

Escalating Libya conflict alarms world, US pulls some troops out

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TRIPOLI, Libya: The military conflict shaking Libya escalated on Sunday as forces of strongman Khalifa Haftar launched an airstrike on a suburb of Tripoli and the UN-backed government vowed a major counteroffensive. The UN called for an urgent two-hour truce for the southern outskirts of the capital to allow evacuations of civilians and the wounded.

Rivalries between the two camps threaten to plunge the country into a full-blown civil war after Haftar on Thursday launched an offensive on Tripoli.

Libya has been riven by chaos since the NATO-backed uprising in 2011 that killed Muammar Qaddafi, with rival administrations and armed groups vying for power.

Repeated attempts to find a peaceful solution have failed.

After a pause overnight, fierce fighting flared anew on Sunday morning south of the capital between Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) and forces backing the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).

Amid an upsurge of fighting in the North African country, the US military said it had temporarily pulled some of its forces out.

"Due to increased unrest in Libya, a contingent of US forces supporting US Africa Command temporarily relocated from the country in response to security conditions on the ground," it said in a statement. It did not detail how many military personnel had been withdrawn from Libya.

US Africa Command, headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, said its mission in Libya involves "military support to diplomatic missions, counter-terrorism activities, enhancing partnerships and improving security across the region." It said it would "continue to monitor conditions on the ground in Libya and assess the feasibility for renewed US military presence as appropriate."

"The security realities on the ground in Libya are growing increasingly complex and unpredictable," said US Marine Corps General Thomas Waldhauser, commander of US Africa Command.

"Even with an adjustment of the force, we will continue to remain agile in support of existing US strategy."

As clashes raged in the mainly farmland region of Wadi Raba and the disused international airport south of the capital, a spokesman for pro-GNA forces

said a “counteroffensive” had been launched to push back Haftar’s forces.

Col. Mohamed Gnounou told reporters that operation “Volcano of Anger” was aimed at “purging all Libyan cities of aggressor and illegitimate forces,” in reference to Haftar fighters.

The LNA meanwhile announced it had carried out its first air raid on a Tripoli suburb, despite calls by the international community to halt hostilities.

GNA head Fayez Al-Sarraj warned on Saturday of a “war without a winner” and said that reinforcements were pouring into Tripoli from several regions.

Powerful armed groups from the western city of Misrata and fighters from Zentan and Zawiya – all battle-hardened militiamen who took part in the 2011 uprising that toppled Qaddafi – have joined the battle.

At least one armed group from Misrata known as Brigade 166 arrived Saturday in eastern Tripoli with dozens of vehicles, some mounted with anti-aircraft guns, to join the counter-offensive, an AFP photographer said.

“We are waiting for orders to repel any advance by the enemy toward Tripoli,” said the group’s spokesman Khaled Abu Jazia.

Misrata fighters ousted the Daesh group from Libya’s coastal city of Sirte, Qaddafi’s hometown, in 2016 after months of bitter fighting.

Sunday’s LNA air raid came a day after forces backing the GNA launched airstrikes on their rivals for the first time since the offensive began, with at least one targeting an LNA position south of Tripoli.

LNA spokesman Ahmed Mesmari had vowed the force would retaliate. On Saturday he said pro-Haftar fighters were “progressing on several fronts... as planned” and that Tripoli would soon be captured.

Analysts say Haftar has been buoyed by a series of successful military operations that have brought all of the east and much of the south of Libya under his control.

A field marshal who served under Qaddafi, Haftar was counting on a swift battle to capture Tripoli.

“To date, Haftar’s operation has mostly failed to go according to plan, and it has now galvanized western Libyan forces against him,” said analyst Wolfram Lacher.

“He now faces the prospect of a protracted war south of Tripoli, or of a decisive defeat,” said Lacher, a researcher with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).

As the tension mounted, Tripoli residents were seen Saturday queueing outside petrol stations and supermarkets.

Haftar's offensive came as UN chief Antonio Guterres visited Libya Thursday days ahead of a planned UN-backed conference aimed at uniting Libya's rivals and paving the way for elections.

The UN Security Council has called on Haftar's forces to halt their advance, warning it was putting Libya's shaky stability at further risk.

But UN envoy Ghassan Salame insisted on Saturday the April 14-16 conference would go ahead.

"We are determined" to hold the talks, he said.

Sarraj said the conference was meant to pave the way for a "stable" government and accused Haftar of "betraying" an agreement reached during a meeting in February to push for elections and a new unity government before year's end.

