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Focus

NO RESPITE FOR LIBYA AFTER IS DRIVEN FROM SIRTE

As Islamic State's last defenses crumbled this week in their Libyan bastion Sirte, dozens of women and children used as human shields stumbled dazed and dust-caked from the rubble. Fighters from the armed groups that defeated the jihadists feted the end of a punishing six-month battle by flying Libyan flags over the Mediterranean city, once known mainly as the home town of late dictator Muammar Gaddafi, more recently as the main stronghold outside Syria and Iraq of Islamic State's caliphate.

But the campaign has been far from the unifying event some had hoped for. Celebrations have been muted by the risk of jihadist counter attacks and the potential for renewed war among Libya's military factions. The past week's developments give a measure of the chaos still enveloping Libya, five years after the NATO-backed uprising that overthrew Gaddafi. Just hours after the last district in Sirte was cleared, fighters in a newly formed force swept up from the desert south of the city towards Libya's Oil Crescent, looking to recapture ports that had changed hands three months before.

Tripoli has seen its worst clashes for more than a year as the capital's militias rolled tanks onto the streets in a feud infused with ideological and political disputes. And in the main city in the east, the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) continued to suffer heavy casualties as it struggles to secure parts of Benghazi against Islamist-led rivals after more than two years of warfare. A half-formed, UN-backed government based in the capital looks increasingly helpless to stop the turmoil - though Western powers insist that it represents the only path towards peace.

UN Libya envoy Martin Kobler told the Security Council this week that while a peace plan signed a year ago had stalled, weapons were still being delivered into Libya, the economy was facing "meltdown", and the country remained a "human marketplace" for migrants trying to reach Europe. Gains against militants in Sirte and Benghazi were "not irreversible", he added. The campaign in Sirte was led by brigades from Misrata, an influential port east of Tripoli. They launched their offensive in May when militants advanced up the coast towards their city.

The UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) scrambled to take command, but only ever had nominal control over fighters on the ground, some of them with different agendas beyond the campaign in Sirte. The brigades hoped the battle would be finished in weeks, but their progress was halted by Islamic State snipers, suicide bombers and mines. By mid-summer, with casualties mounting and an official request from the GNA, they called in the help of US air support. Nearly 500 strikes were carried out over Sirte between Aug 1 and early December.

After the last buildings in Sirte's Ghiza Bahriya neighborhood were secured on Tuesday, jubilant fighters paraded through the streets, chanting that the deaths of more than 700 men from within their ranks had not been in vain. But there have been no such scenes in Misrata, a city whose fighting force was forged in the 2011 uprising and string of military campaigns in the years that followed.

Comeback?

"Every time after we win a war we celebrate," said Ahmed Algennabi, a 28-year-old salesman in a Misrata perfume shop. "But now I don't think that it's the end of this war, and I expect more fighting against Islamic State." Fear of an Islamic State comeback or insurgent campaign is the stated reason for not declaring an official end to the operation in Sirte.

Libyan security officials say a significant number of militants left Sirte before the battle or in its early stages, and that Islamic State has cells along Libya's western coast as well as in the hinterlands. Even as the fighting continued in Sirte's residential neighborhoods, the group carried out attacks from behind the front lines, including suicide bombings and a major ambush.

Military officials say they will now move to deal with this threat by securing the desert valleys south of Sirte and chasing down fugitive militants. But they are also nervous about Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the LNA in the east, who has fought on the side opposed to Misrata's brigades in a stop-start national conflict since 2014, and has recently been boosted by his own military advances. In September, with Misrata's fighters still tied up in Sirte, Haftar's forces moved to seize the Oil Crescent ports, some of them just 200 km to the east, and many see him edging towards national power. —Reuters

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MOST TROUBLING IS RUSSIA REACTION TO SCANDAL

Troubling as the details of the McLaren Report were, a news item out of Russia earlier this week was equally so. The new chair of the country's "revamped" anti-doping agency will be Yelena Isinbayeva, the pole vault great who has spent the past year thumbing her nose at all the evidence and at those who've dared to mete out punishment for the malfeasance. Isinbayeva's appointment to the RUSADA board, made a mere two days before Part 2 of the McLaren report arrived, was all you needed to conclude that either Russia does not fully grasp the depths of depravity that Richard McLaren painstakingly detailed in his 144-page report or, maybe worse, that it just doesn't care.

The details in McLaren's report, released Friday, are as predictable as they are terrible. The 1,000 athletes and who-knows-how-many government and quasi-government officials involved in Russia's doping scandal are symbols not of a system that failed to catch its cheats, but of one that was undercut by the very people we'd presume were hired to protect it.

Isinbayeva herself was never implicated in the doping scandal, and when all but one member of the Russian track team was barred from the Rio Olympics, she paid a heavy price. The two-time gold medalist and world-record holder stayed back because track's international federation had the courage to declare that anyone involved in the Russian sports machine simply could not compete, given the evidence that had been unearthed to that point.

