

Libyan PM appeals for 'common vision' ahead of crisis talks

Author:

Fri, 2018-11-09 22:24

TRIPOLI: The head of Libya's UN-backed government, Fayeze Al-Sarraj, has urged the international community to find a "common vision" for the chaos-hit North African nation, ahead of crisis talks in Sicily next week.

In an exclusive interview with AFP at his unity government's headquarters in Tripoli, Al-Sarraj hit out at "negative interventions by some countries" in Libya, without naming them.

Libya has been beset by violence since Muammar Qaddafi was ousted and killed in an uprising in 2011, with rival groups vying for territory and oil wealth.

Many Libyans put the country's crisis down to rivalries between foreign governments – Western as well as Arab – who they say pursue their own narrow agendas by supporting one group against another.

Al-Sarraj "saluted" France for organizing a conference in Paris in May that brought together the four main protagonists in Libyan politics, including himself.

He said he regretted that decisions taken at the conference, including a commitment to hold elections on Dec. 10, had not been respected.

Al-Sarraj's Government of National Accord (GNA) was set up under a 2015 UN-brokered deal, but a rival administration based in the country's east refuses to recognize its authority.

He criticized the rival Parliament based in the east, saying it had failed to respect its commitment to carry out the preparations needed for elections.

When asked about the timing of elections, Al-Sarraj said "any mention of a date ... without putting in place a constitutional framework is a form of wishful thinking."

The timetable divides the major powers. While France has pushed for the December date, Libya's former colonial ruler Italy, as well as Russia and the US, have all opposed this.

"It is necessary to unify the international position with regard to Libya," Al-Sarraj said, calling for a "common vision" for its future.

He said Italy and France should overcome their differences "so that there are no points of contention" between them.

Bickering leaders

The populist government that came to power in Rome in June has been openly critical of the French role in Libya, saying it was at least partly to blame for the current chaos.

UN envoy Ghassan Salame set out a new election timetable in a videoconference with the Security Council from Tripoli on Thursday.

He said a national conference in the first weeks of 2019 would pave the way for the electoral process to begin in the spring.

Proposals for a platform for ordinary Libyans to chart the political future, short-circuiting the country's bickering leaders, have been under discussion since last year.

They had been delayed because of repeated flare-ups of fighting between the country's rival armed groups.

Al-Sarraj's biggest challenge has been tackling the insecurity, particularly in the capital, where militias still hold sway more than seven years after Qaddafi's overthrow.

Between late August and late September, fighting in and around Tripoli between rival groups from the capital and other parts of western Libya killed at least 117 people and wounded more than 400.

Under pressure from the UN mission, the GNA announced new "security arrangements," which have yet to visibly come into place.

"We are starting to implement this plan, but it requires international support and the engagement of all (Libyan) parties."

The security plan aims to replace the militias with "regular army and police units," said Al-Sarraj. But he said some militias had "played a positive role in contributing to securing the capital and other cities, and in the fight against terrorism."

"Putting all these factions in the same box" represents an injustice to some young Libyans, who could integrate successfully into the security forces, he said.



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Libya should start elections process in 2019 – UN envoy
Libya commander Haftar visits Russia ahead of conference

[Palestinian killed by Israeli fire in border clashes](#)

Author:

Fri, 2018-11-09 22:20

GAZA CITY: A Palestinian was killed by Israeli fire during clashes along the border of the Gaza Strip on Thursday, the Health Ministry in the coastal enclave said.

Israel's military said soldiers opened fire after "several suspects were spotted approaching the security fence in the southern Gaza Strip and attempting to sabotage it."

A Gaza Health Ministry spokesman said the man was shot by Israeli forces during clashes east of Deir Al-Balah in central Gaza.

He was identified as Mohammed Abu Sharbeen, 20, from the southern Gaza city

of Rafah.

At least 220 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire since major protests backed by Hamas began in March.

The majority have been shot during protests and clashes, but others have died in tank fire or airstrikes.

One Israeli soldier was killed by a Palestinian sniper.

Israel says its actions are necessary to defend the border and stop infiltrations and attacks, which it accuses Hamas of seeking to orchestrate.

The often violent demonstrations usually peak on Fridays, but last week's was the calmest in months, amid talk of a truce deal between Hamas and Israel.

Such a deal would see the protests end in exchange for an easing of Israel's blockade of the coastal enclave.