Haftar is "motivated by personal interests and his own delusions" and is trying to "plunge the country into a cycle of violence," said Sarraj.

On Saturday Haftar chaired a meeting with the parallel Libyan administration based in the east of the country to discuss a "security plan" for Tripoli that would be implemented at the end of the assault, his media office said.





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Libya talks to go ahead despite new fighting: UN envoy
UN chief issues stark Libya warning as fighting rages south of Tripoli

[Palestinian minister denounces Netanyahu's poll pledge](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-04-07 23:21

DEAD SEA, Jordan/JERUSALEM: Israel's leader will face a "real problem" if he follows through with his election campaign promise to annex Jewish settlements in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, the Palestinian foreign minister said on Sunday.

Riad Malki told The Associated Press on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Jordan that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's pledge was likely aimed at rallying his nationalist base in the final stretch of a tight race.

He added that Palestinians would "resist" such a policy if carried out.

"If Netanyahu wants to declare Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank, then

you know he has to face a real problem, the presence of 4.5 million Palestinians, what to do with them," Malki said.

He said Israel cannot expel the Palestinians. "We will stay there," he said. "Then you know the international community has to deal with us."

Malki accused the US of encouraging Netanyahu by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and more recently, recognizing Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights.

Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, also expressed concerns about America's "illegitimate decisions" in the region. "We see the solution in dialogue between countries, because unilateral actions will never lead to anything good," he said.

Netanyahu has promoted Jewish settlement expansion in his four terms as prime minister, but until now refrained from presenting a detailed vision for the West Bank, viewed by Palestinians as the heartland of a future state.

It would mark a dramatic shift for Netanyahu, ahead of Tuesday's balloting. Annexing settlements would all but end any final chances for a two-state solution with the Palestinians and potentially push the sides toward a single, binational state.

Poll gimmick

The main challenger to Netanyahu in Israel's elections on Sunday condemned the premier's deeply controversial pledge to annex West Bank settlements, calling it an "irresponsible" bid for votes.

Netanyahu said late Saturday he planned to apply sovereignty over at least parts of the occupied West Bank, a move that could prove the death knell for the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

His remarks were widely seen as an appeal to right-wing voters ahead of what is expected to be a close election on Tuesday.

Benny Gantz, the former military chief whose centrist Blue and White alliance has posed a stiff challenge to Netanyahu, condemned the premier's remarks in an interview with Israeli news site Ynet.

"Why not ask how in 13 years Netanyahu could have annexed and didn't?" said Gantz, in reference to Netanyahu's time as premier.

"I think that releasing a strategic and historic decision in an election campaign bubble is not serious and (is) irresponsible."

Pressed on his personal position, Gantz said he opposed "unilateral" moves.

"We said we will strive for a regionally and globally backed peace agreement while maintaining our basic principles," he said.

Those principles include keeping security control of the Jordan Valley, parts

of which are in the West Bank, and maintaining the large settlement blocs in the West Bank. Gantz has in the past signalled openness to withdrawing at least some settlers from other areas.

He labelled Netanyahu's remarks as "a meaningless statement".

"It's a shame to play with people like that," he said.

Netanyahu is "irresponsible", says Turkey

Turkey on Sunday criticized Netanyahu as "irresponsible" for saying he would annex Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank if he wins Tuesday's election.

Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said the West Bank, which Israel seized in the 1967 Middle East war, was Palestinian territory and Israel's occupation violated international law.

"Prime Minister Netanyahu's irresponsible statement to seek votes just before the Israeli general elections cannot and will not change this fact," Cavusoglu tweeted.

Netanyahu, asked why he had not declared Israeli sovereignty over large West Bank settlements as Israel has already done in the occupied Golan Heights and East Jerusalem, said he was already discussing the move.

Palestinian leaders reacted angrily, blaming what they said was a failure by world powers to stand up for international law.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's spokesman echoed those charges on Sunday. "Will Western democracies react or will they keep appeasing? Shame on them all!" Ibrahim Kalin tweeted.

The Palestinians and many countries deem settlements to be illegal under the Geneva conventions that bar settling on land captured in war. Israel disputes this, citing security needs and biblical, historical and political connections to the land.

Palestinians want East Jerusalem to be the capital of a future state they are seeking. Peace talks with Israel have been frozen since 2014.



