fishermen like Rashad, the entire caviar industry is in danger as a result of the pollution. The Caspian Sea used to be home to one of the world's largest population of sturgeons, but it has declined by more than 90 percent over the last three generations, the World Wildlife Fund said in 2016. "I remember when caviar cost 10 (Azerbaijani) manats (per kilogram)", or about \$6, said environmentalist Garayev. "Today, it costs more than 1,500 manats (\$960) and there is almost none left. We have practically no viable

population of sturgeon today."

Aligaidar Mammedov, a former hydro-geologist and fisherman turned environmental activist, said that oil exploration methods either kill or chase away the sturgeon. "They set off seismic explosions in the sea," he said, adding: "The seabed is destroyed as a result, and sturgeons are seabed fish." Mammedov also warned of the potential for oil spills, which would be far more polluting in the inland sea than they are in the ocean.

Azerbaijan's state-run oil company, SOCAR, says it is doing its part and has cleared most of the vast areas near Baku that used to be covered with oil sludge. "The environmental challenges came mainly during the Soviet era, when the country didn't take enough care of the environment and the technology was not as sophisticated," SOCAR spokesman Ibrahim Ahmadov said. But even if pollution from the oil industry were mitigated, the Caspian could still be inching toward a catastrophe, since global warming is causing it to lose water.

A recent study by Azerbaijan's Academy of Sciences estimated that the sea level is dropping by more than six centimetres per year. "Climate change along the Caspian Sea basin causes very rapid evaporation," said Elnur Safarov, an Azerbaijani marine scientist and one of the study's authors. "The five countries bordering the Caspian, their economies, their lives, depending on it completely - fishing, the oil industry, agriculture, communications," he said. "When the sea level changes... the social and economic situation of the entire coastline changes."

In 2018, Caspian Sea countries signed an agreement defining the status of the sea, which had lacked an international legal framework since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The agreement mainly regulates military use, oil and gas extraction and caviar production, and activists have so far been disappointed that it has not touched on environmental issues. They worry that the Caspian may share the fate of Central Asia's Aral Sea, which has all but vanished in one of the world's greatest environmental catastrophes. "It would be so stupid to lose it (the Caspian) like the Aral Sea," Garayev said. "I don't want to think about it. It would be a crime." — AFP



BURNSVILLE, Minnesota: A coalition of community organizations gathers in support of Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar outside Nuss Truck and Equipment where US President Donald Trump spoke on Monday. — AFP

MPs back changes to constitution to...

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as they gathered for the vote inside the parliament while nationalistic songs played in the background.

The amendments were initially introduced in February by a parliamentary bloc supportive of Sisi and updated this week after several rounds of debates. Prior to the amendments, Egypt's 2014 constitution stipulated only two four-year presidential terms. The 596-seat parliament, which is dominated by Sisi loyalists, was elected in 2015, about a year after Sisi took office. Since Sisi overthrew Morsi, Egypt has drawn heavy international criticism for its sweeping crackdown on dissent. The authorities have jailed thousands of Morsi's supporters as well as liberal and secular activists, including a popular blogger, actors, singers and journalists.

As lawmakers debated the proposed changes, prominent dissident actors Khaled Abol Naga and Amr Waked denounced them as a power grab. If passed,

"these amendments would take us back to a dictatorship fit for the Middle Ages", Waked told a news conference by rights groups in Geneva. His fellow actor criticized Sisi's narrative that his rule brought stability. "Where is there stability in a country that jails children... that treats people badly or that kills?" he said.

Human Rights Watch has said the amendments would "institutionalize authoritarianism". When Sisi visited Washington for talks with US President Donald Trump last week, HRW urged Congress to withhold endorsement of his bid to extend his rule. "Congress needs to use its levers to pressure the Egyptian president to reverse course, starting with withdrawing these constitutional amendments set to consolidate authoritarian rule," said HRW's Michael Page.

Amnesty International has warned the constitutional amendments "would worsen the devastating human rights crisis Egyptians are already facing". "They would grant President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and security forces free rein to further abuse their powers and suppress peaceful dissent for years to come," said Amnesty's Magdalena Mughrabi. Other constitutional amendments include a quota for women's representation of no less than 25 percent in parliament and forming a second parliamentary chamber. — AFP

Notre-Dame still stands...

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Junior interior minister Laurent Nunez told reporters at the scene that work to secure the structure would continue into tomorrow, allowing firefighters access to remove remaining artifacts and artworks. Though "some weaknesses" in the 850-year-old structure had been identified, overall it is "holding up OK", he added. The Paris fire service said that the last remnants of the blaze were extinguished yesterday, 15 hours after the fire broke out.

Renovation work on the steeple, where workers were replacing its lead covering, is widely suspected to have caused the inferno after the blaze broke out in an area under scaffolding. Investigators interviewed witnesses overnight and began speaking with employees of five different construction companies that were working on the monument, said public prosecutor Remy Heitz. "Nothing indicates this was a deliberate act," Heitz told reporters, adding that 50 investigators had been assigned to what he expected to be a "long and complex" case. The architect in charge of the renovation project slated to last until 2022 said no workers were on the site when flames first appeared shortly before 7:00 pm (1700 GMT) on Monday.

Macron struck a defiant tone late Monday as he visited the scene with his wife Brigitte, telling reporters: "We will rebuild Notre-Dame because it is what the French expect." He described the cathedral as the "epicenter of our life". A public appeal for funds drew immediate support from French billionaires and other private donors as well as from countries including Germany, Italy and Russia which offered expertise.

French billionaire Bernard Arnault and his LVMH luxury conglomerate, rival high-end designer goods group Kering, Total oil company and cosmetics giant L'Oréal each pledged €100 million or more. Support came from outside France as well, with Apple chief Tim

Cook announcing the tech giant would give an unspecified amount to help restore a "precious heritage for future generations". Specialized craftsmen and rare materials are expected to be needed to restore Notre-Dame, which is seen as an emblem of France and, more broadly, a symbol of Western civilization that has survived revolutions and war.

"We have everything to be able to rebuild it in exactly the same way," Culture Minister Franck Riester told France Inter, adding that the government was looking at ways to encourage donations. But experts warned a full restoration will take many years. "I'd say decades," said Eric Fischer, head of the foundation in charge of restoring the 1,000-year-old Strasbourg cathedral.

Thousands of Parisians and tourists watched in horror Monday as flames engulfed the building and rescuers tried to save as much as they could of the cathedral's treasures. Many more came yesterday to the banks of the river Seine to gaze at where the roof and steeple once stood. A firefighter suffered injuries during the blaze, which at one point threatened to bring down one of the two monumental towers on the western facade of the cathedral that is visited by 13 million tourists each year.

The Holy Crown of Thorns, believed to have been worn by Jesus (PBUH) at his crucifixion, was saved by firefighters, as was a sacred tunic worn by 13th-century French king Louis IX. Rescuers formed a human chain at the site of the disaster to evacuate as many artifacts as possible, which were then stocked temporarily at the Paris town hall. Smoke damaged paintings will be sent to the Louvre museum, a world center for restoration.

Shock at the extent of the damage was palpable in France and stirred reactions from governments worldwide. In a rare statement, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II said she was "deeply saddened", while Pope Francis hoped that Notre-Dame "may once again become, thanks to reconstruction work and the mobilization of all, a jewel in the heart of the city." The cathedral has been a backdrop to the twists and turns of French history since construction began in mid-12th century - and has featured in countless books and movies. Bells at cathedrals across France were to ring out today at 6:50 pm (1650 GMT) in tribute. — Agencies