

UN special envoy for Libya warns: 'We are in a race against time'

Wed, 2020-02-12 23:35

PARIS: Special Representative for the UN Support Mission in Libya Ghassan Salamé told Arab News it would not be useful for Libyan military commander Khalifa Haftar and Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj to meet without carrying out the necessary preparatory work for an agreement.

"It will not solve the problem," he said, reiterating that several leaders – including Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte – had all tried it, but in vain.

"You need to address the big issues that allow these two to sell whatever agreement they reach to their own constituencies. If this preparatory work is not done, nothing will happen," he said.

In an exclusive interview in Paris, Salamé – a former Lebanese minister – said that while the members of the 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission had agreed at their meeting in Geneva early this month to confirm the truce, to begin the process of disarming the militias, and to meet again soon, foreign interference in Libya was still high. He confirmed that Turkey had sent foreign fighters and equipment to Libya after the Berlin summit in January, adding that other countries are also sending equipment and fighters in support of Haftar.

On the fragility of the ceasefire, he said: "We still have a situation that is very blurred. They keep telling us that they respect the truce, but we have counted more than 130 violations since Jan. 12."

Militias, he said, are on the payroll of the regular army and, according to the central bank, the army is paid on both sides of the divide – east and west – as are all civil servants.

On the current state of the deal between the two sides, he said: "We agreed on many issues; we agreed that the foreign fighters need to depart the country within three months of the ceasefire agreement. We agreed on the beginning of the process of disarming the militias; and we also agreed on the attempt to reunify the struggle against terrorist groups. There were, however, two or three sticking points we did not agree upon."

Commenting on President Macron's accusation that Turkey violated the Berlin commitment by sending arms and Syrian mercenaries to fight in Libya to help Al-Sarraj, Salamé said that both sides had violated the commitments undertaken at the Berlin summit.

That is why, he said, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the situation a "scandal."

"There are commitments and there is a resolution but nobody is respecting

them," Salamé said. "We are therefore now in a race against time. We have launched these three tracks and I am happy the economic and financial tracks are going very well. At least 28 representatives from all the political groups and from various economic institutions in Libya met in Cairo on Feb. 9 and 10, and the next meeting will be in the first week of March."

Regarding the oil terminals, which Haftar has blocked, Salamé said the UN-led economic dialogue in Cairo had explored a mechanism for the fair distribution of oil revenues, since Haftar believes that they are not currently equally distributed.

"Oil is often weaponized," he said. "It happened at least twice on my watch." Oil production is now mainly being carried out offshore, he added. "As with the two oil problems that were solved, I came to the conclusion that without a strong position (being taken) by the international community, we cannot do it on our own."

The Americans have been very much involved in the two preceding oil crises. This time I am using international pressure and I have been talking to tribal leaders in Zueitina.

"More importantly, we put the question of redistribution of oil revenues at the top of the agenda of the economic meeting in Cairo," he continued. "We are trying to come up with a mechanism that is satisfactory to everybody and we pushing as hard as we can."

In response to Haftar's complaint that oil revenues were not equally distributed, Salamé said: "This is an old issue and you have two different things here: You have the idea in the east and the south that these two provinces, even under Muammar Qaddafi, were not fairly treated by Tripoli, and that the west – where the majority of the population lives – is taking more than its fair share of the oil revenues and has been more vocal in the past few months."

On the other hand, Haftar believes that after his deployment in the south and in the west, he is, to a large extent, in control of most of the oil, but the central bank in Tripoli is the one which decides on the oil revenues. The Libyans have to understand that the National Oil Company (NOC) is not taking a penny from the revenues – we are trying to explain that the NOC is different from the central bank: The oil revenues go to the Libyan exterior bank, which gives them directly to the central bank in Tripoli.

Therefore, Haftar believes that the central bank in Tripoli is not treating him and his troops fairly. Thus, you have two combined requests: The old one from the south and east that they were never treated properly, and now Haftar saying his army is not treated properly. So for that you need a mechanism, and a number of Libyan experts on Monday created a special committee to come up with a solution for the fair distribution of oil revenues in the next few days."

