

International

UN denounces 'unprecedented' foreign interference in Libya

Conflict enters a new phase with sophisticated equipment, mercenaries

UNITED NATIONS: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Wednesday that foreign interference in the Libya conflict has reached "unprecedented levels," with sophisticated equipment and mercenaries involved in the fighting. Guterres denounced the situation during a ministers-level UN Security Council video conference, expressing particular concern about the military forces massing around the city of Sirte, halfway between Tripoli in the west and Benghazi in the east.

"The conflict has entered a new phase with foreign interference reaching unprecedented levels, including in the delivery of sophisticated equipment and the number of mercenaries involved in the fighting," he said. Forces loyal to Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), "with significant external support, continued their advance eastward" and are 25 kilometers (15 miles) west of Sirte, Guterres said. GNA units had tried twice before to seize the city, he noted. The unity government, with Turkey's backing, is battling forces loyal to strongman Khalifa Haftar, who has support from Egypt, Russia and the United Arab Emirates.

"We are very concerned about the alarming military build-up around the city, and the high-level of direct foreign interference in the conflict in violation of the UN arms embargo,

and UN Security Council resolutions, and commitments made by member states in Berlin" in January, Guterres said. He did not name any particular countries. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, whose country holds the rotating Security Council presidency, slammed violations of the arms embargo in place for Libya since 2011.

"While the entire world closed its borders, ships, planes and trucks with weapons and mercenaries continued to arrive in Libyan cities," he said. His counterpart from Niger, Kalla Ankourao, joined many others in echoing Guterres' comments. "Libya does not need more weapons, does not need mercenaries" but rather "reconciliation," Ankourao said. Guterres said UN-led talks with military leaders from both sides were focused on the departure of foreign mercenaries, counter-terrorism cooperation, "disarmament and demobilization of armed groups throughout Libya, and modalities for a possible ceasefire mechanism."

He also raised the possibility of creating a demilitarized zone to be controlled by the UN mission in Libya. The presence in Libya of Russian and Syrian mercenaries has been raised as problematic since the start of the year. Syrian regime forces are fighting with Haftar, while rebels have aligned themselves



BENGHAZI: Supporters of Libyan military strongman Khalifa Haftar take part in a gathering in the eastern Libyan port city of Benghazi to protest against Turkish intervention. —AFP

with the unity government. Guterres said the latest fighting in southern Tripoli and the Tarhouna region had forced nearly 30,000

people to flee the violence, bringing the total of internally displaced people in Libya to more than 400,000.—AFP

Indian navy ex-officer refuses to appeal his spying death sentence

ISLAMABAD: A former Indian naval officer on death row in Pakistan for alleged spying has refused to lodge an appeal against his conviction and will try instead for a military pardon, an official said. Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav was arrested in 2016 in Pakistan's restive southwestern province of Balochistan—a region where Islamabad has long accused New Delhi of backing separatist rebels. He was sentenced to death by a closed Pakistani military tribunal in 2017, but the International Court of Justice ordered Islamabad last year to review the sentence, and he was later offered the right to appeal. "Commander Jadhav refused to file a petition for the review and the reconsideration for his sentence and conviction," said attorney general official Ahmad Irfan.

"He instead preferred to follow up on his pending mercy petition", Irfan added. He said Pakistan had written to the Indian high commission inviting it to file an appeal on Jadhav's behalf. New Delhi maintains Jadhav retired from the navy in 2001 and was running a logistics business in Iran, where he was kidnapped and brought to Pakistan and forced to confess. India's foreign affairs spokesman Anurag Srivastava said late Wednesday that Jadhav "has clearly been coerced to refuse to file a review in his case". "Pakistan is only seeking to create an illusion of remedy," he added. —AFP

TikTok's Hong Kong exit a 'win-win' business move

HONG KONG: Viral video platform TikTok's withdrawal from Hong Kong is a savvy commercial move that sidesteps thorny privacy issues but it will not shield the app completely from accusations of collusion with China, experts say. As Facebook, Twitter and other US tech giants risk angering China by refusing to share Hong Kong user data, Chinese-owned TikTok has also portrayed an image of principle by pulling out of the territory.

The moves were triggered by China's imposition of a security law on Hong Kong last week aimed at quashing a democracy movement, and gives police new powers to censor the internet. TikTok's exit from Hong Kong was partly an effort to shake off the "label of it being a company that is controlled by China and shares data with the Chinese government," Zhu Zhiqun, a political science professor at Bucknell University in the United States, told AFP.

However TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, has a similar app for mainland China called Douyin that does share users' data with the Chinese government. And while Douyin is not officially available for download in Hong Kong, ByteDance is happy for it to be used in the city of seven million people. "The company does not have plans to make Douyin available on the Hong Kong app store, but Douyin has local Hong Kong users who have downloaded it in mainland China," a ByteDance spokesman told AFP.

'Win-win'

Leaving Hong Kong allows TikTok to focus on building its increasingly lucrative American market, while ceding only a little bit of ground to its sister app, according to tech expert Elliott Zaagman. "(TikTok is) primarily concerned now with staying alive in the United States," said Zaagman, who writes for the Lowy Institute think tank in Australia and presents the China Tech In-

vestor podcast. "TikTok will lose their Hong Kong users, but Douyin will gain their Hong Kong users...it's kind of a win-win." TikTok and Douyin are among the world's most popular apps, with more than 2.2 billion downloads, according to US-based research agency SensorTower. Their kaleidoscopic feeds of 15 to 60-second video clips are often fun and humorous, featuring everything from make-up tutorials to dance routines. However, with its rising popularity in the United States, TikTok has also come under increasing scrutiny from the US government. US President Donald Trump said this week he was considering banning it as a way to punish China over the coronavirus pandemic.

Other top American lawmakers have raised concerns over the potential for TikTok to leak users' data to the Chinese government. "TikTok is a potential counterintelligence threat we cannot ignore," two senior US senators wrote last year. India—where TikTok is also wildly popular—recently blocked the platform on national security grounds following a deadly border clash between its soldiers and Chinese forces. TikTok staunchly denies snooping allegations. "We have never provided user data to the Chinese government, nor would we do so if asked," a spokesman said on Wednesday.

TikTok has also faced questions on whether it hides videos from Hong Kong's protests to appease the Chinese government. Searches this week on TikTok for #democracy and #independence in Hong Kong came up with no videos, according to AFP research. However some hashtags, including #nationalecuritylaw and #HongKongindependence, did produce results. A TikTok spokesman denied any censorship. "To be clear, we have no restrictions on political content, unless it violates our community guidelines, such as hate speech," the spokesman told AFP on Wednesday.

"We do not remove videos on the basis of content negative toward China, including Hong Kong protest content." With TikTok's future depending much more on factors outside Hong Kong and mainland China, its withdrawal from the territory could turn out to be a PR coup. "It seems that TikTok's users were relatively few in Hong Kong, so commercially it also makes sense to avoid any reputation damage, and simply pull out of the market," Severine Arsene, from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, told AFP. —AFP