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Wintry weather and diplomacy cool down Gaza border protests
Frenchman accused of smuggling guns from Gaza to West Bank 'tricked'

Wintry weather and diplomacy cool down Gaza border protests

Author:

Thu, 2018-11-08 22:43

GAZA: A seasonal shift in the weather and intensified international diplomacy are prompting Palestinians mounting protests along Gaza's border with Israel to rethink their tactics.

Since the demonstrations started more than seven months ago, protesters routinely made attempts to breach Israel's frontier fence and launched incendiary balloons and kites to burn forests and crops inside Israel.

Israeli forces have killed more than 219 Palestinians at the border protests, according to Gazan officials. An Israeli soldier was also killed by a Palestinian sniper.

The protests draw tens of thousands of people after Muslim prayers on Fridays. But last week was the quietest so far, according to journalists who regularly cover the demonstrations.

Smoke from burning tires wafting toward Israel provided a measure of cover for Palestinian youngsters approaching the barrier, but a wintry change in wind direction sent the thick black clouds back into Gaza and Israeli tear gas deeper into the crowd of protesters, forcing their retreat.

Stepped-up efforts by Egypt to craft a long-term cease-fire between Hamas and Israel that could ease an Israeli blockade are also dampening the protests.

One official familiar with the talks said a cease-fire would include a gradual end to the rallies, or an agreement to hold them far from the fence, as well as an easing of Israeli restrictions on the movement of goods and people at the border.

Organizers have made clear the protests would continue until the long-standing Israeli border restrictions were lifted. Dubbed the "Great March of Return," the campaign demands the rights to lands Palestinian families fled or were driven from during fighting around Israel's founding in 1948.

One protester, wearing a black mask, said demonstrators were weighing up new ways to confront the Israeli military now that seasonal rains have begun.

"We may use fire crackers, noisy horns and we will try to cut through the fence. We will surprise them with things we will not make public now," said the 23-year-old, who gave his name only as Hakim.

One idea, he said, was to build a giant slingshot to launch rocks across the barbed wire barrier.

A statement by a Palestinian group which claimed responsibility for balloon

launchings said it would allow time for diplomacy to work before escalating action again.

“We will give a chance for an agreement to be reached that will ease the bitterness of the blockade imposed on our people,” said the Sons of Zwary group. The group was named after a Hamas engineer killed in Tunisia in an alleged Israeli assassination.

In the meantime, it said, it was preparing hundreds of incendiary devices.

Daoud Shehab, of the National Committee supervising the protests, said five assembly areas were being prepared for winter.

“We are placing plastic sheeting to cover large areas and we are also going to pave the ground where people usually gather,” he said.

Earlier Gaza’s Interior Ministry said Egyptian naval forces fired on a Palestinian fishing boat and killed a fisherman, but an Egyptian military source denied the report.

Egypt’s navy has in the past shot at Gazans whom it has accused of crossing the maritime border. There was no initial information on whether the fishing boat had crossed into Egyptian waters.

Wednesday’s incident took place off the coast after dark near the southern border town of Rafah, said Gaza’s Interior Ministry, which is run by officials loyal to Hamas.

“Egyptian naval vessels fired toward a Palestinian fishing boat near the southern sea border of Gaza Strip which led to the death of Mustafa Abu Odah, 30,” the ministry statement said.

In Cairo, an Egyptian military source denied the report.



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Frenchman accused of smuggling guns from Gaza to West Bank 'tricked' Gaza fisherman killed at sea by Egyptian fire: union

[Libya commander Haftar visits Russia ahead of conference](#)

Author:

Thu, 2018-11-08 21:58

MOSCOW: Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar in Moscow on Wednesday, Russian media reported, signalling Kremlin support ahead of a conference aimed at settling the north African country's years of strife.

Russia's military has long shown backing for the powerful Libyan commander, who dominates eastern Libya.

He has visited Russia before, and last year the Russian Defense Ministry hosted him aboard its sole aircraft carrier.

Shoigu and Haftar discussed the Libyan crisis and the security situation in the Middle East and North Africa, Russian news agencies said, citing a defense ministry statement, without giving details.

Italy will host an international conference on Libya on Monday and Tuesday, which Haftar will attend, Italy has said.

Haftar's office said the meeting in Moscow had covered ways to end Libya's crisis and the fight against terrorism.

Russia is expected to send high-level representatives to the Palermo meeting.

The international community formally backs the transitional government in Tripoli, but Egypt and the UAE have lent Haftar support and European states including France courted Haftar as his power grew.

UN efforts to stabilize Libya have long been undercut by the divergent agendas of foreign powers.

France has vied for influence with Italy, which has sought to protect its oil and gas interests and stem the flow of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, by building ties in Tripoli.