When asked why he thinks Turkey is interfering in Libya, Salamé said: "Iran is interfering in Arab countries in the eastern Arab world and Turkey is

doing the same in the western part. Unfortunately, now the situation in the Arab world is very polarized ... There is a combination of factors that have allowed some seven or eight countries to interfere directly – by allowing mercenaries to come, or by sending private military firms, or by sending equipment.”

The UN representative said he hoped that the escalating tension between Russia and Turkey in Syria’s Idlib region would not cause foreign fighters to enter Libya, adding that the two countries had agreed a truce in Berlin, which he described as “a positive development.”

His main concern, Salamé said, is that there are a number of parties who benefit from turmoil in Libya – and have no interest in helping to find a solution.

“What worries me in Libya is that there are groups, traders, financial people, arms dealers taking advantage of the situation and who are not in a hurry to find a solution,” he said. “A solution to Lebanon’s 1975 civil war was possible as early as 1983, but we took six extra years and lost 50,000 lives – just because we were (obstructed).

“I think time is now working against the Libyans. In the past few months, the level of foreign interference in their affairs has reached a point where they are losing their sovereignty little by little, day by day,” he continued.

“I wish they would open their eyes and see that they are becoming not only a threat to themselves but a threat to security in the entire region of the Mediterranean and the Sahel.”





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UN to vote on endorsing road map to end the war in Libya
UN-brokered Libya talks end with no formal truce deal

[Italy-Libya deal puts migrants in danger, say rights group](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-02-12 23:43

CAIRO: Human Rights Watch warned on Wednesday that Italy's renewed support for the Libyan coast guard is putting migrants in danger who are returned to squalid detention centers in the North African country.

Italy sees the Libyan coast guard as key to stemming a huge influx of migrants crossing the Mediterranean into Europe. The war in Libya, where rival militias are vying for control, has made the challenge of handling the migrant flows worse.

The New York-based watchdog urged Italy to suspend all funding and training for the coast guard until Libya shuts down militant-run detention centers in

the country. About 5,000 migrants are languishing in dozens of filthy Libyan centers, where rape, torture and other abuses run rampant.

“Italy can’t paper over its complicity in the suffering of migrants and refugees who fall into the hands of the Libyan Coast Guard,” said Judith Sunderland, associate director of the Europe and Central Asia division at Human Rights Watch.

The UN refugee agency reports that the coast guard has picked up and returned roughly 40,000 migrants to war-ravaged Libya since the agreement was reached three years ago. The total number of migrants intercepted in the past month rose 121 percent from the same period last year.

Italy recently extended its contentious deal supporting the Libyan coast guard, drawing sharp criticism from humanitarian groups.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Italy’s foreign minister revealed that Rome has asked Libya to modify the accord to give humanitarian groups some responsibility for migrants intercepted by the coast guard. The proposal’s details remain vague.

Sunderland described the suggested changes as “tweaking” an already broken arrangement.

“Italian authorities should insist on the closure of detention centers, direct its resources to supporting safe alternatives to detention, increase evacuations from Libya, including directly to Italy, and resume a leadership role in saving lives at sea,” she said.



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Aid ship with 403 migrants rescued off Libya docks in ItalyHRW criticizes Italy, EU's Libya migrant policy

[Syria: US troops open fire on locals in northeast, killing 1](#)

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By ALBERT AJI and ANDREW WILKS | AP

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Wed, 2020-02-12 14:31

DAMASCUS: A Syrian was killed and another was wounded in a rare clash Wednesday between American troops and a group of government supporters who tried to block a US convoy driving through a village in northeastern Syria, state media and activists reported.

The state-run media said the killed man was a civilian. He was among residents of a village east of the town of Qamishli who had gathered at an army checkpoint, pelting the US convoy with stones and taking down a US flag from one of the vehicles. At that point, American troops fired with live ammunition and smoke bombs at the residents, the reports said.

A US military spokesman said coalition forces conducting a patrol near Qamishli encountered a checkpoint occupied by pro-Syrian government forces. After coalition troops issued a series of warnings in an attempt to de-escalate the situation, the patrol came under small-arms fire from unknown individuals, coalition spokesman Myles Caggins said.