Isinbayeva called the suspension "a blatant political order", claiming, as many in her government did, that Russia was being unfairly targeted as part of an East vs. West power play. She called it "a violation of human rights," and vowed to "prove to the IAAF and World Anti-Doping Agency that they made the wrong decision." After Friday's report came out, she said "of course it's in my interests not to allow the situation which I ended up in, so that our athletes from our country are treated the same as everyone else."

Though she was applauded - and is now being rewarded - in her own country and elsewhere for taking this stance, her words are not those of someone who either grasps the seriousness of the problem, or is devoted to bringing meaningful change. Is anyone in Russia devoted to that? Hours after the report went public, Russian deputy prime minister Vitaly Mutko, implicated in the report as an architect of the doping program, said the country would "move into the legal arena," and that "it was simply not realistic ... to do what they are accusing us of".

Indeed, were it not for the excruciating detail McLaren took to conduct his research, it would be hard to believe intelligence agents could open sealed doping bottles and replace tainted urine with clean to beat the drug-testing system at the Sochi Games. McLaren found Russians who won 15 medals in Sochi had their samples tampered with.

He said Russia's doping program also corrupted the 2012 London Olympics on an "unprecedented scale."

Those were Isinbayeva's last games. Since being barred from Rio, she has retired from the sport, won a spot on the IOC and, now, become the chair of RUSADA. WADA protested, saying it was supposed to have been consulted about important moves, such as the naming of RUSADA's new board. For WADA to hope that anyone - say, the IOC - will have its back on this is only that: hoping. The IOC is the same body that rejected WADA's call to ban the entire Russian team from the Rio Games. It argued that it had to walk a careful line between anti-doping and politics, and that it needed to carefully weigh the consequences of "col-

lective responsibility versus individual justice," while basically ignoring the "individual justice" owed to the dozens of athletes who have been and might still be beaten by cheating Russians.

How many of those Russians were in Rio de Janeiro? Time will tell. Though the track team was banned, Russia still sent 271 athletes to the Summer Games, and they combined for 55 medals. McLaren is forwarding the evidence from his report to the IOC and to the individual sports, and those bodies will decide what punishments to levy. Meanwhile, the Winter Olympics are only 14 months away, and already, questions about whether Russia should be eligible for those games are being asked. — AP

MALI'S FOOT-DRAGGING TRAPS PEACE MISSION

Last week, the offices of the UN peacekeeping mission in the desert city of Gao in northern Mali were flattened by a truck bomb. On Tuesday, just five suspected Islamist militants succeeded in freeing 93 inmates from a jail in the town of Niono. "Peace" in Mali looks increasingly like war by another name. As both rebels and government go slow on implementing a deal signed last year, it is the UN peacekeeping mission, which has lost 100 lives and is costing nearly a billion dollars a year, that is paying the price.

"The war makes a living for a lot of people," said Moussa Mara, a former prime minister who led an abortive effort to retake the lawless desert town of Kidal in 2014 but no longer has a government post. "There are those in the peace process who don't want it to conclude. They get their 'per diems'; they get their travel paid. These armed groups are not in a hurry," Mara told Reuters, recalling that one meeting on implementation that was supposed to take an afternoon had ended up dragging on for weeks.

Ever since French forces intervened in 2013 to push back Islamists who had hijacked an ethnic Tuareg uprising in Mali's desert north, world powers, especially former colonial master France, have invested huge sums in trying to soothe the complicated rivalries that caused Mali to implode. The UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, has 13,000 staff from 123 nations. France maintains a 4,000-strong parallel peacekeeping operation, "Barkhane." And the European Union has 580 instructors training the Malian army.

'Time is our enemy'

The aim is to ensure the success of the July 2015

peace pact, which offers Tuaregs and other northern groups some autonomy if they give up an independence, and to prevent a resurgence of Islamist militants adept at exploiting any power vacuum. But the setting up of interim authorities has stalled, and Islamist militants based in the desert north are venturing further and further south with their attacks. One of the north's main cities, Kidal, lies completely outside government control because of fighting between pro- and anti-government Tuareg factions, partly over trafficking routes.

The head of the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA), Chadian diplomat Mahamat Saleh Annadif, has pressed President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita personally for more urgency. "I've told him that this is an emergency, and that time is our enemy," Annadif told Reuters in his office in Bamako, inside a U.N. building protected by security barriers of sandbags. Annadif said he believed Keita was sincere about wanting to implement the deal, but that he had said Mali was a democracy and had to work through its institutions, which took time. "I told him, regardless of the justification, we could have moved more quickly."

