

# Libya govt moves on Sirte; Haftar offensive collapses

CAIRO: Libya's internationally recognized government attempted new advances on Saturday against the forces of retreating eastern commander Khalifa Haftar, who stood by in Cairo as his ally, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, proposed a ceasefire. Forces of the Turkish-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) advanced into the central coastal city of Sirte, they and residents said, though eastern forces said they had driven them back.

In a series of rapid victories, the GNA has, with Turkish support, suddenly brought most of northwest Libya back under its control, dashing Haftar's bid to unite the country by force with help from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia. Two oil engineers in south Libya told Reuters that production at the Sharara field was also gradually restarting after having been shut down in January by eastern-based forces. It could help revive GNA finances after months of almost no revenues.

"The air force has carried out five strikes in the outskirts of Sirte," slain dictator Muammar Gaddafi's hometown and the last major settlement before the traditional boundary between Libya's west and east, GNA spokesman Mohamad Gnounou said. "Orders have been given to our forces to begin their advance and to systematically attack all rebel positions," he added.

Sirte was taken by Haftar's forces virtually without a fight in January after one of Libya's myriad local militias switched sides. Beyond Sirte lies the prize of Libya's main oil export ports, Haftar's most important strategic asset. Some 450 km east of Tripoli, the town was where Gaddafi put up his last stand against NATO-backed rebel forces in 2011.

Appearing at a news conference in Cairo alongside Sisi, Haftar agreed to a new political initiative that analysts say could dilute his power in his eastern home territory and may demonstrate the impatience of his foreign backers. The GNA seemed poised to reject Egypt's proposals, which included a ceasefire from today and a longer-term peace plan, but its war with Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) in the east still seems far from over.

Both sides' foreign backers may be unwilling to curtail efforts to expand their regional ambitions. The LNA still controls the east as well as most of Libya's oil fields in the south. Libya has had no stable central authority since dictator Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown by NATO-backed rebels in 2011 and has been split since 2014 between rival administrations in east and west.

Speaking alongside Haftar and Aguila Saleh, the head of the eastern Libyan parliament, Sisi proposed a plan that includes



CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi (center), Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar (right) and Libyan Parliament Speaker Aguila Saleh arrive for a joint press conference on Saturday. — AFP

talks in Geneva, the election of a leadership council, the disbanding of militias and the exit of all foreign fighters from Libya. In brief comments, Haftar said he hoped Sisi could make "urgent and effective efforts to compel Turkey to completely stop the transfer of weapons and mercenaries to Libya". The UAE was quick to state its support for Saturday's declaration.

But Khaled Al-Meshri, head of the GNA-aligned legislative assembly, said Libyans had no need for new initiatives and rejected Haftar's attempt to return to nego-

tiations after military defeat, according to Al Jazeera. GNA forces' spokesman also appeared to pour cold water on the Egyptian proposals, which included a demand that militias disband and hand over their weaponry to Haftar's men.

"We didn't start this war, but we will choose the time and place when it ends," Gnounou said. He issued a "final call" for Sirte's local leaders to abandon Haftar and spare the Mediterranean coastal city "the horrors of war". "Our forces continue to advance with force and resolve, chasing

the fleeing (Haftar) militias," he said.

Wolfram Lacher of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs said the Egyptian plan was aimed at "cutting Haftar down to size" by expanding Saleh's role. Haftar is a deeply divisive figure whose latest offensive has upended a UN-led peace process. It is unclear how much traction any initiative proposed by him or his allies can gain.

Numerous attempts to establish truces and a return to negotiations have foundered, though the United Nations has started holding separate ceasefire talks with both sides. Egyptian-led efforts to unify Libya's military have also stalled in the past over Haftar's demand to be supreme commander, diplomats say.

Since Thursday, the LNA has lost its last footholds in Tripoli and its most important northwestern stronghold, the town of Tarhouna. On Saturday morning, GNA forces continued their advance as the LNA retreated from Al-Washka, west of Sirte. GNA forces are likely to keep going until they meet resistance, said Tarek Megerisi, a Libya analyst at the European Council on Foreign Relations. "Right now, military voices are ascendant and supported by a fear that Haftar and the UAE will exploit any truce to consolidate and launch counter-attacks," he said. — Agencies

## OPEC, Russia to extend cuts...

Continued from Page 1

extension of cuts. "I applaud OPEC-plus for reaching an important agreement today which comes at a pivotal time as oil demand continues to recover and economies reopen around the world," he said in a tweet.