"In self-defense, coalition troops returned fire. The situation was de-escalated and is under investigation," he added in a statement.

Air Force Lt. Col. Carla Gleason, traveling with the US defense secretary in Brussels, said no Americans were killed in the incident.

Hundreds of US troops are stationed in northeastern Syria, working with their local partners from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces to fight against the Daesh group. The US carries out patrols in northeastern Syria, but it was not immediately clear why the convoy drove into a government-controlled area. The incident marks a rare confrontation involving US and Syrian troops in the crowded region where Russian forces are also deployed – and is certain to further escalate tensions.

State-run Al-Ikhbariya TV aired a cellphone video showing an armored vehicle flying a US flag standing on a rural road while a car appeared to be blocking its way.

Locals are seen walking past the US armored vehicle, with at least two soldiers inside, one of whom steps down as civilians approach. One civilian is seen tearing a US flag as he approaches the soldier.

The TV said protests spread, preventing reinforcements from coming to help the US convoy. The report said the wounded civilian and was being treated at the Qamishli hospital.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said residents and armed pro-government militiamen in Khirbet Ammu blocked the path of a US convoy. The militia fired in the air, prompting the American troops to fire smoke bombs. Tension escalated and US troops killed one person, the Observatory said.

The Observatory, which has a network of activists on the ground, said it is not clear if the killed was a civilian or a militia member. The Observatory also said that a Russian convoy arrived on the scene to defuse the tension. The Syrian war, now in its ninth year, has pulled in international players including the US, Russia and Turkey. Russia has supported President Bashar Assad's government, while Turkey is the rebels' main backer.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Wednesday that Turkey will attack Syrian government forces anywhere in Syria if another Turkish soldier is hurt. He added that Turkey is determined to force the Syrian military back from the gains it has made in the northwestern province of Idlib by the end of February.

"As of today, in the event of any minor harm to our soldiers, I announce that we will strike regime forces everywhere without being bound to Idlib or the boundaries of the Sochi agreement," Erdogan told a ruling party meeting in Ankara.

Forces loyal to Assad, backed by Russian air cover, have been advancing into the last rebel-held areas of Idlib and nearby Aleppo countryside, seizing dozens of towns and sparking a large-scale humanitarian crisis.

Under a 2018 agreement with Russia in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Turkey established a dozen military observation posts in Idlib, where it backs some opposition groups. Several of these posts have been surrounded by government forces in recent weeks.

At least 13 Turkish soldiers have been killed by Syrian artillery fire this month.

Erdogan said he had spoken to Russian President Vladimir Putin by telephone about the situation in Idlib.

The Kremlin said that the phone conversation underlined the need to fully implement the Russian-Turkish agreements.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov added that despite a pledge by Turkey, militants in Idlib have continued to launch attacks on Syrian troops and threaten Russian facilities in Syria. "It's inadmissible and it runs contrary to the Sochi agreements," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters.



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Russia accuses Turkey of aggravating situation in Syria's Idlib

[Lebanon formally requests IMF technical help for rescue plan](#)

Wed, 2020-02-12 20:59

BEIRUT: Lebanon formally requested technical assistance from the IMF on Wednesday, asking the Fund to send a team to Beirut to help draw up a comprehensive plan to escape financial collapse, a senior government source told Reuters.

As the government grapples with an economic crisis that has fuelled increasingly violent protests, heavily indebted Lebanon must urgently decide on how to deal with fast approaching debt payments including a \$1.2 billion Eurobond due on March 9.

The financial crisis, worse than any Lebanon endured in its 1975-90 civil war, came to a head last year as slowing capital inflows led to a liquidity crunch and demonstrations erupted against the ruling elite.

Deciding how to handle Lebanon's next sovereign debt maturity is a top

priority for Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government which won a vote of confidence in parliament on Tuesday.

The IMF technical team is expected to arrive in Beirut in the next few days to help draw up an economic, financial, and monetary plan, said the senior government source, adding that the request for help was made by phone on Wednesday.

It was not immediately clear whether the technical assistance would involve a plan for debt restructuring, though some politicians have expressed support for consulting the IMF before any plan is put forward to manage the debt payments.

