

Libyans chose danger at sea over peril at home

AT SEA: For three young Libyans plucked from a deflating dingy in the Mediterranean, the perils of trying to cross the sea were still preferable to what they had left behind in their war-torn home. Salah, Khalil and Ibrahim, aged between 19 and 22, sat in a corner of the Ocean Viking vessel operated by SOS Mediterranean and Doctors without Borders as it waited for permission to dock at a port. They sat apart from other migrants from Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia, Senegal and the Ivory Coast who have fled torture and abuse in Libya where most of them had gone to seek work. "I had no idea how dangerous the sea could be," says Khalil, 20. "But Libya is collapsing - you cannot live there," he adds, pulling an imaginary trigger.

Before he fled Libya, Khalil was a taxi driver. While driving the route from Sabha, his hometown in the center to the eastern city of Benghazi, he was stopped by militia loyal to Khalifa Haftar, a strongman who holds sway in the region. He said he was thrown into prison where he languished for three months alongside hundreds of others and was beaten daily, pointing to a scar in the corner of his mouth. He later made a break for freedom with about 15 fellow prisoners, running the gauntlet of their jailers who fired on them as they fled. "People were shot around me but I didn't stop," he said. "I was hit too."

Luca, the ship's doctor who removed the bullets

embedded in Khalil's body, says such wounds are nothing new among those fleeing from conflict areas. With his taxi taken from him, Khalil returned to his family. "I just wanted to live a normal life," he said. But a month later fighting broke out in his town and his mother told him to flee. "She had no idea of how dangerous the crossing could be," Khalil says. "Neither did I. I was happy to try the sea." But by the time he was rescued by Doctors without Borders on Aug 12, the blue rubber dingy he was sharing with 104 others was on the verge of sinking.

Nineteen-year-old Salah joined the forces of the Government of National Accord of Fayez Al-Sarraj. But he soon realized that he was not cut out for war. "If I had stayed, I would have been killed - either by Sarraj's men for fleeing, or by Haftar's men for fighting for Sarraj," he said. He got a number from a Sudanese, and left the same day - with just time for one last selfie with his family.

Ibrahim's reason for fleeing was the color of his skin. "My father was black - he is dead. My uncle died in the fighting. My school was bombed. My mother said to me 'Libya is not a country for you.'" "My Sudanese friends were like a family to me. One from Darfur was killed right in front of me as we were on our way to play football," he said. "I didn't want to fight. I was terrified on that blue boat, but Libya is more dangerous than our sunken vessel." — AFP



(From left) Salah, 19, Ibrahim, 22 and Khalil, 20, three migrants from Libya, sit on deck of the 'Ocean Viking' rescue ship on Sunday during a search-and-rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea. — AFP

Cairo's Baron Palace facelift sparks outcry

CAIRO: Egyptian authorities have defended renovation works at a historic Cairo palace after the site's new look sparked mockery on social media. The site, dubbed the Baron Palace, was built between 1907 and 1911 by wealthy Belgian industrialist Edouard Empain. The baron also spearheaded the development of the surrounding upmarket neighborhood of Heliopolis. Built in a style reminiscent of the Cambodian Hindu temple of Angkor Wat, the striking building set amid lush gardens has long since fallen into disrepair.

But work to restore the building has sparked outcry. Many have taken issue with white marble additions to the building's rosy pink stone exterior, saying the materials are of poor quality and not in keeping with the original style. One Twitter user asked: "Who is the fool behind the restoration of Egypt's palaces? Our heritage is being systematically destroyed." A Facebook page called Egyptian Historians chided officials for the

"warped" restoration. "Be honest with yourselves and admit that you ruined it... you are literally demolishing our monuments," a post on the group's page said.

Antiquities Minister Khaled El-Enany dismissed online criticisms as "fake news". "I didn't hear one word of truth in all these social media comments," he said in a statement. His ministry said the colors of the palace had faded from weather damage over many years. "The restoration is a real dream and we will breathe life into this abandoned landmark," Enany added. General Hisham Samir, who heads up the ministry's engineering branch, said the colors were "correct and are backed up by historical sources".

The works began in July 2017 in cooperation with the Belgian government and will cost 100 million Egyptian pounds (over \$6 million), the statement added. Samir told AFP that the work is expected to be completed by year's end with plans to open the building to the public by early 2020. Egypt's multitude of historical monuments and buildings are a major draw for tourists, though the country has often faced accusations of neglecting these sites. The government has recently launched various restoration projects to stimulate tourism, a key sector that has suffered in recent years due to political insecurity and sporadic militant attacks. — AFP



CAIRO: This picture taken on Sunday shows restoration works ongoing at the historic "Le Palais Hindou" (also known as the "Baron Empain Palace") in the Egyptian capital's Heliopolis district. — AFP

Iran warns US as freed tanker...

