

# Pope expresses support for detained fishermen in Libya

Author:

Mon, 2020-10-19 00:45

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis expressed support on Sunday for 18 fishermen held in Libya, weighing in on a standoff between Italy and the administration of Khalifa Haftar, one of the North African country's two rival leaders.

"I want to say a word of encouragement and support for the fishermen who have been held in Libya for more than a month, and for their families (who) are hoping to be able to embrace their dear ones soon," Francis said at his weekly blessing in St. Peter's Square.

Libyan patrol boats detained two Sicilian fishing boats on Sept. 1 for allegedly fishing in territorial waters and brought the crews to Benghazi in Libya. The crews, made up of Italians and Tunisians, were accused of operating in Libya's territorial waters.

The fishing grounds have been disputed since 2005, when Libya's then ruler, Muammar Qaddafi, unilaterally extended Libyan territorial waters to 74 nautical miles offshore from 12. Haftar, who controls eastern Libya, is trying to enforce this.

## **FASTFACT**

**Italian newspapers have reported that Gen. Haftar wants Italy to hand over four Libyan nationals convicted of human trafficking in return for freeing the fishermen.**

Italian newspapers have reported that Gen. Haftar wants Italy to hand over four Libyan nationals convicted of human trafficking in return for freeing the fishermen. Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio told parliament on Thursday that such an exchange would be "unacceptable."

The Italian minister pledged to bring home the fishermen.

"Our fishermen are being held by a Libyan party not recognised by the Italian government, the European Union or the United Nations," Di Maio told the Senate during question time. "It is our aim to bring them home as soon as possible," he said.

Concern has mounted in Italy over the fate of the men – eight Italians, six Tunisians, two Indonesians and two Senegalese.

Di Maio said the men appeared to have been detained over the alleged violation of a "protected fishing zone," an area of sea extending 74 miles from the coast and unilaterally claimed by Libya in 2005 as its own. Benghazi authorities passed the case to the military prosecutor's office on Sept. 31 because the incident took place in what is considered a military zone, Italy's parliamentary relations minister Federico D'Inca said last week.

The area is also a fishing ground for the gambero rosso, or red prawn, a

crustacean prized by gourmet chefs and which can sell for up to €60 a kilo at the fishmongers.

### **Detention, attacks**

Families from Mazara del Vallo, on the west coast of Sicily, have been fishing the prawns since the 1900s.

"The area has been the site of numerous incidents (over the years), from the interception and seizure of fishing boats to the detention of crews, and even attacks" by Libyan vessels, Di Maio said. The Italian media has dubbed it "the prawn war."

Di Maio said he had called on those "who have particular influence on Benghazi" for help, including his counterparts in France, the US, the UAE and Russia. "We are monitoring the fishermen's health daily. They are well. They are not being held in a prison but an independent structure, they have no contact with prisoners, they are being treated well," he said.

But the fishermen's families believe the men are being held as a bargaining tool and will only be released in exchange for four Libyan footballers.

The Libyans were arrested in Sicily in 2015 and sentenced to 30 years in jail for people trafficking, after a court found them guilty of locking migrants below deck on a rough sea crossing to Italy in which 49 people died.

Their lawyers claim they were asylum seekers fleeing the conflict-torn North African country.

D'Inca told parliament that "the reported request to swap the fishermen with four Libyan citizens jailed in Italy has neither been confirmed nor formally made."

Francis also called for talks to bring peace to Libya, which is divided between Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA).



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## Israel takes 'cautious' steps of second virus lockdown

Mon, 2020-10-19 00:51

JERUSALEM: Israel started "cautiously" emerging from a second coronavirus lockdown Sunday after a month of tight restrictions, reopening preschools, kindergartens, beaches and national parks, with numbers of new infections falling.

Public radio said about a million young children were set to return to kindergartens and other facilities on Sunday.

Talia Zinkin, 40, said she "hesitated a lot" before sending her two-year-old son to daycare.

"But I felt he would enjoy being with other children," she told AFP. "We have to try to live normally."

Zinkin, playing with her younger child in a Jerusalem park, said it had been full of children last week – but had emptied with the reopening of kindergartens.

Businesses not involving face-to-face contact with the public were allowed back to work, and a contentious ban on individuals moving more than 1 km from their homes was lifted.

That rule had sparked anger among some Israelis who claimed it was designed to stem a wave of protests against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Since July, a number of protest movements have joined to publicly oppose Netanyahu's management of the pandemic and the accompanying economic havoc, including spiraling unemployment.

One group, the "crime minister" movement, focuses on demanding the resignation of the prime minister over the allegations of corruption on which he is currently on trial.

People are now also able to visit friends or relatives, as long as gatherings are of no more than 10 people if inside, and 20 outside.

Jews were also allowed to pray at the Western Wall, in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem, the holiest site where Jews are allowed to pray.

Worshippers will be separated into socially distanced "pods" of up to 20 people, an official statement said.

### **HIGHLIGHT**

**About a million young children were set to return to kindergartens and other**

## **facilities on Sunday, according to public radio.**

The nearby Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, Islam's third holiest site, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were also reopened.

