

CRISTINA AND CO: LATIN FIRST LADIES AND PRESIDENTS



BUENOS AIRES: Former Argentine President (2007-2015) Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner participates in a rally at the huge Villa 31 shantytown in downtown Buenos Aires, on August 8, 2016. The rally celebrates the launching of a community television channel made possible by a law promulgated during her government. —AFP

BUENOS AIRES: Like "Evita" before her, Cristina Kirchner stepped from her husband's shadow to make a mark on Argentine politics one of several powerful women in the macho Latin American political world. "I am not Evita, nor Hillary" Clinton, Kirchner, who is widely known just as "Cristina," once said. She spoke when she was a senator and first lady of Argentina ahead of the 2007 presidential election that brought her to office as the successor to her husband, Nestor.

In one sense she was right. Kirchner, 63, has been arguably more divisive than either the erstwhile Argentina leftist heroine or even Bill Clinton's wife, now running for US president. "I have some things in common with Hillary. We have both been senators, lawyers and wives of presidents, but not much more," Kirchner said. "I don't want to be compared to Hillary or Evita or anyone. The best thing you can be is yourself." Kirchner says she has contended with a sexist political culture and media who often belittled her political decisions as bouts of womanly "hysteria."

After being elected to succeed her husband, Kirchner pushed on with his left-wing social policies. "He always told me that people would demand much more of me" than of him when he was elected in 2003 in the wake

of a financial crisis, she said in a televised interview last week. "We were in such a bad state in 2003 that they never demanded things of him that they later demanded of my government," she said. Like other Latin American leftist leaders, for her supporters Kirchner was a heroine of the poor. But to her rivals, she was an irresponsible populist. "In my case there was another aspect, the feminine aspect," she said. "That weighed heavily in Argentina, where in some areas there is still misogyny about women in power."

Dilma

"Cristina says that after so many decades as a deputy and a senator, she got used to fighting to be listened to in places where it was hard to be heard," said Sandra Russo, author of an official biography of Kirchner, published in 2011. "She has a very high mental threshold." Kirchner compared her treatment in the media with another recent Latin American female leftist head of state, Dilma Rousseff of Brazil. On the front page of a magazine, Kirchner said, "they portrayed me as hysterical and crazy. They did the same with Dilma. We are both women." Like Kirchner, Rousseff has succumbed to scandal. She has been suspended from office to face an impeachment trial over

alleged financial irregularities in what she has called a "coup" by her rivals. In Argentina, meanwhile, the courts are also going after Kirchner over alleged corruption, in what she has branded a politically motivated campaign. Her conservative successor, Mauricio Macri, is busy unwinding her social welfare policies and protectionist trade measures.

Rosario

Latin America has seen 10 women presidents in the past four decades. Among them, socialist Michelle Bachelet is serving her second term as president of Chile. In Peru, Keiko Fujimori narrowly lost a presidential election in June. She served as first lady during the leadership of her now-jailed father Alberto Fujimori. In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega, 70, this week put his wife, Rosario Murillo, down as his vice-presidential running mate as he runs for re-election in a November 6 vote. Murillo, 65, is currently a government minister and the main spokesperson for Ortega's leftist administration. Many see her as the real power in the country over the past decade. She is a mother of 10 and a well-known poet in her country. Ortega is widely expected to win a third consecutive term from 2017 to 2022, given the fragmented opposition. —AFP

US AIR STRIKES SHOW LIMITS ON THE LIBYA INTERVENTION

WEST RISKS BEING SEEN TO TAKE SIDES BETWEEN FACTIONS

TUNIS: While US jets and drones are pounding Islamic State in the Libyan city of Sirte, Western powers are unlikely to expand their military involvement rapidly, anxious to avoid exacerbating factional divisions as the government they support struggles to establish itself. The United Nations-backed government asked for the US air strikes which began on Aug 1, but it has still not made a long-awaited request for broader security help - including a possible easing of an international arms embargo on the factions which emerged during and after the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi.

"They know that the international community is ready to help with train-

ing and advice, but specific requests are not emerging yet," said a Western diplomatic source. Forces aligned to the Government of National Accord (GNA), which set up in Tripoli four months ago, have battled for weeks to remove Islamic State fighters from Sirte, the jihadist group's former North African stronghold.

