

Libya strongman Haftar in Greece ahead of peace meeting

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ATHENS: Libyan military strongman Khalifa Haftar was holding talks in Athens on Friday two days ahead of a peace conference in Berlin, which he and the head of Tripoli's government Fayeze Al-Sarraj are expected to attend.

Haftar thanked Vladimir Putin, his "dear friend," for his efforts to bring peace in Libya after Moscow announced that the Russian leader would attend Sunday's conference.

However, Russia's acting foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said Haftar and Al-Sarraj could not even bear each other's presence, let alone talk.

"So far ties between them are very tense, they don't even want to be in the same room to say nothing of meeting each other," Lavrov said.

World powers are trying to mediate a lasting cease-fire nine months after Haftar's forces launched an assault on Tripoli, sparking fighting that has killed more than 280 civilians and 2,000 fighters and displaced tens of thousands.

An interim truce that came into force on Sunday has mostly held, despite accusations of violations from Haftar's forces and the rival Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA).

Haftar walked away from cease-fire talks in Moscow on Monday, but German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas visited his eastern Libya stronghold of Benghazi on Thursday to persuade him to join the Berlin conference.

He flew to Athens on a surprise visit on Thursday, with Greece seeking to build ties with Haftar after the GNA signed a maritime and military cooperation deal with Turkey in November.

Athens is vehemently opposed to the contentious Turkish deal with Libya, which claims much of the Mediterranean for energy exploration in conflict with rival claims by Greece and Cyprus.

Haftar met Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias and they were holding further talks on Friday. He is also set to meet Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Greece is seeking to take part in the Berlin talks but has yet to be invited. Haftar agreed in principle on Thursday to go to Berlin after Al-Sarraj signalled he would be there.

But Sarraj, whose GNA did sign up to a permanent truce deal in Moscow, cast doubt over Haftar's intentions after he refused to sign.

Meanwhile, protesters in eastern Libya entered the Zueitina oil terminal on Friday and announced its closure in response to calls by tribal leaders, a port engineer and witnesses told Reuters.

The tribal leaders are from eastern and southern Libya, areas controlled by military commander Khalifa Haftar.

The state oil company, NOC, said the country's oil and gas industry should

not be used as a “card for political bargaining”.

However, the Zueitina engineer said “the terminal is still receiving oil and a tanker entered it today”. Reuters could not verify whether exports had been halted and NOC was not immediately available for comment.

The tribal leaders on Thursday called for oil terminals to be shut and accused the internationally recognised government in Tripoli of using oil revenue to pay foreign fighters.

Scores of protesters erected a large tent outside the Zueitina terminal. They read a statement saying they planned to shut all oil terminals in eastern Libya.

The oil-rich North African state has been in turmoil since a 2011 NATO-backed uprising that overthrew and killed dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

Numerous countries have since become involved – the GNA is backed by Turkey and Qatar, while Haftar has the support of neighboring Egypt as well as Russia and the United Arab Emirates.

The United Nations said the Berlin talks aim to end foreign interference and division over Libya.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will take part and voiced support for truce efforts, the State Department said on Thursday.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Wednesday for firm support for the peace talks and asked for a halt in the fighting.

In a report to the Security Council he warned against “external interference,” saying it would “deepen the ongoing conflict and further complicate efforts to reach a clear international commitment to a peaceful resolution of the underlying crisis.”

The conference will aim to agree six points – including a permanent cease-fire, implementation of a much-violated UN arms embargo and a return to political efforts for peace, Guterres said.

Turkish troops have been deployed to support the GNA, while Russia, despite its denials, is suspected of supporting Haftar with weapons, money and mercenaries.

Some 11 countries and several international organizations are set to attend along with the Libyan parties.

The fighting has spurred a growing exodus of migrants, many embarking on rickety boats toward Italy.

Nearly 1,000 intercepted at sea have been forced to return to the war-ravaged country since January 1, mostly ending up in detention, the UN’s International Organization for Migration said on Tuesday.



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Libya strongman Haftar in Athens for talks ahead of Berlin peace conference 'Putschist Haftar' has 'ran away' from Moscow after Libya truce talks – Turkey's Erdogan

[Iraq's top cleric Al-Sistani discharged from hospital](#)

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By QASSEM ABDUL-ZAHRA | AP

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Fri, 2020-01-17 13:33

KARBALA: Iraq's most powerful cleric was discharged Friday from a hospital following a risky surgery for a fractured bone and returned to his home in southern Iraq, medical officials said.

Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, who turns 90 later this year, fractured a thigh bone when he slipped while bathing before evening prayers Wednesday night. The surgery was considered risky for his age and came amid ongoing tensions in Iraq following the US killing of a top Iranian general and a popular protest movement against the country's ruling elite. Al-Sistani's opinion is often sought during troubled times and news that his surgery was successful prompted a flurry of well-wishes from senior officials.

Thankful that His Eminence Ayatollah Sistani underwent successful surgery today in [#Iraq](#). My prayers are extended along with the millions of Iraqis to whom he is a source of guidance and inspiration. May God grant him a speedy recovery and long life.

– Secretary Pompeo (@SecPompeo) [January 17, 2020](#)

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, "My prayers are extended along with the millions of Iraqis to whom he is a source of guidance and inspiration," in a tweet early Friday.

Al-Sistani underwent surgery Thursday at the Kafeel hospital in Karbala and was sent home Friday, officials at the hospital said. He returned to his home in the holy city of Najaf. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to media.

The cleric has been critical in calming tensions in recent months as the country faced crisis after crisis beginning with mass protests seeking to unseat the political establishment and the recent US drone strike that killed Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani.



