

## International

# Libya authorities release 120 captured pro-Haftar fighters

## Latest move towards reconciliation in a UN-backed peace process

**ZAWIYAH, Libya:** Authorities in western Libya released 120 fighters from a rival eastern force on Wednesday, the latest move towards reconciliation in a UN-backed peace process aimed at ending years of violence. The men were fighting for the 107th Brigade under the command of eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar, who in April 2019 launched an offensive to seize Tripoli from a unity government. The fighters had been captured near the western city of Zawiya that same month.

On Wednesday, dressed in loose white outfits and matching skullcaps, they were released following a ceremony in Zawiya, 45 kilometers (30 miles) east of Tripoli. The ceremony took place at a sports ground in Zawiya under heavy security. In a speech, Abdallah Al-Lafi, vice-president of the country's new presidential council, welcomed the move and called for further reconciliation and rebuilding.

"We must not pass on hatred and bitterness to our children," he said. After a recitation from the Koran and the singing of the national anthem, the prisoners were released and reunited with their families amid loud ululations. The United Nations' Libya mission UNSMIL welcomed the release of the fighters, hailing the "efforts by the

national unity government".

The mission tweeted that it "hopes that this initiative constitutes the start of a national reconciliation" and called for "the release of all detainees before the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan" in two weeks. Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah tweeted that "Libya's future and development are linked to its ability to heal its wounds through national reconciliation."

### Foreign forces

Libya has been ravaged by bloodshed since the fall and killing of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed 2011 revolt. An array of armed groups arose to fill the vacuum, and many coalesced around the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) or around Haftar, who backed an eastern administration. The two camps, each supported by foreign powers, fought for more than a year before Haftar was forced to retreat. In October they signed a truce, setting in motion a UN-led process that saw a new transitional government installed in February.

The deal also led to the release of several dozen prisoners by January. The new executive is charged with organizing national elections set for December 2021. But while the advances in the



**TRIPOLI:** Prisoners of war, loyal to the forces of Libya's eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar, are pictured upon their release by the new Libyan unity government on Wednesday in the port city of Zawiya. — AFP

peace process have been widely praised, the transitional administration faces a complex task—not least due to the presence of foreign forces who backed the rival camps and have remained on Libyan soil.

Haftar received military support from the UAE and the shadowy Wagner Group, close to the

Kremlin, while his rivals were backed by Turkey, whose drones were seen as critical in repelling Haftar's forces last year. According to the UN, some 20,000 mercenaries and foreign fighters were still in Libya in early December. A January 23 deadline for their withdrawal passed without any sign of them leaving. — AFP

## Exit from women's treaty splits Turkey's activists

**ISTANBUL:** Turkey's contentious withdrawal from a treaty combating gender-based violence has had a sympathetic response from at least one quarter: a top women's group that includes President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's daughter. With a stroke of the pen that sparked international outrage, Erdogan last month pulled Turkey out of the 2011 Istanbul Convention, a landmark pact it once took pride in having helped craft.

Erdogan's decision came as the number of femicides and other crimes against Turkish women is growing. For some observers, the mostly Muslim but officially secular country now stands at a cultural crossroads. Although Erdogan gave no formal reason for his decision, a top aide said the treaty's references to gender-based abuses had been "hijacked by people attempting to normalize homosexuality"—legal in Turkey since Ottoman times. The LGBT movement was "incompatible" with Turkey's "social and family values", press aide Fahrettin Altun said in a statement.

This argument has found some support from the more religiously conservative women who often back Erdogan and his ruling party, which is rooted in political Islam.

It has also resonated at Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), a prominent group whose deputy chair is Erdogan's younger daughter Sumeyye.

### 'Neither for nor against'

The convention's association with LGBT activism "has be-



**ISTANBUL:** In this file photo, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's daughter Sumeyye Erdogan (left) and Chief Technology Officer (CTO) of Baykar Makina Selcuk Bayraktar pose during their wedding ceremony. Turkey's contentious withdrawal from a treaty combating gender-based violence has had a sympathetic response from at least one quarter: a top women's group that includes Erdogan's daughter Sumeyye. —AFP

come an unbearable burden for Turkish officials," KADEM board member Derya Yanik said. "From our perspective, the Istanbul Convention was an instrument for combatting violence against women," Yanik said during an interview at the group's headquarters in Istanbul. "But some groups tied the Istanbul Convention to (LGBT rights). It was one of the elements that eroded the charter." Officially, Yanik said KADEM was "neither for nor against" the convention, which requires countries to adopt a raft of legislation aimed at prosecuting gender-based violence and femicide. —AFP

## UN backpedals on Yemen corruption claims

**RIYADH:** A UN panel of experts has backtracked on corruption and money-laundering claims against Yemen's Saudi-backed government, saying no evidence was found in a preliminary review, according to letters seen yesterday. The experts assessing UN sanctions on Yemen claimed in a January report that the war-ridden country's central bank "illegally" diverted to traders \$423 million from a \$2 billion Saudi deposit, that was meant to stabilize the Yemeni currency and enable basic food imports.

But in an update to the UN Security Council's sanctions committee, the experts said its "preliminary review has not demonstrated evidence of corruption, money laundering or elite capture". In their letter dated last Friday, the panel said it aims to conduct a "complete review" of the initial report and will present its findings in "due course".

It added that the Saudi deposit, made in 2018 under a development and reconstruction program, appeared to have its desired effect as "food prices were stabilized" the following year in Yemen, which has seen famine-like conditions. The January report also alleged that Hayel Saeed Anam (HSA), a UAE-headquartered business conglomerate with a large market presence in Yemen, pocketed a substantial part of the diverted funds. In a separate letter to HSA chairman Abdul Gabbar Hayel Saeed, the panel said its findings "should be disregarded, pending a final assessment". —AFP