

Russia says Syrian government forces has halted fire in Idlib

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DAMASCUS: Syrian government forces have unilaterally ceased fire in the northern Idlib province, the last major opposition stronghold, Russia said on Sunday, while opposition activists reported continued shelling and airstrikes.

Fighting erupted in Idlib late last month, effectively shattering a cease-fire negotiated by Russia and Turkey that had been in place since September. Russia has firmly backed Syria's Bashar Assad regime in the eight-year civil war, while Turkey has supported the opposition.

In a brief statement on Sunday, the Russian Defense Ministry's Center for Reconciliation of the Warring Sides in Syria said regime forces had ceased fire as of midnight. It described the move as unilateral, but did not give details.

The pro-government Syrian Central Military Media said regime forces responded to shelling by militants on Sunday on the edge of Idlib. It gave no further details.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitoring group, reported an airstrike on the town of Khan Sheikhoun, saying it inflicted casualties.

The opposition's Syrian Civil Defense also reported shelling near the town of Jisr Al-Shughour without reporting any casualties.

Syrian government forces intensified their attacks as of April 30 on Idlib. The area is home to some 3 million people, many of whom are internally displaced. The last round of violence also displaced some 180,000 in opposition-held areas.



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[If Tehran 'wants to fight' it will be 'official end of Iran': Trump](#)

Sun, 2019-05-19 23:35

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump tweeted on Sunday that if Tehran “wants to fight,” it will be the “official end of Iran.”

If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran.
Never threaten the United States again!

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [May 19, 2019](#)

Trump’s stern warning added Iran should “never threaten the United States again.”

His tweet comes as tensions continue to rise in the Middle East as the US and Iran come to blows over the Iranian regime’s activities, which the Trump administration see as a direct threat to US interests in the region.

Iran's foreign minister downplayed the prospect of a new war in the region on Saturday, saying Tehran opposed it and no party was under the "illusion" the Islamic republic could be confronted.

"We are certain... there will not be a war since neither we want a war nor does anyone have the illusion they can confront Iran in the region," Mohammad Javad Zarif told state-run IRNA at the end of a visit to China.

Iran-US relations hit a new low last year after US Trump pulled out of a 2015 nuclear deal and reimposed unilateral sanctions on Tehran.

(With agencies)



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Trump awaiting Iranian response on direct talks Saudi oil tankers sabotaged off UAE coast as Trump warns Iran of 'suffering greatly' if Tehran attacks

Libyan government boasts of new weapons despite arms embargo

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CAIRO/BENGAZI, Libya: Fighters allied with the Tripoli government in Libya say they have received armored vehicles and “quality weapons” despite a UN arms embargo on the country.

A Facebook page linked to the Government of National Accord (GNA) posted photos appearing to show more than a dozen armored vehicles arriving at a port, without saying who supplied them.

The Facebook page is run by the media office for the GNA’s counter-offensive against Khalifa Haftar’s Libya National Army (LNA).

Supporters of the various militias allied with the government say the vehicles, which resemble Turkish-made Kirpi armored vehicles, were supplied by Turkey.

Spokesmen for Turkey’s military and Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to phone calls seeking comment.

Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said last month his government would stand by Tripoli authorities as they repel an offensive launched by the LNA. The battle for the Libyan capital has threatened to ignite a civil war on the scale of the 2011 uprising that toppled and killed longtime ruler Muammar Qaddafi. The UN Security Council imposed an open-ended arms embargo on Libya in February of the same year.

Fathi Bashagha, the interior minister for the Tripoli-based government, also visited Turkey late in April to activate “security and defense agreements” between the two governments.

The offensive on Tripoli was launched April 4 by the LNA, which controls the country’s eastern half.

Haftar, who in recent years has been battling extremists and other militias across eastern Libya, says he is determined to restore stability to the North African country. He has received support from several countries in the region including the UAE and Egypt.

“The GNA supplies armor, ammunition and ... weapons, to its forces who are defending Tripoli,” read a statement published on Facebook.

The weapons embargo has been regularly violated by different groups in Libya, according to the UN. Haftar has accused Turkey and Qatar of supplying weapons to his rivals.

In a September report, the UN’s group of experts on the country noted an increase in the number of armored vehicles supplied to LNA.

Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said last month his government would stand by Tripoli authorities.

Initially controlling swathes of Libya's east, Haftar launched an offensive in the south of the country in January before attacking the coastal capital last month.

His forces have been held back from the city center by pro-government forces, with fighting continuing on the outskirts of Tripoli and particularly in the southern suburbs.

Daesh attack

Two guards and a soldier were killed and four other people were kidnapped on Saturday in a suspected Daesh attack targeting Libya's Zella oilfield, a security source said.

The death toll was confirmed by the National Oil Company (NOC) which condemned the attack in a statement on Saturday evening.

