

International

UN calls for Libyan ceasefire as death toll climbs to 1,000

Security Council condemns attack on Tajoura detention camp

TRIPOLI: The UN Security Council has called for a ceasefire in Libya as the death toll from a three-month offensive on Tripoli reached 1,000, including scores killed in an air strike that hit a detention centre for migrants. The council condemned the late Tuesday attack on the Tajoura detention camp east of Tripoli and "stressed the need for all parties to urgently de-escalate the situation and to commit to a ceasefire", said a joint statement.

Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar, whose forces hold eastern Libya and much of the country's south, launched an offensive in early April to wrestle the capital from forces loyal to the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). Air strikes and ground fighting have since left nearly 1,000 people dead and some 5,000 wounded, the UN's World Health Organization said. The fighting has forced more than 100,000 people to flee their homes and threatens to plunge Libya into deeper conflict.

Among the dead are 53 migrants killed Tuesday night in an air raid on a detention centre in the Tripoli suburb of Tajoura, held by the GNA, which accused Haftar's forces of carrying out the strike. A Geneva-based spokesman for the International Organization for Migration said six children were among the migrants killed. Joel Millman said that 350 migrants, including 20 women and four children, were still detained at the centre, one of five air hangars hit in the raid.

World powers have been divided over how to respond to Haftar's offensive, with the United States and Russia refusing to condemn the Libyan strongman. The British-drafted council statement condemned the attack on the migrant camp, called for a return to political talks and for full respect of the arms embargo on Libya. It followed a closed-door council meeting on Wednesday during which US diplomats said they needed more time to consult with Washington on the proposed text.

The United Nations has called for an independent investigation to determine who was responsible for the strike on the centre, which housed some 600 migrants, mainly from African countries. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey—which backs the GNA—called for an end to "unlawful attacks" by Haftar's forces during a meeting with Libyan Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj in Istanbul on Friday, the Turkish presidency said.

UN shared coordinates

UN agencies and humanitarian groups have repeatedly voiced concern over the plight of thousands of migrants and refugees held in detention centres near combat zones in the capital. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has expressed outrage over the attack and said the United Nations had shared the coordinates of the detention centre with the warring sides to protect the civilians. The carnage in Tajoura was "a tragedy that should have never happened", said Charlie Xaxley, spokesman for the UN's refugee agency.

Libya has become a major conduit for migrants seeking to reach Europe and remains prey to numerous militias vying for control of the country's oil wealth. Rights groups say migrants face horrifying abuses in Libya, and their plight has worsened since Haftar launched the offensive against Tripoli. According to the UN, some 5,700 refugees and migrants are being held in detention centres in Libya, 3,300 of whom are vulnerable to fighting in and around Tripoli.

Plane downed

An initial lightning assault in early April saw Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army steam towards the capital. But they have since been bogged down on its southern outskirts, where frontlines have been frozen for months. GNA forces launched a surprise counter-attack late last month, seizing the strategic town of Gharyan, the main supply base for Haftar's offensive.



TAJOURA, Libya: An image grab taken from CCTV video footage shows the aftermath of an airstrike on the detention camp for migrants in the capital Tripoli's eastern suburb of Tajoura. —AFP

After the setback, Haftar's forces threatened to intensify strikes against their rivals. Both sides have launched daily air raids throughout the fighting and

each lost several planes. The rival camps have remained convinced that with the help of their backers, they can win the battle. The GNA receives support from Turkey and Qatar, and Haftar is backed by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and according to experts, to some degree by the United States. —AFP

Bombings kill 14 civilians in Syria

BEIRUT: Syrian regime bombardment has killed 14 civilians including seven children in north-western Syria, a war monitor said yesterday, in the latest deadly raids on the embattled opposition bastion. Warplanes and helicopters late Friday carried out air strikes on Mahabel village in Idlib province, killing 13 civilians including the seven children, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

A woman was also killed yesterday in regime rocket fire on the outskirts of the town of Khan Sheikhun in the south of the province, the Britain-based war monitor said. Idlib, a region of some three million people, many of whom fled former rebel-held areas retaken by the government, is the last major bastion of opposition to the Russia-backed Damascus government after eight years of civil war.