Analysts had expected the May-June cuts to be extended by at least another month, if not longer. Although more countries around the world are

gradually moving out of lockdown, crude consumption has not returned to pre-confinement levels, which were already comparatively low.

"Today's deal is a positive development and, unless a second COVID-19 wave hits the world, it will be the backbone of a quick recovery for the energy industry," Bjornar Tonhaugen of Rystad Energy said, referring to a feared fresh wave of new coronavirus infections. "The 9.7 million bpd production cuts were already working, extending them an extra month will tighten (the) market more quickly," Ann-Louise Hittle of Wood Mackenzie said. A bone of contention ahead of the meeting had been the willingness of each country to abide by the agreed production quotas. According to data intelligence company Kpler, OPEC+ reduced output by

around 8.6 mbpd in May, less than planned, with Iraq and Nigeria seen as the most resistant. OPEC said all meeting participants agreed Saturday that countries that failed to comply fully so far were willing to make up for it in July, August and September.

Nevertheless, it was precisely that earlier failure that led Mexico on Saturday to refuse to extend its cuts. "There are other countries that extended the cuts to July. We told them no, that we are maintaining the agreement signed in April. There is no problem," Mexico's Energy Minister Rocio Nahle told reporters during a visit to a petrochemical plant in Veracruz state. She said Mexico "fully respected" the original agreement, under which it agreed to cut production by 100,000 barrels a day in May and

June, but other countries "did not respect it," without specifying which ones.

Despite the difficulties, the output cuts have helped support oil prices, which rose to around \$40 per barrel at the start of June for both the US benchmark, West Texas Intermediate (WTI), and Europe's Brent North Sea contracts. Both had slumped to historic lows in April, with Brent falling as low as \$15 and WTI briefly entering negative territory.

The April deal was signed after days of wrangling between major players, whose revenues have been ravaged by the collapsing oil market this year. The next meeting of OPEC and its allies has been scheduled for December 1 in Vienna, where the organization is based. — AFP

## World rallies against George...

Continued from Page 1

Helicopters circled overhead as some protesters danced — but the pain which drove many in to the streets was never far below the surface, as others yelled "This ain't no party!" Military personnel as well as police watched over the gathering. But there appeared to be fewer than on previous days, and some gave the protesters small smiles and waves as they marched by.

On the National Mall, fencing and uniformed guards blocked protesters from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr famously delivered his "I have a dream" speech in 1963. The protests were ignited by videos of a police officer kneeling on Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes as he pleaded for his life — the latest unarmed black person to be killed by white law enforcement officers. The officer, Derek Chauvin, has been charged with second-degree murder.

The rage since Floyd's death in Minneapolis on May 25 has exploded into the most serious civil unrest in America since King was assassinated in 1968. Peaceful protests swelled Saturday in other US cities. Tens of thousands rallied across New York City and Philadelphia, Chicago shut down the city's Lake Shore Drive to facilitate protests, and demonstrators marched in Los Angeles. In San Francisco, thousands marched across the Golden Gate Bridge, briefly stopping traffic as they spilled into the driving lanes.

But the demonstrations in Washington were the biggest since protests began in Minneapolis before spreading across the country and then abroad. "Today, the pain is so raw it can be hard to keep faith," tweeted Democratic presidential hopeful Joe Biden. A remembrance for Floyd was held Saturday in North Carolina, the state where he was born, following a memorial service in Minneapolis on Thursday.

Hundreds waited to view his coffin, some holding umbrellas against the hot sun. Some sobbed and many held cell phones high as a hearse arrived with the casket. Floyd's sisters LaTonya and Zsa-Zsa told reporters they would not go inside. "I can't go in, see him laying in a coffin, it would drive me crazy forever," said LaTonya through tears.

She expressed her pain at watching the footage of her brother's agonizing death. "Every time I look up I see him on the ground, face up, neck down, hollering please help me," she said, adding she wished the video could be taken down. "I'll never hear his voice, I'll never hear his laughter, I'll never tell him again that I love him and likewise he'd tell me the same," said Zsa-Zsa.