In recent weeks, Western powers and the UN have quietly stopped talking about the election in December, without formally declaring it dead.

In May, France had persuaded major players in the North African country to verbally agree to elections on Dec. 10 as a way of ending repeated rounds of bloodshed between competing factions.

But weeks of fighting between rival militias in Tripoli and deadlock between rump parliaments in Tripoli and the east has made that goal unrealistic, Western officials argue.

Shelving the plans for presidential and parliamentary elections is the latest setback for Western powers.

Instead of pushing for a vote as a short-term goal, UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salame was focusing in a briefing to the UN Security Council on Thursday on staging a national conference next year and fixing the economy, diplomats said.

The conference would aim to forge consensus in a country divided between hundreds of armed groups controlling mostly minimal territory, towns, tribes and regions.

Salame plans to push again for economic reforms to end a system benefiting armed groups that have access to cheap dollars due to their power over banks.

Salame is the sixth UN special envoy for Libya since 2011.

Diplomats say delayed reforms introduced in Tripoli in September, including a fee on purchases of foreign currency, can only partially ease Libya's economic woes as long as the central bank remains divided and predatory factions retain their positions.

The reforms have so far done little to improve conditions for ordinary Libyans hit by steep inflation and a cash crisis linked to the fall of the dinar on the black market.

For the militias, the sources said Salame would outline a new "security arrangement" for Tripoli aimed at depriving them of control of key sites and integrating their members into regular forces – something that has proved elusive in the past.

Talks to unify rival camps launched in September 2017, shortly after Salame took up his post, ground to a halt after one month with Haftar's role a key sticking point. Many in western Libya oppose him, fearing he could use the position to seize power.

Haftar's Libyan National Army says it is committed to the election process, in which Haftar himself is a possible candidate.



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Phase two development of Libya's Bahr Essalam gas field to finish by end 2018: NOCFive dead in suspected Daesh attack in central Libya

Houthi claims of UAE airport drone attacks were 'propaganda fabrications'

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Thu, 2018-11-08 21:31

LONDON: Houthi militia claims that they attacked UAE airports with drones are probably "propaganda fabrications," according to a [report from investigative website Bellingcat](#).

The alleged attacks had been used by the Iran-backed Houthis as a tool to give the impression they had the capability of attacking strategic sites inside the Emirates, the report by risk consultant Khalil Dewan said.

In July and August, Houthi media claimed that Abu Dhabi and Dubai airports had been targeted by their forces with Sammad-3 drones. The claims, which were denied by the UAE, were also found to be baseless by the Bellingcat investigation.

The report also implicated Iran in arming the Houthis, citing the militia's use of Hudhuh-1, Qasef-1 and Sammad unmanned craft, all of which "resemble Iranian-made drones."

"The Houthi's primary method (of propaganda) is to show they have the capability to strike the UAE," the report said.

On both occasions of the alleged attacks, flights continued to operate unaffected – despite claims by the Houthis of flights redirecting from Abu Dhabi to Dubai.

The UAE General Civil Aviation Authority at the time denied the claims and said air traffic was operating as usual.

The Bellingcat report cited the lack of mobile footage captured by passengers of disruptions as they traveled through the airports as evidence that the attack did not take place.

"The disruption that occurred and the scale of it would not suggest that a lethal attack occurred," the report said.

The report also debunked Houthi claims that drone attacks had been carried out in Saudi Arabia.

Charts and infographics released by the militia list alleged drone operations in the Kingdom between December 2017 and July 2018, as well as the type of drones supposedly deployed.

While the drones may have entered Saudi Arabian airspace, the Bellingcat report said it was unlikely the drones actually carried out strikes.

On April 11, Saudi Arabia's air defense systems downed two Houthi drones in the south at Abha International Airport and Jazan. According to Arab Coalition spokesman, Col. Turki Al-Maliki, an "unidentified body" flew toward Abha International Airport but was destroyed.

Al-Maliki confirmed the remnants appeared to be those of a Houthi drone. On the same day in Jazan, Saudi defense forces destroyed another Houthi drone

and according to Al-Maliki, the drone was identical to the remnants of the one downed at Abha International Airport. According to a [Conflict Armament Research report](#), the use of drones shows the Houthis' ability to use "low-cost technology" against the Arab coalition's "sophisticated military assets," but that the use of the Iranian-designed Qasef-1 drones supports the claim that Iran is arming the Houthis in Yemen.



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Amnesty accuses Houthi militia of 'militarizing' Yemen hospital