The region on Turkey's doorstep is administered by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat

Tahrir al-Sham, but other jihadist and rebel groups are also present. Idlib is supposed to be protected from a major regime assault by a September deal between Moscow and Ankara, but Damascus and its Russian ally have ramped up their deadly bombardment of the region since late April.

More than 520 civilians have been killed since then, according to the Observatory. The United Nations says 25 health facilities in the region have been hit, the latest including the second attack in two months on an underground hospital in the town of Kafranbel on Thursday. "The attacks happened despite the fact that the coordinates of this hospital had previously been shared with the parties to the conflict in a deliberate, carefully planned effort to prevent any attacks on it," an UN official said on Friday.

"I am horrified by the ongoing attacks on civilian areas and civilian infrastructure as the conflict in northwest Syria continues," said Mark Cutts, UN deputy regional humanitarian coordinator for the Syrian crisis. Syria's war has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with a brutal crackdown on anti-government protests. —AFP

Albanian justice on pause as judges fall victim to graft probe

TRIRANA: Inside the halls of Albania's quiet Supreme Court building, a clock on the wall has stopped. It is an apt symbol for a tribunal that hasn't held a hearing since May, after all but two judges were dismissed as part of a sweeping graft review that is cleaning out notoriously corrupt courts—but also crippling Albania's judicial system in the process.

"In 2014 there were 17 (judges), in 2019 there remain only two," explains Ida Vodica, a Supreme Court spokeswoman. One of the remaining judges, the president, is under review. The country launched the intensive vetting process three years ago under pressure from the European Union, which the Balkan state aspires to join.

An independent body has been tasked with

screening judges and prosecutors on three criteria: their assets and income, any links with Albania's powerful organised crime groups, and their professional and ethical conduct in the past. It's a deep scrub of a system where lawyers have said the bulk of their work is acting as "brokers" to negotiate the size of a bribe. But it is also leaving the country, whose government happens to be mired in a political crisis, lacking a key pillar of democracy.

So far, 140 out of 800 judges and prosecutors have been reviewed. Out of that figure 88 have either been dismissed—mostly for issues related to unjustified assets—or resigned just before they were set to be scrutinised, according to a May report from the European Commission. At a hearing before the independent commission last month Gurali Brahimllari, a judge in a criminal appeal court in Tirana, said he was "surprised" by their analysis that his assets greatly exceeded his income. He provided paperwork to explain the imbalance. But the commission was not convinced, and he was dismissed.

It was a similar story for a prosecutor who in November failed to convince the panel that thousands of euros (dollars) in income was the result of a lucky streak in sports betting. Meanwhile, a judge from the Constitutional Court tried in vain to explain

that he received 15,000 euros worth of gifts on the occasion of his daughter's marriage. The net has even caught one of Albania's most feared men—former Attorney General Adriatik Lalla, whose assets have been seized as he is under investigation for money laundering. The EU has applauded the results of the probe as "crucial to restoring public trust in the judiciary". But ordinary people like 62-year old Ruze Iso are victims of the judicial stagnation. Since 2018 she has asked the Supreme Court to annul the seizure of her house over a debt, claiming that the ruling was based on fake documents forged by corrupt legal officers. "My husband is ill, we're 'all on the street,'" she says, explaining that they now live in an abandoned garage. Her case is likely among the mountains of paperwork that are filling up archive rooms, empty offices and dark courtrooms and collecting dust. "Currently, there is a stack of 32,000 files awaiting review, and we don't even have a place to deposit them," said Vodica. The court's president Xhezair Zaganjori assures that "in late summer or early September four or five new judges will probably arrive to take over the files." Authorities claim the Constitutional Court could be functional again in early 2020. At present, only one of nine judges has evaded the probe. —AFP

Alaska's heat wave shatters city record, disrupts jobs, lives

LOS ANGELES: Temperatures in Alaska's largest city Anchorage have soared to a sweltering all-time record of 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 centigrade) as a heat wave grips the US state which straddles the Arctic Circle. Fourth of July fireworks were canceled due to risk of wildfires caused by "extreme dry weather conditions," as temperatures matching those in Miami highlighted rapid warming in a region considered particularly vulnerable to climate change. "At 5pm this afternoon, Anchorage International Airport officially hit 90 degrees for the first time on record," tweeted the National Weather Service (NWS) late Thursday. The previous record was 85 degrees, set in June 1969. The average high temperature for July 4 in Anchorage, located in southern Alaska, is a far cooler 65 degrees.

