

International

Libya watchers observe signs of progress toward reconciliation

Political rupture in the east has reversed fortunes of Bashagha

TRIPOLI: Oil-rich but war-scarred Libya has for years been ruled by two rival governments, but now some analysts see faint signs of progress toward reconciliation between them. They point to discord within one of the camps, based in the east and backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar, where the parliament last week suspended its former premier Fathi Bashagha.

Paradoxically, the observers say, Bashagha's political demise could signal that the Haftar camp is moving towards rapprochement with the internationally recognized government in the capital Tripoli. Some observers even suggest this could aid United Nations-led efforts urging new elections this year in the country that has been torn by bloody chaos since the 2011 overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

The political rupture in the east has reversed the fortunes of Bashagha, who a year ago launched an attack on Tripoli that was repelled after a day of deadly street fighting. Bashagha was suspended on May 16 by the eastern-based parliament, which also announced an investigation against him for unspecified reasons.

The move against Bashagha "sealed the end of the political life of this former strongman," said analyst Hasni Abidi of the Geneva-based Institute for Arab and Mediterranean Cultures. His "humiliating departure ... reflects the differences in the eastern camp, in particular between the Haftar clan represented by his children and the parliament," Abidi said. Tripoli-based interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah has meanwhile used the "paralysis of the eastern government to consolidate his grip on political and economic life in Libya", he said.

The North African country was plunged into more than a decade of bloody violence following Gaddafi's

ouster in a NATO-backed popular uprising in which the veteran dictator was killed. The ensuing chaos drew in warlords, jihadists and foreign mercenaries and claimed countless lives while leaving the country awash with guns. Haftar, a Gaddafi-era soldier turned exile, and since backed by Egypt and other foreign powers, launched an assault on Tripoli in 2019 that left thousands more dead but ultimately failed.

The warring parties reached a formal ceasefire in October 2020. Since then, the United Nations has resumed its efforts for new elections, to bring stability to the troubled country, but these have been repeatedly delayed. Bashagha, from the port city of Misrata and formerly a political heavyweight in the western camp, had sought Haftar's support in late 2021, vowing to work for "national reconciliation". Bashagha's suspension comes ahead of a mid-June deadline declared by the United Nations for the rival political forces to agree on a framework to hold elections before the end of the year.

Bashagha "always had an expiry date", said Emadeddin Badi of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, a Switzerland-based research body. "His usefulness ended the day he lost the possibility of establishing himself in Tripoli," the analyst said. Libyan media have meanwhile reported that talks have been held between representatives of Haftar and Dbeibah.

Dbeibah's nephew and one of Haftar's sons "have been in almost continuous talks for months", researcher Jalel Harchaoui told AFP. "The desire of these two Libyan personalities to accommodate one another is one of the reasons for Bashagha's fall," he said. Badi said Haftar had offered to suspend Bashagha, a move that had the "blessing" of Egypt.



TRIPOLI: People use pedalboats in the Saraya Lake outside the capital's Red Castle on May 21, 2023. — AFP

The head of the UN Support Mission in Libya, Abdoulaye Bathily, has said he hopes for an agreement "by mid-June" to hold elections before the end of this year. He told the UN Security Council last month that "intensive consultations have taken place amongst security actors" and said "there has been a new dynamic in Libya".

Libyan political analyst Abdallah Al-Rayes said

the rival camps' new understandings are the culmination of "discreet negotiations in Cairo" with a view to "forming a new coalition government". "This is a step that precedes any agreement on the polls," he added. Harchaoui, however, was less optimistic and said "the elites already well in place today ... have absolutely no intention of leaving power in order to allow credible and authentic elections". — AFP

Islamic scholar acquitted in Swiss rape trial

GENEVA: A Swiss court on Wednesday found Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan not guilty of rape and sexual coercion in a Geneva hotel 15 years ago, with his accuser immediately indicating she would appeal. The court also decided to compensate the former Oxford University professor for his legal costs, awarding him up to 151,000 Swiss francs (\$167,000), but rejecting his claim for moral damages.

"The accused must have the benefit of the doubt," Yves Maurer-Cecchini, the president of the Geneva Criminal Court, said, citing a lack of evidence, contradictory testimonies and "love messages" sent by the plaintiff after the alleged assault. "Tariq Ramadan must be acquitted." Following the verdict, the 60-year-old Swiss academic — a charismatic yet controversial figure in European Islam — smiled and hugged one of his daughters.