Around the world, protesters echoed the rage of American demonstrators. "It is time to burn down institutional racism," one speaker shouted through a megaphone at a hooting crowd of thousands outside the parliament building in London. "Silence is violence," the throng shouted back in the rain, before mounted police moved in to disperse a small missile-pelting crowd trying to push its way closer to Downing Street. Thousands more marched in the northern English city of Manchester.

Officials around the world have been trying to balance understanding at people's pent-up anger with warnings about the dangers of a disease that has officially claimed nearly 400,000 lives globally. Yet tens of thousands of Australians defied Prime

Minister Scott Morrison's call to "find a better way", tens of thousands marched in France, and thousands more in Britain ignored the health minister's warning. And in Tunis, hundreds chanted: "We want justice! We want to breathe!"

In Sydney, aborigines performed a traditional smoking ceremony at the start of a "Black Lives Matter" protest, which was allowed at the last minute after initially being banned on health grounds. Many held up signs and wore face masks marked with the words "I can't breathe" — the words Floyd kept saying while handcuffed as a policeman knelt on his neck. One placard simply read "8:46" — the amount of time the 46-year-old was pinned to the ground by the white officer before his death.

In Paris, riot police held back a crowd of several thousand who gathered outside the US embassy for an unsanctioned protest. "I've had racist abuse all my life," said one demonstrator, 46-year-old Nadine. "That is our life. To be a black French woman in France, it's not easy." A protest in the French city of Metz ended with a few dozen people breaking into a courthouse and scuffling with security guards and one of the city's prosecutors. "Protesters held up placards reading "Being black is not a crime" and "Our police are assassins".

Smaller, youth-driven protests were staged outside US embassies in Warsaw and Sofia. In Germany, Bundesliga footballers warmed up in "Red card to racism #BlackLivesMatter" shirts and took a knee prior to kickoff. "How many more?" asked a poster held up in a crowd of thousands in Frankfurt, while hundreds rallied across town squares of Belgium and the Netherlands.

The protests have even resonated in war-scarred countries such as Iraq, where the "America Revolts" and the Arabic phrase for "We want to breathe, too" hashtags are spreading on social media. "I think what the Americans are doing is brave and they should be angry, but rioting is not the solution," said Yassin Alaa, a 20-year-old camped out in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, the site of months of anti-government protests. Back in Washington, many black protesters hailed the multiracial, multiethnic nature of the demonstrations, calling the change "invigorating". Jackie Maddox, 59, who remembered her own parents marching in Washington for their rights decades ago, said she felt "relieved" that black people were no longer alone. "It's about time that they are tired too," she said of other protesters — though, she added, she hoped it would last.

The days of demonstrations in the US — which have included outbreaks of looting and violence — have seen new police abuses, some captured on camera. Two policemen in Buffalo, New York were charged with felony assault Saturday after they were filmed shoving a 75-year-old protester who fell, hit his head and began bleeding, in one of the most widely shared videos fuelling outrage.

But there were some changes to policing as well. In Seattle, authorities announced a temporary ban on tear gas. A federal judge in Denver forbade the use of chemical agents and projectiles like rubber bullets against peaceful protesters. And in Dallas, police marched in solidarity with protesters.

The unrest has handed US President Donald Trump — the target of many a biting protest sign and chant — one of the greatest challenges of his tumultuous presidency. While condemning Floyd's death, he has adopted a tough stance toward protesters, calling them "thugs" or "terrorists" and threatening a military crackdown. "LAW & ORDER!" the president tweeted as evening fell Saturday, adding later that the crowd in DC was "much smaller" than anticipated. — Agencies

## Morocco artisans fear 'knockout...

Continued from Page 1

The crafts industry represents around seven percent of GDP, with an export turnover last year of nearly one billion dirhams (\$100 million). Despite their role in the economy, artisans work without social security cover and with a limited distribution network, much of it through word of mouth, like elsewhere in North Africa.

The 30 women who weave rugs for a small cooperative called "Creative Woman" in Sale have all lost their meager incomes. Weavers work eight hours a day for barely \$100 a month "when the carpets are sold" and they "have nothing left because there has not been a single sale in three months", explained Rachida Nabati.

