



TRIPOLI: A journalist covers the frontline during clashes between forces loyal to strongman Khalifa Haftar and fighters loyal to the Libyan internationally-recognized government on May 25, 2019. — AFP

## Libya journalists caught in crossfire

**TRIPOLI:** In a country splintered by conflict and propaganda wars, Libya's journalists are caught in the crossfire between battle fronts and partisan employers, exposing them to risks on the ground. Fighting that erupted in early April when eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive on the capital Tripoli has only exacerbated the cleavages in the country's already fragmented mediascape. The battle pits the forces of Tripoli's UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) against fighters loyal to Haftar, who backs a parallel administration in eastern Libya.

The rival sides each run their own news agencies and official television channels. And Libya's private media outlets have dug in too - taking sides and thereby exposing their journalists to potential reprisals. "Because of the conflict... journalists in Libya can't do their normal work anymore," Mohamed Al-Najem, who runs the Libyan Center for Freedom of Press (LCFP), told AFP.

Threats and attacks since the 2011 ouster of long-time leader Muammar Gaddafi have prompted several

private television networks established by businessmen and politicians in the years immediately after his fall to pull out and transmit from abroad. Some new outlets have followed suit, broadcasting politically charged content from overseas. "The (Libyan) media, especially the ones broadcasting from abroad, are largely responsible for the exacerbation of hate speech and incitement to violence," Najem said. Those outlets, he added, are "encouraging abuses on the ground, which affect their journalists".

In its latest poll on worldwide press freedoms, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Libya 162 out of 180 countries. The LCFP has documented 32 attacks on journalists since early April, in what it says marks an increase since Haftar launched his offensive. "Libyan media is facing an unprecedented crisis," said RSF's North Africa head, Souhaieb Khayati. He said many journalists were, "whether they like it or not", forced to work with Libya's warring factions.

On July 16, the eastern-based administration backed

by Haftar banned 11 TV stations it deemed hostile, accusing them of being "terrorism apologists". Pro-Haftar outlets have banned journalists from covering the strongman's push to take the capital - unlike the GNA, which has opened up the front on its side to dozens of reporters. "More than 150 foreign journalists have obtained visas since the beginning of the war," according to the GNA's foreign press department. "Our role is limited to authorizations, but journalists are entirely responsible for their own security on the front," department head Abdelfattah Mhenni told AFP.

Since the fighting kicked off in Tripoli, an AFP cameraman and another from Reuters have been wounded covering clashes. Their injuries come after the July 2018 abduction and murder of journalist Musa Abdul Karim and the death of photographer Mohammed bin Khalifa in January this year. Since the beginning of the year, "journalists and other media professionals (in Libya) continued to be subjected to intimidation and arbitrary detention," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres

said in a report published in late August. He said the UN mission in Libya had "reviewed one case of unlawful killing and more than 10 cases of the arbitrary arrest and detention".

In early May, two journalists from a private anti-Haftar broadcaster were arrested by the strongman's forces while covering the fighting south of Tripoli. They were released 23 days later, but only after tribal pressure. None of the arrested or assaulted journalists agreed to talk to AFP for fear of reprisals against themselves or their families. Many have been forced to change phone number, move, or even flee the country.

In a push to protect journalists, the LCFP is working on a mobile phone app that would provide reporters with a safe way to document attacks. Presented recently to a group of journalists in Tripoli, the application "Kon Chahed" (Be a witness) is now in its trial phase. LCFP hopes the app will allow journalists "to report attacks... and warn colleagues who are in the same area". — AFP

## Kuwait probes drone sighting, PM...

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Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia raced yesterday to restart operations at oil plants hit by the drone attacks which slashed its production by half, as Iran dismissed US claims it was behind the assault. The Tehran-backed Houthi rebels in neighboring Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition is bogged down in a five-year war, have claimed Saturday's strikes on two plants owned by state giant Aramco.

But United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pointed the finger squarely at Tehran, saying there was no evidence the "unprecedented attack on the world's energy supply" was launched from Yemen. "The United States will work with our partners and allies to ensure that energy markets remain well supplied and Iran is held accountable for its aggression," the top US diplomat added.

That drew an angry response from Tehran, where foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said: "Such fruitless and blind accusations and remarks are incomprehensible and meaningless." The remarks were designed to damage Iran's reputation and provide a pretext for "future actions" against the Islamic republic, he added. "The Americans have taken the policy of 'maximum pressure' which has apparently turned into 'maximum lying' due to their failures," said Mousavi.

Baghdad, caught between its two main sponsors - Tehran and Washington - also denied any link to the attacks amid media speculation that the drones were launched from Iraq. "Iraq is constitutionally committed to preventing any use of its soil to attack its neighbors," Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi said in a statement. "The Iraqi government will be extremely firm with whomever tries to violate the constitution."

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whose nation is pitted against Iran in a decades-old struggle for regional dominance, has said the kingdom is "willing and able" to respond to this "terrorist aggression". The kingdom focused on restoring production at the plants, as the Saudi bourse slumped three percent as the week's trading began yesterday morning.

Saturday's explosions set off fires that engulfed the Abqaiq plant, the world's largest oil processing facility, and nearby Khurais, which hosts a massive oil field. Saudi's energy infrastructure has been hit by the Houthis many times before, but this strike was of a different order, abruptly halting 5.7 million barrels per day (bpd) or about six percent of the world's oil supply.

The full extent of the damage was not clear, nor the type of weapons used, and reporters were kept away from the plants amid beefed-up security. Saudi interior ministry spokesman Mansour Al-Turki told AFP there were no casualties in the attacks. Aramco has said it will dip into its reserves to offset the disruption, but the incident could affect investor confidence as its stock market debut looms.