A spokesman for the president did not respond to a request for comment, but Security Minister Colonel Salif Traore told Reuters: "It's the nature of a deal that nobody can get all they want ... but I'm confident this deal will permit us to stabilise our country." Meanwhile, the security situation worsens. Andrew Lebovich of the European Council on Foreign Relations said the northern rebel groups were becoming more fragmented, and had little trust in the UN force. "Even supposedly pro-government militias (in the north) don't really want the government back." — Reuters

PIPELINE PROTEST PROMISES TO GALVANIZE ACTIVISM

US veterans, thousands of whom last week helped stop a contested oil pipeline running through North Dakota, could become important partners of activists on the environment, the economy, race and other issues that divide Americans. Several academics said the effort to support the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and others opposed to the pipeline project was likely the biggest gathering of its kind of former military personnel since the early 1970s when US veterans marched against the Vietnam War.

That so many veterans mobilized in less than two weeks to rural North Dakota speaks to the power they may have on public opinion, because of their status as having put their lives on the line for their country, veterans and academics said. "The sense that vets are distinctively American figures, regardless of political beliefs, always seems to have currency, even when they are working on different sides of an issue," said Stephen Ortiz, a history professor at the State University of Binghamton in New York.

Many veterans who went to Cannon Ball, North Dakota, to join the months-long protests by Native Americans and environmentalists against the 1,885-km Dakota Access Pipeline, said they were already looking for their next issue to support. "Militarily-trained soldiers have now discerned, on their own, a genuine, just cause for which to promote and defend, and this

time without being under orders to do so," said Brian Willson, whose 2011 memoir "Blood on the Tracks: The Life and Times of 5 Brian Willson", described how after serving in the Vietnam War, he became a non-violent protester for social change in the United States.

Law enforcement tactics, particularly the use of water cannons, against the protesters had been considered extreme by some. Veterans said in interviews they felt galvanized to act as a human shield, providing a respite for those who had been at the protest camp for months. The pipeline owned by Texas-based Energy Transfer Partners LP, is routed adjacent to the Standing Rock Sioux reservation. Protesters have said the \$3.8 billion project could contaminate the water supply and damage sacred tribal lands. The veterans at Standing Rock were led by former Marine Michael Wood Jr and Army veteran Wes Clark Jr, son of retired US general Wesley Clark, former commander of NATO. The group raised \$1.1 million through online crowdfunding to help transport, house and feed veterans at the camp.

Battle resumes with Trump presidency
On Sunday, the US Army Corps of Engineers said it turned down a permit for the pipeline's completion, handing a victory to the protesters. But the saga will not end there. Republican President-elect Donald Trump has said he wants the pipeline built;

his team said he would review the decision when he takes office. Even though the fight is not over in North Dakota, some see this as a way forward on other issues.

"There's a lot of these pipelines being built around the county. Flint (Michigan) has a water crisis. So we're going to see if we can keep this movement going and really change some things in America," said Matthew Crane, 32, from Buffalo, New York, who served in the US Navy from 2002 to 2006. Clark's group, called Veterans Stand With Standing Rock (VSSR), asked for 2,000 volunteers but said twice as many arrived. Comments on the VSSR Facebook page criticized Clark for a lack of planning and for not having contingencies in place for North Dakota's harsh winters.

As a blizzard blew in on Monday, many hunkered down at the main protest camp. Hundreds more slept in the pavilion of the Prairie Knights Casino in Fort Yates, roughly 10 miles away on the Standing Rock reservation. Clark, who himself was snowed-in at the casino, said in a Facebook video posted Wednesday night that the response meant "a huge tax on the supply chain and on accommodations."

Asking forgiveness

As part of their journey to North Dakota, many veterans asked forgiveness in two ceremonies for what they considered crimes and mistreatment of Native Americans by

the US government and military over the past 150 years. One ceremony took place Monday on Backwater Bridge near the camp, the site of two heated confrontations with law enforcement earlier this fall. Thousands of veterans and tribal members prayed, emoting war cries on the bridge's southern span.

One veteran, wearing a flak jacket and a Veterans for Peace flag, yelled to the crowd from atop a horse. "We didn't serve this country to see our brothers and sisters here persecuted," said the man, whose name was inaudible in the fury of the arriving blizzard. "Are we not all human?" Some veterans said they planned to remain in North Dakota, unwilling to trust that Energy Transfer Partners would abide by the federal government's decision. Most had left by Wednesday, however, said Heather O'Malley, a US Army veteran who monitored news for the group. She said it was unclear if they would return to the area in January if needed.

Clark and others said this was a way for veterans to address other efforts around the country. "This is a small battleground in a larger war that is developing in our country that has to do with race, the economy and the powers that be taking advantage of those who really don't have a voice," said Anthony Murtha, 29, from Detroit, who served in the US Navy from 2009 to 2013. — Reuters