Entry to the mosque compound was previously limited to residents of the Old City, which fell within the 1-km limit.

The latest lockdown was the second since Israel recorded its first Covid-19 case in February.

Tough restrictions introduced in March were lifted after about two months, but critics of the government have said the easing was premature.

"This time we are moving cautiously," Netanyahu said on Saturday.

Ronni Gamzu, Israel's national coronavirus response coordinator, urged people to keep up their guard.

"The main challenge is still ahead of us," he said in remarks aired on radio Sunday. "Keep observing the rules."

According to a decision on Thursday, a phased lifting of restrictions will take place through to February.

The current lockdown, imposed on Sept. 18, remains in place in several mainly ultra-Orthodox Jewish areas around the country.

They are designated "red" zones of infection.

But influential rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, who himself recently tested positive for the virus, ordered ultra-Orthodox boys' schools to reopen, despite a government ban. On Saturday, Netanyahu appealed directly to the most religiously observant.

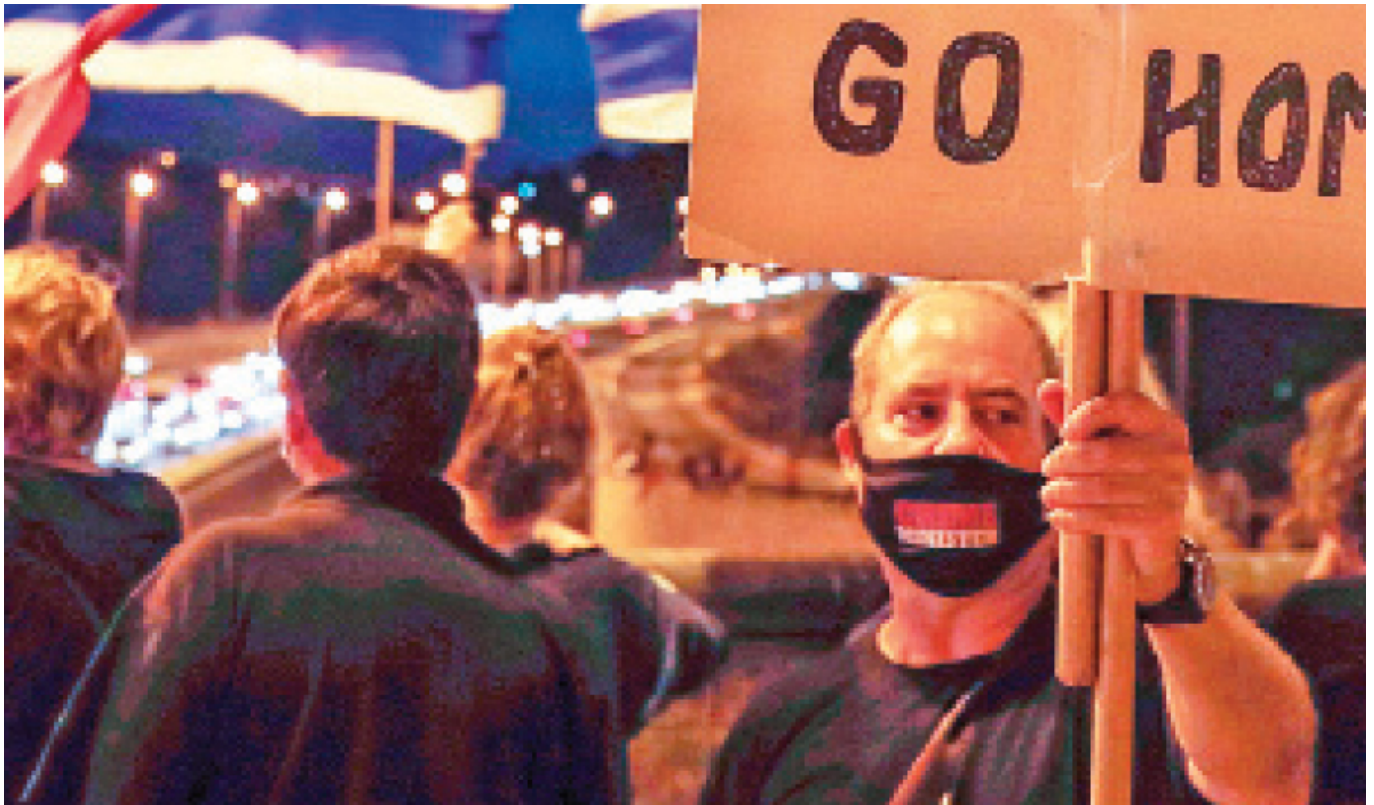
"Our Torah sanctifies life. We have a Torah of life and we need to safeguard life and health," he said. "I ask the ultra-Orthodox public to follow these rules." Israel boasted about its early virus response, which included a quick nationwide lockdown and travel restrictions.