Giant high-pressure ridge

The abnormally warm weather is being caused by a "giant ridge of high pressure sitting right over us," NWS meteorologist Bill Ludwig told the Anchorage Daily News. Alaska had earlier broken tempera-

ture records throughout a hot spring, particularly in the Arctic zone which is especially sensitive to fluctuations in climate.

All 30 days in June had above-average temperatures, the NWS said. According to scientists, Alaska is warming at twice the rate of the global average. "From 1901 to 2016, average temperatures in the mainland United States increased by 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit... whereas in Alaska they increased by 4.7 degrees," Rick Thoman, a climate specialist at the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy, told AFP in April.

Fast-melting ice

The dramatic warming Alaska has experienced in recent years - linked partly to a decline in sea ice and Arctic ocean warming - has wreaked havoc on local communities, wildlife and the state's economy. Permafrost - the frozen ground that covers almost 85 percent of Alaska - is thawing, affecting everything from building foundations to wildlife habitats and the picking of berries that grow on the tundra. Frozen rivers usually serve as transport routes in winter, as two-thirds of communities in the state are not accessible by road. But higher temperatures have made the ice dangerously thin and unsafe for truck or car travel.

Many recreational sled-dog races have had to be canceled this year, and the famed Iditarod race had to be re-routed as what is normally solid sea ice



was open water on part of the race course. Crab fishing has also been affected as the sea ice that fishermen use as a platform is non-existent or too thin in some areas. Alaska's seal population is likely to be affected this summer, as some species give birth on solid ice, Thoman said.

Global warming has led to the lowest ice levels in the Bering Sea - which connects with the Arctic Ocean - since 1850,

when sea ice records were first kept, he added. While it is unprecedented for the mercury to hit 90 degrees in coastal Anchorage, temperatures as high as 100 degrees have been recorded in Alaska's interior. The high-pressure system causing the current spike in temperatures is expected to shift north to inland areas in the coming days, with further records likely to be broken, according to AccuWeather. —AFP

Elephants: Jumbo surprise outside Nigeria megacity

LAGOS: The jungle was so thick that Emmanuel Olabode only found the elephants he was tracking when the great matriarch's sniffing trunk reached out close enough to almost touch. "She flapped her ears, blocking us to guard her family, then left in peace," recalls Olabode. "It was extraordinary." The elusive elephants are just 100 kilometres from downtown Lagos, Nigeria's economic capital, home to over 20 million people. "They are scared of humans," says Olabode, who leads the Forest Elephant Initiative, a conservation

group in the Omo Forest, northeast of Africa's biggest city. "So they are active at night."

Forest elephants are the shy relations of their larger savannah cousins and are experts at hiding; so skilled, in fact, very few in the city know about them. The crowded concrete jungle of Lagos is better known for wild nightlife than nighttime wildlife. "When people hear about the elephants, they do not believe it," says Joy Adeosun, a government scientist working with Olabode. "They are in shock," adds Adeosun, fixing a motion-sensitive camera that has not only snapped elephants, but antelope, buffalo and chimpanzees too.

Omo, spreading across some 1,325 square kilometres of southwestern Ogun state, was protected as a government reserve nearly a century ago. A UNESCO "biosphere reserve" of global importance, it is one of the last patches of pristine rainforest left in Nigeria. Nigeria's deforestation rates are among the highest in the world, according to the

UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. "Chopping down trees is easy," says Olabode, whose team of eight community rangers are overstretched. "But if the forest goes, the whole ecosystem changes. The rains reduce, then the farms lose fertility. Everyone suffers." Half of the forest, a 650-square-kilometre area, is reserved for wildlife and logging is banned.

But corruption is rampant. "There are so many trees here," says Ibiyinka James, on one of dozens of trucks illicitly laden with ancient hardwoods, off to become planks for the booming construction market in Africa's most populous nation. "The birds can fly to another forest," he adds. And with trees cleared, farmers plant crops. "I need to provide for my family. What else can I do?", cocoa grower Christopher Shadrach says, from Ose-Eke, one of the villages hacked out of the reserve, each one home to hundreds of people. But to the elephants, the crops are tasty treats, which angers forest farmers. —AFP

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