Now US "Operation Odyssey Lightning" is targeting tanks, armed pick-up trucks and fighting positions in the slowly shrinking area of Sirte that Islamic State still holds, easing the passage for Libyan ground forces. However, the GNA has moved slowly to formulate its own security strategy and seek more foreign help, handicapped by internal political splits, a lack of capacity, and sensitivity to criticism that it is dependent on external support, Libyan and Western officials say. Discussion of a 5,000-strong Italian-led

peacekeeping mission has fizzled out, and foreign ground intervention has been limited to small-scale special forces deployments.

Coastguard training is being planned, but programs to train and equip national security and police forces have yet to be developed. One request that is expected sooner or later is for exemptions to the UN arms embargo. World powers said in May they were ready to consider this to help the GNA combat Islamic State, but much depends on its ability to show that arms will not end up in the wrong hands, from a Western point of view. Among the likely recipients would be fighters from the city of Misrata, which

Islamic State, also known as ISIS. However, some people see a risk of renewed conflict between loose alliances of armed groups that fought for control of Tripoli in 2014. The fear is that the Misrata brigades will end up fighting forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar, a military commander based in eastern Libya.

Haftar and his allies have so far loudly rejected the GNA, and foreign powers intervening anywhere in Libya risk being seen to take sides among the local factions. "The challenge for the West will always be to surgically fight ISIS whenever that implies not getting dragged into Libya's civil war," said Mattia Toaldo, a Libya expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations. The limited foreign involvement so far has met with a mixed reception locally. While the United States and Britain are popular around Misrata, France is out of favor there. French Special Forces have been operating for months in the eastern city of Benghazi, where fighters loyal to Haftar have been battling opponents including Islamic State.

After three French soldiers were killed last month in a helicopter crash south of Benghazi, confirming their presence, there were protests in Misrata and Tripoli, and the GNA summoned the French ambassador. However, the US strikes against Islamic State - both in Sirte and in the western city of Sabratha in February - have provoked few protests. Libyan militants returning from fighting in the Syrian civil war helped to implant Islamic State in the country in 2014, but the group has struggled to win support or hold territory, with most local people regarding it as a malign import dependent on foreign fighters.

The GNA-backed forces wonder why the US strikes did not come sooner. "We just want this fight to end, we'll take any help we can get," said one commander on the Sirte front line. But that openness does not extend to the idea of foreign boots on the ground, or broader efforts to end the security vacuum that allowed Islamic State to gain a foothold. "The need for outside help with training is certainly recognized at senior political level," the diplomat said. But in discussions about a peacekeeping force, the Libyan position was very clear - nothing like the 'Green Zone', the secure international area of Baghdad, would be acceptable. Even for training, "any visible presence on the streets would be difficult," said the diplomat. —Reuters

lies roughly midway between Tripoli and Sirte.

They have backed the GNA, providing security in Tripoli and leading the battle against Islamic State in Sirte, Gaddafi's home town. However, the loyalty of Libya's armed factions has been fickle in the past and the GNA's leadership, or Presidential Council, has yet to form a unified military command structure. "Only regular units under the command of the Presidential Council will get an exemption from the arms embargo," UN Libya envoy Martin Kobler said. "The Presidential Council has to be accepted as the Supreme Commander of the army. The question is does it really have control over the Misrata forces? Maybe yes, maybe no."

Loud rejection

The Misrata brigades say they will return home after securing Sirte from

NO END IN SIGHT AS ANTI-IS CAMPAIGN ENTERS 3RD YEAR

WASHINGTON: The US-led military effort against the Islamic State group started exactly two years ago, aimed at halting the jihadists as they swept across Iraq, leaving a trail of human butchery and destruction in their wake. It was supposed to have been a swift and narrow campaign that would help local forces deal a "lasting defeat" to IS jihadists. But billions of dollars and more than 14,000 air strikes later, such assertions are buckling, and the campaign highlights the limits of fighting a war mainly from the skies. "I think we are looking at decades of effort," said Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute. "We are fighting a losing battle if we expect to completely destroy (IS) altogether."