By mid-May, after new daily cases had dropped off considerably, the government had moved to expedite the reopening of schools, bars, eateries and places of worship, as well as allowing weddings, with restricted numbers. Infections quickly resurged.

By the end of September, the number of new daily cases had soared, at times to over 8,000 – among the highest rates in the world per capita according to an AFP tally.

But this past week, daily infections largely fell below 2,500, and an official update on Sunday morning showed just 397 new cases recorded the day before. Israel, a country of about nine million people, has recorded 302,911 coronavirus cases, including 2,202 deaths, as of Sunday.





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## [Israel, UAE to sign agreement for 28 weekly flights](#)

Sun, 2020-10-18 18:02

JERUSALEM: Israel and the United Arab Emirates will a sign a deal on Tuesday to allow 28 weekly commercial flights between Israel's Ben Gurion airport, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Israel's Transportation Ministry said on Sunday.

The agreement, which also allows unlimited charter flights to a smaller airport in southern Israel and 10 weekly cargo flights, comes after Israel and UAE agreed to normalize relations.

The aviation deal will be signed at Ben Gurion airport and flights are expected to begin within weeks, the ministry said.



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## [Open season on weapons sales to Iran as UN embargo expires](#)

Sun, 2020-10-18 17:42

CHICAGO: The end on Sunday of a UN embargo on selling conventional weapons to Iran is “a critical threat to regional and international stability,” analysts told Arab News.

The arms ban expired under the terms of the UN resolution that confirmed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the 2015 agreement between Tehran and world powers to curb Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for an easing of sanctions.

Iran can now buy weapons from Russia, China and elsewhere, and Tehran claims the expiry of the embargo is a diplomatic victory over the US. Nevertheless, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insisted on Sunday that arms sales to Iran would still breach UN resolutions and result in sanctions. “The

US is prepared to use its domestic authorities to sanction any individual or entity that materially contributes to the supply, sale, or transfer of conventional arms to or from Iran," Pompeo said.

"Every nation that seeks peace and stability in the Middle East and supports the fight against terrorism should refrain from any arms transactions with Iran.

"For the past 10 years, countries have refrained from selling weapons to Iran under various UN measures. Any country that now challenges this prohibition will be very clearly choosing to fuel conflict and tension over promoting peace and security."

## Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

The Iranian-American Harvard scholar Dr. Majid Rafizadeh told Arab News: "The lifting of Iran's arms embargo is a critical threat to regional and international stability. Allowing the world's worst state sponsor of terrorism to have an unlimited supply chain of conventional weapons may sadly go down in history as one of the most dangerous acts against world peace.

"The beneficiaries are the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, its proxies and militia groups across the region. Sophisticated weapons could fall into the hand of the Syrian dictator Bashar Assad and Iran's terror and militia groups such as the Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iran-backed armed factions in Iraq."

Security analyst Dr. Theodore Karasik said Iran primarily sought technical data from other countries in order to build up its domestic arms manufacturing capacity.

"Tehran's culture of weapons engineering and reverse engineering means possible purchases of small weapons such as the Kornet anti-tank missile from Russia, and components such as Chinese optical jammers against drone attacks," said Karasik, senior adviser to Gulf State Analytics in Washington, D.C.

"Iran also seeks off-the-shelf systems such as the Russian S-400 air defense and the Bastion coastal defense system. China will benefit too. It is thought that Iran will purchase C-802 anti-ship cruise missiles and possibly Chinese naval patrol craft."



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## [Palestinian official Saeb Erekat taken to Israeli hospital after COVID-19 condition worsens](#)

Author:

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Sun, 2020-10-18 12:43

AMMAN: Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat was rushed by ambulance to a



hospital in West Jerusalem on Sunday after his COVID-19 infection suddenly worsened.

Erekat, 65, secretary of the PLO's executive committee, is being treated in the coronavirus intensive care unit at Hadassah Ein Kerem hospital, where his condition was described as serious but stable.

"He arrived in serious condition and needed support and high doses of oxygen," the hospital said.

Earlier, Erekat had been carried to the Israeli ambulance on a stretcher from his home in the Khadiwey neighborhood of Jericho in the occupied West Bank. He was accompanied to the hospital by his son Ali and daughters Dalal and Salam, who is a doctor.

"Thank God, my father's health is stable. He needs special medical care for lung transplanted patients, thank you for your prayers, may God protect us all," Dalal said later on Twitter.

Erekat had a lung transplant in a US hospital in 2017. Family and friends were worried about his low-level immunity because of the surgery. He tested positive for the coronavirus 10 days ago.

Arsen Ostrovsky, a lawyer and political analyst in Israel, accused Erekat of hypocrisy for being treated in an Israeli hospital while the Palestinian Authority prevented ordinary Palestinians from doing so.

Palestinian officials dismissed the criticism as offensive and unjustified. "International law including the Hague and Geneva conventions requires an occupying power to provide medical support to the population under its control," one said.

Erekat has been one of the most high-profile faces of the Palestinian leadership for decades, especially to international audiences. He is one of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's most senior advisers, and also held top positions under Yasser Arafat.



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