Ramadan's 57-year-old accuser —

identified only under the assumed name of "Brigitte" due to her concerns for her safety — left the courtroom before the end of the verdict was read out. Her lawyers said they would appeal against the ruling. "This deeply unfair decision is the reflection of a caricatural hearing from which dignity was absent and where the word of my client was neither heard nor respected," lawyer Francois Zimeray told AFP.

Ramadan left the court surrounded by his relatives, smiling but without commenting. "It is a verdict inspired by reason," said his Swiss lawyer Yael Hayat. His French lawyer Philippe Ohayon told AFP: "Too many implausibilities and contradictions led to a perfectly logical acquittal in fact and in law." Prosecutors had been seeking a three-year sentence for Ramadan, half of which would have been served behind bars.

Brigitte was in her forties at the time of the alleged assault. She filed a complaint 10 years later, telling the court she felt emboldened to come forward following similar complaints filed against Ramadan in France. In its ruling, the Geneva court found Brigitte's account was "generally constant and detailed". However, it was not corroborated. "There is no doubt that the complainant felt like she had a bad experience that eve-



GENEVA: Leading Swiss Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan reacts as he leaves Geneva's courthouse after he was acquitted on May 24, 2023. — AFP

ning," the president of the court said, but "the existence of this stress (...) does not make it possible to confirm the materiality of the alleged facts."

Controversial among secularists who see him as a supporter of political Islam, Ramadan obtained a doctorate from the University of Geneva, with a thesis focused on his grandfather, who founded Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood movement. He was a professor of contemporary Islamic studies at Oxford and held visiting roles at universities in Qatar and Morocco. He was forced to take a leave of absence in 2017 when rape allegations surfaced in France at the height of the "Me Too" movement. — AFP

Top US official warns on child social media use

WASHINGTON: The top US health official on Tuesday issued a stark warning to parents, tech companies and regulators, saying the evidence is growing that social media use may seriously harm children. In a lengthy advisory, US surgeon general Vivek Murthy said that while not without benefits, "there are ample indicators that social media can also have a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents".

Social media use by young people in the United States is nearly universal, with up to 95 percent of adolescents reporting using a social platform and more than a third saying they do so "almost constantly", according to the Department of Health and Human Services. Murthy's report said social media can help children and adolescents find a community to connect, but that it also contains "extreme, inappropriate, and harmful content," which can "normalize" self-harm and suicide.

It can perpetuate body dissatisfaction, eating disorders and depression and expose children to online bullying while they are undergoing a critical stage in brain development, the report warned. Murthy called on policymakers to strengthen safety standards around social media and urged tech companies to responsibly assess the impact of their products on children and share data with researchers.

He also advised parents to establish tech-free zones at home in order to promote in-person communication, and to educate children by modelling healthy, responsible online behavior. The report comes at a time when authorities across the United States are searching for ways to regulate social media use, and curb its ill-effects on young people in particular.

Earlier this month, the US state of Montana banned the use of TikTok on its territory. The Chinese-owned video sharing giant is challenging the decision in court. And in March, Utah became the first US state to require social media sites to get parental consent for accounts used by minors. "We are in the middle of a national youth mental health crisis, and I am concerned that social media is an important driver of that crisis — one that we must urgently address," Murthy said. — AFP

World's biggest warship visits Oslo, angering Russia

OSLO: The world's biggest warship, the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier, arrived in Oslo on Wednesday for a stopover criticized by neighboring Russia as an "illogical and harmful" show of force. The 337-metre (1,106-foot) nuclear-powered ship sailed into the Oslo Fjord under escort, where it will stay for several days before heading to the Arctic for military exercises, according to Norwegian media.

"Norway is a strategic partner in the continued efforts to maintain a secure and stable Arctic and North Atlantic region that benefits global order," Erik J Eslich, commander of US Carrier Strike Group 12, said in a statement. The Norwegian military said in a statement "the aircraft carrier's visit and presence provides... a unique opportunity to develop our cooperation and work closely together with our most important ally, the United States".