Nearly half of the territory once held by the IS group in Iraq has been liberated, as well as about 20 percent of its claim in neighboring Syria. Experts foresee the eventual collapse of the group's self-declared "caliphate," but the jihadists are fighting back by calling on followers

to launch attacks across the globe. Just this year, IS has claimed a string of horrific attacks including in France, Belgium, Turkey, Baghdad and the United States. "This is an organization that has very successfully morphed back into a traditional terrorist organization that then steadily rebuilds its capabilities," Lister said.

US boots on the ground

When President Barack Obama launched air strikes in Iraq in August 2014, officials stressed US involvement would not be sustained for the long term. And Obama, elected on a promise of ending America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, vowed ground troops would not be dragged back into another conflict. He has repeatedly insisted that while the United States can provide support and air strikes, the war has to be won by local forces-not Americans.

Still, about 6,500 coalition troops-mostly American-have deployed in the anti-IS fight. Most are in Iraq,

though some special operations forces are working with Kurdish and Arab fighters in war-torn Syria, where a civil war and Russian strikes in support of President Bashar Al-Assad have further complicated the picture. "The few people of us who were watching this group develop from 2010 to 2014 knew very well that this was going to be a very long-term battle, and the idea that no US troops were going to be involved was just a fantasy," Lister said.

Though the United States claims more than 60 countries are part of its coalition, in reality America and just a few stalwart partners are carrying out almost all the work. Within weeks of the first strikes in Iraq, the coalition campaign spread to Syria. The fight later expanded to Afghanistan and, last week, the Pentagon quietly started an air campaign in the IS group's Libyan stronghold of Sirte. That campaign is supposed to last "weeks, not months," according to the Pentagon. —AFP



SIRTE: A military vehicle used by fighters from the pro-government forces loyal to Libya's Government of National Unity (GNA) is seen near ammunition casing in Sirte during an operation against jihadists of the Islamic State (IS) group. —AFP

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50 SENIOR REPUBLICAN NATIONAL SECURITY OFFICIALS REJECT TRUMP

WASHINGTON: Fifty senior Republican national security officials have issued a stinging rejection of their party's White House nominee Donald Trump, warning he would be "the most reckless president in American history" if elected. The group, some of whom already announced they would not vote for Trump, included former homeland security chiefs, intelligence directors, senior presidential advisors and a former US trade representative. They served under Republican presidents from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush. "We are convinced that he would be a dangerous president and would put at risk our country's national security and well-being," they wrote in a statement published in The New York Times on Monday.

Their disavowal of the Republican presidential candidate was followed by another setback for Trump, when influential US Senator Susan Collins said yesterday he was "unworthy" of America's highest elective office, and will not receive her support. "I will not be voting for Donald Trump for president. This is not a decision I make lightly, for I am a lifelong Republican. But Donald Trump does not reflect historical Republican values nor the inclusive approach to governing that is critical to healing the divisions in our country," Collins wrote in an op-ed article appearing in Tuesday's Washington Post.

While the US security experts did not say they would vote for Democrat Hillary Clinton-indeed they expressed

"doubts" about her-they were clear in stating that "none of us will vote for Donald Trump." They essentially declared the brash billionaire unfit for office, echoing Clinton's criticism by saying that Trump "lacks the character, values, and experience to be president" and displays "alarming ignorance of basic facts" of international politics.

The New York real estate mogul also has shown no willingness to learn about foreign affairs or national security threats, "acts impetuously" and lacks self control, the statement said. "He is unable or unwilling to separate truth from falsehood," the group wrote, saying Trump possesses a set of "dangerous qualities" that should disqualify him from the presidency. "We are convinced that in the Oval Office, he would be the most reckless president in American history."

They warned that the political neophyte's "erratic behavior" has alarmed America's closest allies, adding that he fails to recognize the indispensable nature of such diplomatic relationships. The signatories include Tom Ridge and Michael Chertoff, the first and second homeland security secretaries under president George W. Bush, former director of National Intelligence John Negroponte and Bush-era CIA director Michael Hayden. Also in the group are former US Trade Representative and World Bank president Robert Zoellick and Eric Edelman, former national security advisor to vice president Dick Cheney. —AFP

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