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Iraq 'will never be the same' after protests, says Ali Sistani

[Lebanese block roads as protests enter fourth month](#)

Author:

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1579261000852512300

Fri, 2020-01-17 11:31

BEIRUT: Protesters blocked several main roads across Lebanon on Friday as unprecedented demonstrations against a political elite accused of corruption and incompetence entered their fourth month.

The protest movement rocking Lebanon since October 17 has resurged this week, over delays in forming a new cabinet to address the country's growing economic crisis.

No progress seemed to have been made on a final lineup, which protesters demand be made up solely of independent experts and empty of traditional political parties.

In central Beirut, dozens of protesters Friday stood between parked cars blocking a key thoroughfare linking the city's east and west.

"We blocked the road with cars because it's something they can't move," Marwan Karam said.

The protester condemned what he regarded as efforts to form yet another government representing the usual carve-up of power between the traditional parties.

"We don't want a government of masked political figures," the 30-year-old told AFP. "Any such government will fall. We won't give it any chance in the street."

Forming a new cabinet is often a drawn-out process in Lebanon, where a complex system seeks to maintain balance between the various political parties and a multitude of religious confessions.

Nearby, Carlos Yammine, 32, said he did not want yet another "cake-sharing government."

"What we have asked for from the start of the movement is a reduced, transitional, emergency government of independents," he said, leaning against his car.

Elsewhere, demonstrators closed roads including in Lebanon's second city of Tripoli, though some were later reopened, the National News Agency said. The protest movement is in part fueled by the worst economic crisis that Lebanon has witnessed since its 1975-1990 civil war.

The protests this week saw angry demonstrators attack banks following the imposition of sharp curbs on cash withdrawals to stem a liquidity crisis. On Thursday night, protesters vandalized three more banks in the capital's Hamra district, smashing their glass fronts and graffitizing ATMs, an AFP photographer said.

Earlier, Lebanon's security services released most of the 100-plus protesters detained over the previous 48 hours, lawyers said.

Human Rights Watch on Friday condemned the arrests and the response of security forces to protests outside a police station on Wednesday night demanding detainees be released.

"The unacceptable level of violence against overwhelmingly peaceful protesters on January 15 calls for a swift independent and transparent investigation," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at the rights watchdog.

Over the past few months, the Lebanese pound – long pegged to the US dollar at 1,507 – has fallen in value on the unofficial market to around 2,500.

The World Bank has warned that the poverty rate in Lebanon could rise from a third to a half if the political crisis is not remedied fast.



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Anger returns to streets of Lebanon as lira plunges in value against dollar

[Libya strongman Haftar in Athens for talks](#)

Author:

AFP

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1579198874837121700

Thu, 2020-01-16 18:15

ATHENS: Libyan military strongman Khalifa Haftar has flown to Athens for talks ahead of a peace conference in Berlin, a source with knowledge of the issue said Thursday.

"Haftar is coming to Athens," the source told AFP as Greek media reported he would be meeting with the Greek prime minister and foreign minister on

Friday.

Meanwhile, Egypt, Italy and Greece say Erdogan's announcement that he is sending troops to Libya violates international resolutions.



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Turkey threatens to 'teach lesson' to Libya's Haftar 'Putschist Haftar' has 'ran away' from Moscow after Libya truce talks – Turkey's Erdogan

[Beirut shaken by 'barbaric' protests crackdown](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1579195797206920500

Thu, 2020-01-16 17:18

BEIRUT: An upsurge of violence in Lebanon's protests against the ruling elite, with police meting out beatings and protesters hurling stones, has alarmed rights groups and whipped up public fury.

After a brief lull in largely peaceful protests since October, people filled the streets again this week, angry at a political class that has steered Lebanon into its worst economic crisis since a 1975-1990 civil war.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, police wielding batons and firing tear gas wounded and arrested dozens as protesters lit fires and smashed bank facades and ATMs, Reuters journalists saw.

"These past two nights, they (police) were really barbaric," said Cynthia Sleiman, a charity worker and protester who ended up in hospital after Wednesday night's violence in Beirut.

"I had just arrived and was looking for my friends when the policeman grabbed me, hitting me on the head and neck. I fell to the ground and blood was streaming out," she said.

Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF) said they were pursuing rioters and 100 policemen were injured this week. "The force member is suffering daily in the street," ISF chief Imad Othman said on Thursday. "He is not a robot, he is a human."

A security source said at least 80 protesters were injured in two days and 72 others arrested. Many of those in detention would be released on Thursday, the source said.

Since the protests led Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri to resign in October, politicians have failed to agree a new cabinet or rescue plan for the heavily-indebted economy. The Lebanese pound has lost nearly half its value, dollar shortages have driven up prices and confidence in banks has collapsed. Azza Al-Masri, a media researcher also injured on Wednesday, said she saw a woman faint after police beat her up. "The viciousness was unlike anything I've seen," she said.

Activists believe police violence may indicate Lebanon's establishment has lost patience with protesters and is also stung by public wrath against banks, which have curbed access to savings and blocked most transfers abroad. Human Rights Watch's Beirut director Lama Fakih told Reuters the group was concerned at excessive force by security forces amid rising frustrations on both sides. She said there was no "strong message" from government that police would be held responsible.

A Lebanese media group said 15 journalists were attacked on Wednesday. One of them was a Reuters video journalist, who was treated in hospital for head injuries and released.

On Thursday, lawyers, journalists and activists gathered at the interior ministry and the justice palace in Beirut to complain about police violence. Interior Minister Raya Al-Hassan told reporters she had not ordered a clampdown and denounced attacks on media, while also urging understanding for police.



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