Norwegian Defense Minister Bjorn Arild Gram said "this is the concrete expression of our close relationship with the United States and demonstrates the will for collective defense and deterrence". The highly publicized visit, which comes amid heightened tensions between the West and Russia over the war in Ukraine, was denounced by the Russian embassy.

"There are no issues in the North that require a military solution, nor issues that require outside intervention," Russian embassy spokesman Timur Chekanov told AFP by email. "Considering that Oslo



MOSS, Norway: The 337-m USS Gerald R Ford aircraft carrier of the US Navy is seen on its way into the Oslo Fjord on May 24, 2023. — AFP

admits that Russia poses no direct military threat to Norway, such shows of force seem illogical and harmful," he added.

NATO member Norway shares a land border with Russia as well as a maritime border in the Barents Sea. The USS Gerald R. Ford, which can transport up to 90 aircraft and helicopters, is expected to remain moored in the Norwegian capital for several days. A vast airspace and sea ban has been implemented around the vessel. According to online daily Barents Observer, the ship is expected to head for the Arctic in several days ahead of the May 29 start of the Arctic Challenge Exercise, gathering 150 aircraft from 14 Western countries. — AFP

nuclear deal clinched with Iran would survive.

The 2015 deal formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, gave Iran relief from international sanctions in return for curbs on its nuclear program. But the deal collapsed in 2018 after the United States unilaterally withdrew from it and reimposed sanctions, prompting Iran to suspend the implementation of its own commitments to curb nuclear activity including uranium enrichment.

In Jan 2020, Iran launched a missile attack on US forces at the Ain Al-Assad military base in Iraq's Anbar province, days after a US drone strike at Baghdad airport killed revered Revolutionary Guard commander Qasem Soleimani and his Iraqi lieutenant Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis. — AFP

Syrian babies abandoned as...

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war" affecting both government-controlled and rebel-held areas, the group said.

It pointed to factors including poverty, instability, insecurity and child marriage, along with sexual abuse and pregnancy out of wedlock. While adoption is forbidden across Syria, Othman has asked the local authorities for permission to raise Hibatullah. "I told my children that if I die, she should have part of my inheritance," even though she can never officially be part of the family, he said, breaking into tears. The three-year-old, her hair pulled back loosely into pig-tails and tottering around in shiny pink sandals, now calls him "grandpa". "She is just an innocent child," Othman said.

Syria's war has killed more than 500,000 people, displaced millions and ravaged the country's infrastructure. Health department official Zaher Hajjo told AFP that 53 abandoned newborn babies had been registered in government-controlled areas in the first 10 months of last year — 28 boys and 25 girls. Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad this year issued a

decree creating dedicated facilities for the children, who would be automatically registered as Arab, Syrian and Muslim, with the place of birth as the location they were found.

In rebel-held Idlib province, social workers at the main center for abandoned children tended to tiny babies wrapped tightly in blankets in basic cradles, some spruced up with purple paint or ribbons. In the bare-walled room with a brown-and-beige carpet, one woman rocked a baby to sleep with one hand while feeding another milk with the other.

Faisal Al-Hammoud, head of programs at the center, said one baby girl they took in was found under an olive tree after being mauled by a cat. "Blood was dripping down her face," he said, adding that the orphanage had since entrusted her to a family. Workers follow up to make sure such babies are well treated and "that there is no child trafficking", Hammoud added.

The center has taken in 26 babies — 14 girls and 12 boys—since it opened in 2019, and nine this year alone, said Abdullah Abdullah, a civil affairs official with Idlib's rebel authorities. More than four million people live in areas controlled by militants and Turkish-backed groups in Syria's north and northwest, 90 percent of whom depend on aid to survive. "The war is to blame and families too" for child abandonments, Abdullah said. "These children are victims," he added. — AFP



IDLIB: A picture taken on April 30, 2023 shows a nurse caring for babies at a center which shelters Syrian unaccompanied children and those of unknown parentage. — AFP

Iran unveils its longest-range...

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The unveiling comes amid heightened tensions in the Zionist-Palestinian conflict and just over 10 days into a fragile Gaza ceasefire that ended five days of cross border conflict between the Zionist entity and the Iran-backed Palestinian group Islamic Jihad. Days after the Khorramshahr was unveiled in 2017, then US president Donald Trump issued a stark warning at Tehran, casting growing uncertainty over whether a