## Dozens hurt as protesters...

Continued from Page 1

as supporters of Hezbollah clashed with some demonstrators calling on the group to disarm. Hezbollah is the only group to have kept its weapons since the end of the Lebanese civil war, deeply dividing Lebanon along political lines.

"Weapons should be only in the hands of the army," said Sana, a 57-year-old female protester from Nabatiyah, a city in southern Lebanon, a Hezbollah stronghold. Soldiers formed a human chain separating the two sides after supporters and opponents of Hezbollah threw stones at each other, an AFP photographer said. Supporters of Hezbollah, which is also represented in the government and parliament, chanted: "Shiite, Shiite."

On Saturday evening, there was an exchange of gunfire between residents of a Sunni district, a stronghold of the former prime minister Saad Hariri, and a nearby Shiite neighborhood, a stronghold of the Amal party, a security source said. Soldiers moved in to restore order, said the state-run news agency ANI. There were clashes too in the northern city of Tripoli, an AFP correspondent there reported.

Security forces fired tear gas near a street leading into the parliament building behind Martyrs Square, after some demonstrators pelted them with

## Assembly panel seeks ban...

Continued from Page 1

Mohammad Al-Sheetan against reducing government subsidies or raising public charges as he prepares to grill him next week. Adasani on Thursday filed to grill the minister, appointed just a few months ago, on a number of counts including pushing to approve a government bill to borrow KD 20 billion and failure to follow up alleged kickbacks in Kuwait Airways deals, in addition to alleged losses in foreign investments.

The energetic woman in her 40s, who has been a weaver since the age of seven, has been forced to borrow from friends to supplement her modest earnings from a vegetable garden next to her shack. In the cooperative, some have been bailed out by a state coronavirus emergency fund, while many others "can no longer pay their rent". "We have to sell on the internet but we don't know how to do that," said the mother who taught herself to read and write. "A digital platform was launched for artisans a few years ago, but it doesn't work," master plasterer Mohamed Touel said.

In Tunisia, the National Office of Handicrafts has been working on an electronic platform for sales in Europe and has organized small exhibitions in hotels. It also encourages artisans to launch Facebook pages or electronic sites. But Sabiha, a potter in the Tunisian rural town of Sejan whose works are on UNESCO's list of "intangible cultural heritage", said she cannot "even afford to recharge" her mobile phone. — AFP

stones and ransacked shops. Some protesters set fire to garbage bins as riot police advanced towards them.

Lebanon has been rocked by a series of political crises in recent years, before an economic crunch helped trigger unprecedented cross-sectarian mass protests in October. The demonstrations forced the government to resign and a new one headed by Prime Minister Hassan Diab was approved by parliament in February, tasked with launching reforms and combatting corruption.

But many Lebanese say the new administration has failed to find solutions to the country's manifold problems, including a grinding recession and spiralling inflation. The local currency has lost more than half of its value on the black market in recent months, falling from the official rate of 1,507 to more than 4,000 pounds to the dollar. Banks have gradually stopped all dollar withdrawals.

A sign held aloft by protesters on Saturday called for "a government that eliminates corruption, not one that protects corruption". More than 35 percent of Lebanese are unemployed, while poverty has soared to engulf more than 45 percent of the population, according to official estimates.

Lebanon is also one of the world's most indebted countries, with a debt equivalent to more than 170 percent of its GDP. The country defaulted on its external borrowing for the first time in March. Diab's government adopted an economic recovery plan in April and has begun negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, to try to unlock billions of dollars in aid. — AFP

The grilling also charges that the minister failed to take sufficient action against alleged involvement in the Malaysian sovereign wealth fund scandal and suspicion of money laundering. Adasani called on the finance minister not to resign and to face the grilling, due to be debated next week, adding he will explain that the government action to send the Malaysian fund issue to the public prosecution was insufficient.

The lawmaker also urged the prime minister to freeze the authorities of the finance minister until the grilling has been debated. Adasani said attempts by the minister to increase the cost of public services or privatize them are totally rejected, adding that the minister submitted the KD 20 billion debt law before looking into alternatives.