As markets closely watch Saudi's ability to get its

industry back on track, Aramco CEO Amin Nasser said Saturday that "work is underway" to restore full production. And newly appointed Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman said part of the drop would be offset by drawing on vast storage facilities designed to be tapped in times of crisis. Riyadh, the world's top crude exporter, has built five giant underground storage facilities across the country that can hold tens of millions of barrels of various refined petroleum products.

Following a phone call between US President Donald Trump and Prince Mohammed, the White House condemned the attacks on "infrastructure vital to the global economy". The UN's Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths said he was "extremely concerned" over the latest attacks, which also drew swift condemnation from Riyadh's Gulf allies, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Kuwait.

Saudi Arabia has spent billions on military hardware but recent events have underscored its infrastructure's vulnerability to attack. While the kingdom's oil wells, scattered over a vast area, may be tough to hit, its various oil processing facilities are much more exposed. In recent months, the Houthis have staged repeated cross-border missile and drone attacks targeting Saudi air bases and other facilities in what they say is retaliation for the Riyadh-led bombing campaign on rebel-held areas in Yemen.

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani accused Washington of diverting blame for the war in Yemen, where US ally Saudi Arabia leads a military coalition that has regularly carried out air strikes. "Today, witness that innocents die every day in Yemen ... Americans, instead of blaming themselves - and confessing that their presence in the region is creating problems - blame the region's countries or Yemen's people," Rouhani said.

"If we want there to be real security in the region, the solution is that America's aggression cease," Iran's president added, before leaving for Ankara to attend a trilateral meeting on Syria with Turkey and Russia. "We believe the region's issues can be solved through talks in Yemen, Yemeni-Yemeni negotiations - they must decide for themselves. The bombardment of Yemeni people must stop," Rouhani said.

The attack comes after Trump said a meeting with Rouhani was possible at the United Nations General Assembly in New York this month. Tehran has ruled out talks until sanctions are lifted. White House adviser Kellyanne Conway did not rule out a possible meeting between the two but told "Fox News Sunday" that the strikes "did not help" that prospect.

In remarks published yesterday, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' aerospace arm said Iran's missiles could hit US bases and ships within a range of 2,000 km. "Neither us nor the Americans want a war," Brigadier General Amirali Hajizadeh said, quoted by Tasnim news agency, which is considered close to the Guards. "Of course, some forces facing each other in the field could do something, by which a war could start," the commander said. "We have always prepared ourselves for a full-fledged war... everyone should know that all American bases and their vessels in a 2,000-kilometre range can be targeted by our missiles," he added. — Agencies



KAFR LUSIN, Syria: Abu Ahmad, a displaced Syrian from Termala, sits with his family inside a cave in this village near the Syria-Turkey border on Sept 9, 2019. — AFP

## Idlib chaos forces displaced into...

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Idlib region since the end of April, the United Nations says.

A four-months-long Russian-backed regime offensive has killed more than 970 civilians, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. A ceasefire announced by Moscow on Aug 31 has reduced air strikes, but skirmishes on the ground persist, despite the agreement. The truce was the second such deal between the Syrian government and jihadists since Aug 1. The previous ceasefire collapsed after just a few days.

The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham alliance, led by Al-Qaeda's former Syria affiliate, controls most of Idlib as well as parts of neighboring Aleppo and Latakia provinces. The region of around three million people is one of the last holdouts of opposition to the forces of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. In a tight cave near the Turkish border, Abu Ahmad and his young son chip away at stone walls with metal rods and hammers.

## Iraq signs deal to plug into...

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"This first step will pave the way to discuss further and higher capacity projects, not only to supply Baghdad and northern Iraq but also as a pathway to other countries," he said. Ibrahim said the project had "more than a technical or economic aspect. It has a political aspect."

The 49-year-old father of three has dug a cave for his family in the village of Kafr Lusin, three months after fleeing bombardment of his hometown of Termala, south of Idlib. "I had dug a cave in Termala where we were living throughout the revolution, so I had the idea of digging a cave here as well," Abu Ahmad told AFP. "There, I dug a cave out of fear of air strikes and bombing, but here, it's out of fear of the cold," he added.

Abu Ahmad said the cave is a better place to live than in a tent, especially in winter or during periods of heavy bombardment. "The tent does not protect you, not in summer or winter," he said. "I want to make this cave big enough for my whole family," he added, his face red from hours of hard labor. Sitting cross-legged on a large green carpet on the cave's floor, his wife lamented her losses. "We spent our entire lives working, struggling, building - and then, in an instant, a war plane destroyed our house with one missile," said Khadija, pillows and mattresses stacked behind her.

Overhead, a green water cooler hangs from a metal rod. A handful of cooking utensils are kept in a plastic container and, besides a few spices and pickles stored in water bottles, there isn't much else. "Look around, this is where I live, this is my life," she said. "This is the alternative to a home." — AFP

Baghdad is looking to boost diplomatic ties with Arab neighbors, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, but insists it also wants to maintain good relationships with its other powerful neighbor, Iran. The deal comes a day after Iraq signed a \$1.3 billion agreement with German industrial conglomerate Siemens to add 1.7 GW to the grid by repairing war-damaged power plants in the northern city of Baiji.

Iraq partly fills its power shortages by importing both electricity and natural gas from Iran. It has been granted a series of waivers from Washington to keep importing electricity from Iran despite US sanctions on Tehran, with the latest exemption expiring in mid-October. — AFP