A decision on the March Eurobond was expected in Beirut on Thursday at a meeting between the president, central bank governor, finance minister and others, a second government source said.

Lebanon was seeking advice on the March Eurobond "amid concerns that any reprofiling of Lebanon's debt should be conducted in an orderly way to avoid damaging the country's banking system," the second government source said.

Lebanese banks holding the bulk of the sovereign debt have piled pressure on the state to pay the March Eurobond on time. The banks have in recent months imposed tough controls on hard currency amid dwindling reserves and fears of capital flight.

In London, two of Lebanon's international corporate creditors, Greylock Capital and Mangart Advisors, said they and others had organised an "informal discussion group" to begin evaluating options.

Another source familiar with the matter said that "since the government gave the nod for IMF technical help, the general mood is towards doing an orderly restructuring".

"The feeling here is that the government would like a restructuring – not to pay – and to set terms on how to pay and when to pay," a fourth source familiar with the matter said.

Senior political sources said the major parties that back the Diab government, notably the heavily armed Hezbollah, favoured reaching a deal to avoid paying the debt as Lebanon needed its foreign currency to pay for essential imports.



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Lebanon's banking association calls for paying March Eurobond on time
Lebanon needs IMF technical help, advice on Eurobond

[UN identifies dozens of firms linked to Israeli settlements including Airbnb, Booking.com and Motorola](#)

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Wed, 2020-02-12 16:07

GENEVA: The UN has released a list of 112 companies with activities in Israeli settlements, which are considered illegal under international law, including Airbnb, Expedia and TripAdvisor.

The move was cheered by the Palestinians but slammed as “shameful” by Israel, where officials fear the list could be used to boycott firms with ties to the settlements.

The UN report comes in response to a 2016 UN Human Rights Council resolution calling for a “database for all businesses engaged in specific activities related to Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory.”

The UN rights office said that listing companies in the database was “not, and does not purport to be, a judicial or quasi-judicial process.”

Among the businesses on the list are a range of large international companies, including Airbnb, Alstom, Booking.com and Motorola Solutions.

“I am conscious this issue has been, and will continue to be, highly contentious,” UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet said.

But she added that the findings had been subject to an “extensive and meticulous review process” and the report “reflects the serious consideration that has been given to this unprecedented and highly complex mandate.”

Israel, which routinely accuses the UN and especially the Human Rights Council of bias against it was quick to slam Wednesday’s publication.

“It is a shameful surrender to pressure from countries and organizations who want to harm Israel,” Foreign Minister Israel Katz said in a statement.

His Palestinian counterpart Riyad Al-Malki meanwhile described the publication as “a victory for international law and diplomatic efforts.”

The database was scheduled to be released three years ago, but has repeatedly been delayed.

The rights office initially evaluated more than 300 companies.

But the final report published Wednesday cited 112 business entities that the office had “reasonable grounds to conclude have been involved in one or more of the specific activities referenced” in the 2016 resolution.

It said 94 of the listed companies had their headquarters in Israel, while 18 others were spread across six other countries.

The UN agency said compiling the database had been a “complex process” involving “widespread discussions” with states, think tanks, academics and the companies themselves.

Human Rights Watch’s deputy advocacy chief Bruno Stagno celebrated the publication of the database.

This “should put all companies on notice: to do business with illegal settlements is to aid in the commission of war crimes,” he said.

Wednesday’s report meanwhile stressed that companies were not doomed to remain on the database forever.

“Where there are reasonable grounds to believe that... the business enterprise is ceasing or no longer involved in the relevant activity, the business enterprise would be removed from the database,” it said.

The report recommended that the database be updated annually, and urged the Human Rights Council to appoint a group of independent experts to handle this task.

Israeli settlements established in occupied Palestinian territory are considered to violate international law, and have long been seen as a major obstacle to peace, since they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

More than 600,000 Jewish settlers live in the West Bank and east Jerusalem among three million Palestinians, with tensions often high.



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Trump deal makes 'Swiss cheese' Palestinian state, Abbas tells UN Security Council
Palestinians rally against Trump plan amid struggle at UN