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Palestinian Authority unsustainable if Netanyahu wins election, says chief negotiator
Netanyahu pledges to annex West Bank settlements after vote

[Flood-hit Iran getting no financial aid from abroad due to US sanctions - statement](#)

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Sun, 2019-04-07 14:36

GENEVA: US sanctions have prevented the Iranian Red Crescent from obtaining any foreign financial aid to assist victims of flooding that has killed at

least 70 people and inundated some 1,900 communities, the group said on Sunday.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week that Washington was ready to help via the Red Cross and Red Crescent, but accused Iran's clerical establishment of "mismanagement in urban planning and in emergency preparedness".

"No foreign cash help has been given to the Iranian Red Crescent society. With attention to the inhuman American sanctions, there is no way to send this cash assistance," the Red Crescent said in a statement.

It said the group had received some non-financial help from abroad which had been distributed to flood victims.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said last week that US sanctions – reimposed after Washington quit a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and six world powers – were impeding aid efforts to flood-stricken towns and villages.

"Blocked equipment includes relief choppers: This isn't just economic warfare; it's economic TERRORISM," he said on Twitter.

The flood disaster, arising from exceptionally heavy rainfall since March 19, has left aid agencies struggling to cope and seen 86,000 people moved to emergency shelters.

The government has told citizens, and especially flood-affected farmers, that all losses will be compensated.

Iran's state budget is already stretched under US sanctions on energy and banking sectors that have halved its oil exports and restricted access to some revenues abroad.

Iran acted on Saturday to evacuate more towns and villages threatened by floods after continued rain in the southwest.



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[Egypt court clears indigenous Nubians of protest charges](#)

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CAIRO: An Egyptian court on Sunday cleared eight members of the indigenous Nubian minority of charges related to a protest staged nearly two years ago, a judicial official said.

The case involving 32 defendants dates back to September 2017 when dozens of Nubians held peaceful demonstrations in the southern city of Aswan demanding their right to return to ancestral lands.

Nubians are an ethnic group indigenous to northern Sudan and southern Egypt who trace their roots to an old civilization.

They were evicted in the 1960s after their shoreline was flooded with water from Lake Nasser following the construction of the Aswan High Dam.

The eight acquitted on Sunday were cleared of charges including inciting protests, blocking roads and disrupting public order, the judicial official told AFP.

Twenty-four other Nubians received conditional fines of 30,000-50,000 Egyptian pounds (\$1,733-\$2,890) which would only be enforced if the defendants commit future crimes.

Nubians have been calling for decades for their right to return to their historic villages along the Nile.

The ethnic minority's incessant calls culminated in recognizing their right of return to their original lands in Egypt's 2014 constitution for the first time.

Egypt has effectively banned protests under a law passed following the 2013 military ouster of former Islamist President Muhammad Mursi.

General-turned-president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who led Mursi's ouster, came to power in 2014.

He secured a second four-year term in March 2018 with over 97 percent of the vote.

Under his rule, Egyptian authorities have launched a broad crackdown on dissidents jailing Mursi's Islamist supporters as well as liberal, secular activists and popular bloggers.



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[Dozens of neglected animals evacuated from Gaza zoo](#)

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Sun, 2019-04-07 14:25

GAZA CITY: Dozens of neglected animals were evacuated from a ramshackle Gaza zoo on Sunday in the fourth and largest such rescue mission in the blockaded Palestinian enclave.

Vets and volunteers from Four Paws International transported some 40 animals into Israel from the neglected zoo in the southern town of Rafah. The animals, including lions, foxes, monkeys, pelicans, wolves and ostriches, will be resettled in sanctuaries in Jordan and South Africa.

“The zoo has been in a bad situation in recent years due to economic and political turmoil,” said Amir Khalil, a veterinarian from the Vienna-based organization. “Most of the animals had a sort of traumatization.” Many of the animals were smuggled into Gaza via tunnels beneath the southern border with Egypt, which along with Israel has blockaded the territory since the Hamas militant group seized power there in 2007. The blockade and three wars between Israel and Hamas have made life miserable for Gaza’s 2 million residents. Animals kept in captivity have suffered from a combination of neglect and lack of resources on the part of zookeepers. Some died of cold and hunger in makeshift zoos as keepers failed to provide adequate care, while others were killed during the 50-day war in 2014. In January, four lion cubs died in the Rafah zoo. The owner later released grisly footage showing a lioness being declawed, in an apparent effort to push the organization to speed up the evacuation process. The owner was compensated for the animals, but the amount paid has not been publicized. Four Paws International has carried out four rescue operations and has sent numerous medical missions to treat animals and birds in Gaza. Two zoos have closed since Four Paws removed their animals, while animals are still being held in poor conditions at three other zoos. The latest evacuation was scheduled last month, but a round of cross-border violence between Israel and Gaza militants forced the organization postpone it.







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