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As the ship finally sailed eastward, Iran said it had warned the United States through the Swiss embassy in Tehran, which represents US interests, against trying to seize it again. "Iran has given necessary warnings to American officials through its official channels... not to make such a mistake because it would have grave consequences," said foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi. Speaking at a news conference, he dismissed the notion of any link between the seizure of the Iranian tanker off Gibraltar and the British-flagged tanker in the Gulf. "There is no connection whatsoever between these two vessels," said Mousavi. "There have been two or three maritime violations made by that ship," he said, referring to the Stena Impero held off Iran's Bandar Abbas. "The court is looking into it. We hope the (investigation) is completed as soon as possible and the verdict is issued."

The spokesman said the tanker's release was a blow to US "unilateralism". "The Americans have not been very successful with their unilateral sanctions that have no legal basis. They should come to their senses that bullying and unilateralism cannot get anywhere in the world today," Mousavi urged other countries not to accept sanctions the US has imposed on Iran "because they're not legitimate and have no legal basis".

Bashir acknowledges receiving millions...

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financing. On Saturday, Sudan's ruling military council, which took over after Bashir's ouster, signed a power-sharing agreement with the main opposition coalition, paving the way for a transitional govern-

ment and eventual elections. The pact sets up a sovereign council as the highest authority in the country, but largely delegates executive powers to the cabinet of ministers. The sovereign council was due to be sworn in yesterday, but it was delayed after one of the five nominees put forward by the opposition alliance representing protest leaders turned down the job. The spokesman for the Transitional Military Council, Lieutenant General Shams El Din Kabbashi, said the formation of the new ruling body would be delayed by 48 hours on the request of the opposition coalition. — Agencies

Iran's judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi called for legal action to be taken against Britain over the vessel's detention. "Now following the release of the ship, the Islamic Republic of Iran should seek damages," he told state television. But despite the tanker's release, Iran still faced a dilemma over its ultimate destination and that of its oil, said Commerzbank analyst Carsten Fritsch. "The tanker was renamed... but the problem with US sanctions remains," he told AFP. "I don't see any buyer in the Mediterranean apart from the sanctioned regime in Syria. Returning to Iran will be difficult since it would need to make the whole trip around Africa."

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was unable to give anything away when asked during a trip to Finland if the oil would be offloaded in Greece. "Now because of US sanctions we cannot be very transparent with the destination of our oil," he told a news conference in Helsinki. In its decision ordering the tanker's release, Gibraltar said it had received written assurances from Iran that the ship would not be headed for countries "subject to European Union sanctions". Iran denied it had made any promises about the ship's destination to secure the release. Tensions between Iran and the United States have been rising since President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from a landmark nuclear deal in May 2018 and began imposing sanctions against the Islamic republic. Iran has responded to Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign by suspending some of its commitments under the nuclear deal. The situation has threatened to spiral out of control with ships attacked, drones downed and oil tankers seized. At the height of the crisis, Trump called off air strikes against Iran at the last minute in June after its forces shot down a US drone. — AFP

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Heatwaves longer, deadlier even in a 2 Celsius world

PARIS: Northern hemisphere summers will deliver dangerously longer heatwaves, droughts and bouts of rain even if humanity manages to cap global warming at two degrees Celsius, scientists said yesterday. With one degree of warming since pre-industrial times so far, extreme weather of this kind has already become more intense, with a single heatwave in 2003 leading to 70,000 excess deaths in Europe alone.

But the new study, published in the journal Nature Climate Change, is the first to quantify how much longer such events are likely to last if temperatures rise another degree. "We could see a significant shift in summer weather conditions," said lead author Peter Pfleiderer, a doctoral researcher at Humboldt University in Berlin. "Extreme weather would become more persistent - hot and dry periods, as well as consecutive days of heavy rain would all get longer."

Even small increases in the duration of extreme weather events can have devastating impacts on human health, food production, biodiversity and even economic growth. During the 2018 heatwave in Europe, for example, several hot and dry spells - each lasting weeks - led to wheat yield losses of 15 percent in Germany. In the United States, the past 12 months have been the wettest on record, with large swathes of the heartland

immobilized by continuous rainfall and flooding.

The study looked at the changes in the northern hemisphere climate system that might be driving more extreme weather. "The climate models show a systematic weakening of the large-scale summer atmospheric circulation-including the Jetstream and storm tracks - as the planet warms," said co-author Dim Coumou, a researcher at Vrije University Amsterdam. "The increase in weather persistence can be linked to a weakening of this circulation."

As it slows down, hot and dry conditions can build up over the continents. At the same time, water-bearing hurricanes and typhoons can persist longer in one place. According to the new findings, the chance of hot periods lasting longer than two weeks in a 2C world will go up by four percent compared to today, with even larger increases in eastern North America, central Europe and northern Asia.

