

## International

# Turkey signs military deal with UN-backed Libya govt

## Maritime accord may complicate energy exploration row

**ISTANBUL:** Turkey signed a military deal late Wednesday with Libya's UN-recognized government following a meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul, his office said. Erdogan met with the head of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), Prime Minister Fayed Al-Sarraj, to sign agreements on security and military cooperation, as well as maritime jurisdictions.

"We are confident that we will improve the security situation for the Libyan people together," Fahrettin Altun, communications director at the Turkish presidency, wrote on Twitter. He called on other countries to support the GNA. "Stability of Libya is critically important for the safety of Libyans, regional stability, and prevention of international terrorism," Altun tweeted.

The deal comes despite calls from the Arab League - which includes Libya - to end cooperation with Turkey in protest at its military offensive against Kurdish forces in Syria last month. Libya has been mired in chaos since a NATO-backed uprising that toppled and killed dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE back Khalifa Haftar, a military strongman in eastern Libya who launched an offensive in April in a bid to seize Tripoli from fight-

ers loyal to the GNA. Turkey and Qatar openly support his rival Sarraj.

The Turkish government did not say where the Turkish and Libyan maritime boundaries met but Turkish drilling in the eastern Mediterranean has angered Greek Cypriots, Athens and the European Union. EU foreign ministers agreed economic sanctions against Turkey two weeks ago to punish it for drilling near the coast of Cyprus in violation of a maritime economic zone established off the divided island. The dispute pits Turkey against Greece, Cyprus and other eastern Mediterranean states that have agreed maritime and economic zones, leaving Ankara searching for allies in the region.

"This means protecting Turkey's rights deriving from international law," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said of the memorandum of understanding on the "delimitation of maritime jurisdictions". He said that such accords could be agreed with other countries if differences could be overcome and that Ankara was in favor of "fair sharing" of resources, including off Cyprus. "We are ready to do this working together with everyone, but if countries do not favor this that is their own preference." The internationally recognized government in Tripoli confirmed the new



**ISTANBUL:** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) shakes hands with Fayed Al-Sarraj, the head of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), during their meeting on Wednesday. — AFP

agreements but gave no details. The government in eastern Libya, where rival political factions have been based since 2014, said the maritime accord was "illegitimate". The foreign affairs

committee of the eastern-based parliament called it "a flagrant violation of Libya's security and sovereignty" and a threat to "peace and security in the Mediterranean sea". — Agencies

## Crisis puts Mali political class under pressure

**BAMAKO:** As Mali's gruelling jihadist conflict grinds on, many say military forces cannot be expected to do all the heavy lifting, and the country's fractured political class has to help. The country's problems are as much about poverty, ethnic divisions and weak institutions - which require political solutions - as they are about Islamist violence, they argue. Jihadists, capitalizing on underlying grievances, seized much of northern Mali in 2012, triggering a security crisis that some say now poses an existential threat.

Despite a peace agreement reached in 2015 and an attempt at a so-called national dialogue, violence has spread from the north to the centre of Mali, claiming thousands of lives. The 2015 Algiers accords, meant to disarm rebel groups and integrate them into the national army, are mostly gathering dust. Talks on implementing the agreement ended three months ago. The stagnation is irking France, which on Tuesday lost 13 troops in a force that it deployed to Mali to shore up the fragile country.

"What seems the most important thing now is more political action," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said in Paris. "More political action in Mali to ensure that commitments are upheld, so that so-called DDR (for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of rebels) is truly carried out, that the Algiers agreements, including the decentralization part, be truly carried out, and that there be a show of common will to fight terrorism."

### 'Political' conflict

Some politicians in Mali agree that talks are the way forward. "The war is first and foremost political," Boulan Barro, an opposition MP, told AFP. Cheickna Camara, from the presidential majority, said that "dialogue is necessary and the political class needs to play its part". He added that talks would "allow us to leave this infernal cycle of killings". But there is also an uncomfortable truth: Mali's battered army remains chronically underfunded and poorly



**French sailors stand during a minute of silence on board a ship in the Black Sea early yesterday as they remember the 13 French soldiers killed in Mali. — AFP**

equipped. Soldiers have paid a heavy price - more than 140 Malian troops have died since September. Questioned by MPs on Thursday about the state of the army, Malian Defence Minister Dahirou Dembele agreed it was a problem. "You're right to be afraid, I'm afraid," he said. "When I see my army, I'm afraid." Dembele said he wanted to see Mali's army "reach the level of other armies, so that they are no longer saying there's such and such a (foreign) force (in Mali), but that Mali is taking charge of its own defense."

France intervened in Mali in 2013 to stop the jihadist advance and has some 4,500 troops deployed across the region to help local forces. A new unit of European special forces is also due to deploy in Mali in 2020. On Tuesday, 13 French soldiers died in a mid-air helicopter collision while pursuing jihadists in Mali. It was France's worst single-day military loss of life in 36 years.

Appeals to national unity, a recurring government refrain, have largely fallen on deaf ears. The main opposition party has declined an invitation to join talks meant to bring diverse sections of society around the table, complaining that they are not really inclusive. The government is nonetheless undertaking country-wide consultations. — AFP

## Cyprus appoints investigator over 'Israeli spy van'

**NICOSIA:** Cyprus appointed an independent criminal law expert yesterday to help police investigate an alleged "spy van" reportedly owned by an Israeli and equipped with sophisticated surveillance technology. Attorney General Costas Clerides said that because of the "seriousness of the case and the different legal aspects", the expert, Elias Stephanou, had been asked to help police. The multi-million-dollar vehicle was showcased in a Forbes video broadcast several months ago that only recently went viral online in Cyprus.

The van is owned by Cyprus-registered company WiSpear whose founder and CEO is an Israeli former intelligence officer, Tal Dilian, the report said. Forbes said the van's \$9 million state-of-the-art equipment can monitor devices within a 500-m radius, hack any phone and listen in on encrypted conversations. The probe began after the opposition communist party AKEL asked what the government was doing about alleged activities undertaken in the van.

Earlier this month, police searched the company's premises in the southern coastal resort of Larnaca. The van was seized on Nov 17 and is still in police possession. Clerides said in a statement Stephanou would help investigate whether any offences had been committed that might violate the rights to privacy and confidential communication. WiSpear denies any wrongdoing and says the vehicle was not used to spy on anybody in Cyprus, nor was it hired to do so.

"We would like to restate that the car has not been active within Cypriot territory other than for demo and field tests purposes only, solely on company-owned devices," a WiSpear statement last week said. — AFP