The attackers struck at an entrance gate to the field, which lies near the town of Zella about 760 km southwest of the capital, Tripoli, before fleeing, according to the source and local residents who asked not to be named.

Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack through its Amaq news agency later on Saturday.

The Zella field belongs to Zueitina Oil Company, which pumped 19,000 barrels per day on average in the last quarter of 2018 across all its fields.

An engineer told Reuters workers at the field were safe and facilities had not been damaged.

Libya's NOC chief said on Saturday continued instability in the country could cause it to lose 95 percent of oil production.

Speaking in Saudi Arabia ahead of a ministerial panel gathering on Sunday of top OPEC and non-OPEC producers, Mustafa Sanalla also confirmed the Zella attack.

Islamic State has been active in Libya in the turmoil since the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. The militant group took control of the coastal city of Sirte in 2015 but lost it late in 2016 to local forces backed by US airstrikes.

In the last two years, the group has targeted three state institutions in Tripoli, home of the UN-backed government of national accord led by Prime Minister Fayez Serraj.

Saturday's assault took place as LNA, which is allied to a rival administration in eastern Libya, mounts an offensive to control Tripoli.



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[Investigators rule out as 'improbable' theory that exploding phone caused EgyptAir crash](#)

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PARIS: It is improbable that an exploding smartphone or tablet caused the crash of an Airbus jet operated by EgyptAir three years ago, according to an expert report commissioned by French authorities and seen by AFP on Sunday. The plane, flying from Paris Charles de Gaulle airport to Cairo, crashed over the Mediterranean between Crete and the northern coast of Egypt on May 19, 2016 killing all 66 people on board.

But the aftermath of the crash has been marked by tension, with the Egyptian authorities pointing to a terror attack as the likely cause but their French counterparts insisting on technical issues.

Paris investigating magistrates ordered separate expert reports on two subjects, the first looking at the maintenance of the plane and the second specifically at the phone issue.

There had been speculation that a thermal runaway – a drastic change in temperature – in batteries in an iPhone or iPad in the cockpit could have been the cause of a fire that brought down the plane.

But in the expert report, first reported by the Le Parisien daily and now seen by AFP, three experts said that this was improbable.

“If a spontaneous thermal runaway in a device with a lithium-ion battery can never be completely excluded, the analysis shows that for these devices such an event must be considered extremely improbable,” said the report.

It said that this conclusion was only valid if there had been no “external mechanical aggression” on the devices.

The report said there should have been no security impact even if the devices had been charging in the cockpit.

The report on the security of the plane, which was made known in April, said the aircraft should never have taken off because of a series of technical issues on previous flights.

All passengers and crew on board, including 40 Egyptians and 15 French citizens, lost their lives in the crash of the A320.

In December 2016, Egyptian officials said traces of explosives had been found on the remains of some victims, but French authorities were skeptical, as no organization had claimed responsibility for any attack.



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Palestinian flags at Eurovision irks Israel minister

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JERUSALEM: Israeli Culture Minister Miri Regev on Sunday criticized the display of Palestinian flags during the Eurovision song contest finals in Tel Aviv, including by one of Madonna's dancers.

"It was an error," Regev, a right-wing minister known for provocative stances, told journalists before a cabinet meeting.

"Politics and a cultural event should not be mixed, with all due respect to Madonna."

Regev criticized Israeli public broadcaster KAN for not having prevented the flags from being shown, though it was unclear what could have been done. During Madonna's performance at the Eurovision extravaganza, which began Saturday night and stretched into Sunday morning, two of her dancers could be seen side-by-side with Israeli and Palestinian flags on their backs.

The gesture was an apparent call for unity, but Eurovision organizers seek to keep all politics out of the event and the display of Palestinian flags inside Israel is deeply controversial.

Madonna had not commented on the flags.

Separately, Icelandic group Hatari displayed scarfs with Palestinian flags when results were being announced.

The European Broadcasting Union, which organizes the event, condemned both displays.

Referring to Madonna's dancers, it said "this element of the performance was not part of the rehearsals."

"The Eurovision Song Contest is a non-political event and Madonna had been made aware of this."

Madonna resisted calls from pro-Palestinian activists to boycott the event over Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory.

In a statement before the finals, Madonna said: "I'll never stop playing music to suit someone's political agenda nor will I stop speaking out against violations of human rights wherever in the world they may be."

Regev also criticized KAN for not having filmed any of its "postcards" of participating singers in the occupied West Bank.

Each singer was filmed in scenic areas of Israel and some of the footage was aired during the show.

Israel occupied the West Bank in the 1967 Six-Day War and it remains under occupation today.

Israeli settlements there are viewed as illegal under international law and are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

Israel won the right to host Eurovision thanks to last year's victory by Israeli singer Netta Barzilai.

The Netherlands' Duncan Laurence won this year's Eurovision with his power

ballad "Arcade."



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