Drought-like conditions of more than 14 days will become 10 percent more likely in central North America. And bouts of sustained heavy rain will jump by more than a quarter across the entire northern temperate zone. All of these impacts would come on top of more intense droughts, deluvian rains and heatwaves, such as the record-setting temperatures that scorched much of the northern hemisphere in June and July of this year.

"For warming above 2C we would expect even further extremes of heat persistence," co-author Carl-Friedrich Schuessner, the head of climate science and impacts at Berlin-based Climate Analytics, told AFP. "Bearing in mind the current slow pace of reducing emissions puts the world on track to 3C, our study underlines the need for urgent action." — AFP

Malaysia quizzes Indian preacher...

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He is accused of making an intentional insult aimed at provoking a breach of the peace, according to state news agency Bernama.

Mahathir said Sunday that Naik "can preach but he wasn't doing that... he was talking about sending the

Chinese back to China, Indians back to India, that's for me a political move", according to the news agency. The government has in the past appeared reluctant to move against Naik for fear it could upset some Muslims as well as provide ammunition to political opponents.

In 2010 Naik - who founded the Peace TV channel, which has a huge global following - was barred from entering Britain. In a July 2008 broadcast Naik suggested that Al-Qaeda was not responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. "Even a fool will know that this was an inside job," he said in the video, claiming then-President George W Bush was behind the plot. — AFP

UK to end EU free movement...

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people entering the UK" as part of the new hard-line stance. "Details of other changes immediately on October 31 for a new immigration system are currently being developed," the spokeswoman said.

The change comes amid growing fears Britain is set to leave the 28-member bloc without a divorce deal in two and a half months. Around 3.6 million EU citizens already in Britain have been told to apply for "permanent settled status", under an interior ministry scheme started by Johnson's predecessor Theresa May. So far

Regime advance cuts off Turkish...

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the south of the stronghold. Yesterday afternoon, a new loyalist advance saw pro-Damascus fighters take control part of the highway north of Khan Sheikhun, effectively blocking the Turkish military convoy from continuing south. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor with a network of contacts in Syria, said this would stop the convoy ever reaching a Turkish monitoring post south of Khan Sheikhun.

Earlier in the afternoon, an AFP correspondent saw the convoy stop on the Aleppo-Damascus highway in the village of Maar Hattat, just north of Khan Sheikhun. Analysts say regime forces want to retake the key road that connects Damascus with the northern city of Aleppo, both of which they control.

Earlier, an AFP correspondent saw a military convoy of around 50 armored vehicles including personnel carriers and at least five tanks travelling southwards along the highway. The Observatory reported Syrian and Russian air strikes aimed at hindering the convoy's advance. Turkey's defense ministry "strongly" condemned the attack, saying regime operations were "in violation of the existing memorandums and agreements with the Russian Federation".

The Damascus regime meanwhile denounced the

convoy's crossing from Turkey. "Turkish vehicles loaded with munitions... are heading towards Khan Sheikhun to help the terrorists," a foreign ministry source said, using the regime's blanket term for rebels and jihadists. This confirmed "the support provided by the Turkish regime to terrorist groups," state news agency SANA reported the source as saying.

only around one million have signed up for the status. May's government said in January that it would end free movement "as soon as possible" after a no-deal Brexit, but keep allowing EU arrivals "for a transitional period only". Legislation drawn up to deal with the issue is stuck in parliament in the House of Commons gridlock over Brexit. Johnson has said he favors a skills-based immigration system post-Brexit, but Downing Street is yet to unveil full details.

Critics representing EU citizens claim he is trying to evade parliamentary scrutiny of his changed stance towards new arrivals after Brexit - and fear those already in Britain could get mistakenly caught out. "Ending freedom of movement abruptly on Oct 31st will lead to mass discrimination against potentially over 2 million EU citizens," the 3million lobby group said on Twitter, calling the move "reckless". — AFP

Yesterday morning, a Russian air strike hit the rebel vehicle leading the convoy just outside Maaret Al-Noman, 15 km north of Khan Sheikhun, killing a Turkish-backed fighter from the Faylaq al-Sham group, the Observatory said. It also killed two other opposition fighters, it added. After the convoy entered the town, Russian and Syrian warplanes targeted the area in an apparent "attempt to prevent the convoy from advancing", Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said.

On Sunday, pro-regime forces backed by Russian air strikes took control of Khan Sheikhun's northwestern outskirts. Fighting continues to the east and west of the town, the Observatory says. The seizure of Khan Sheikhun and territory further east would encircle a patch of countryside to its south, including the town of Morek where the Turkish observation post is situated. The Turkish army earlier said the convoy was heading towards Morek. Analyst Nawar Oliver said the latest developments in Khan Sheikhun were likely linked to a "disagreement" between both signatories. He said Turkey had likely sent the convoy to avoid its troops being "threatened" or placed "at the mercy of the regime and Russia". It may have also taken a "decision to protect Khan Sheikhun", he said. — AFP