

# Libya rescues over 200 Europe-bound migrants off coast

Author:

Fri, 2019-05-10 22:05

CAIRO, ROME, RABAT: Libya's navy says it has rescued 213 Europe-bound African and Arab migrants off the Mediterranean coast.

The navy released a statement online on Friday saying its coast guard came to the aid of two rubber boats that had sailed separately on May 8. One of the two boats was carrying 88 men, 12 women and seven children. The second boat carried the remaining 106.

The statement says the migrants – nationals of several Arab and African countries – were handed over to Libya's police after having received humanitarian and medical aid.

Libya became a major conduit for African migrants and refugees fleeing to Europe after the uprising that toppled and killed Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. Libyan authorities have stepped up efforts to stem the flow of migrants, with European assistance.

A day earlier, 66 migrants were rescued in international waters off Libya on Thursday during two separate operations carried out by the Italian navy and a charity ship, raising the likelihood of a new stand-off over which port will take them in.

The first group of 36 migrants was picked up by the navy's Cigala Fulgosi patrol ship around 75 nautical miles off the Libyan coast as part of Italy's "Mare Sicuro" ("Safe Seas") operation.

Those on board, including two women and eight minors, were in "mortal danger" as their makeshift craft had taken on water, adding that they had been rescued "in line with Italian and international law."

## Crackdown

Moroccan authorities have succeeded in slowing the rate of illegal migration into Spain in recent months after a crackdown on smuggling networks, Morocco's migration and border control chief said on Friday, unveiling new figures to Reuters.

So far 7,202 people have successfully reached Spain from Morocco this year, around 2,000 more than in the same period last year. But more than half of this year's crossings took place in January, with numbers declining sharply over the following three months.

Border control chief Khalid Zerouali told Reuters this showed that government efforts were having an effect.

He said the authorities had prevented 25,000 illegal crossings so far this year, up 30 percent compared to the same period last year. So far this year there have been no attempts to storm border fences of the Spanish North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

"The measures taken by Morocco led to stemming the migration flow to Spain," Zerouali said.

The route between Morocco and Spain has become one of the main illegal entry routes into Europe for migrants as pressure has been applied to close other routes from Turkey to Greece and Libya to Italy.

Last year some 57,000 people arrived illegally in Spain. Morocco said it stopped 89,000 migrants last year.

The vast majority of illegal Mediterranean crossings are attempted during the summer months which have yet to begin, so the much smaller figures for the first few months of the year are difficult to compare.

Zerouali denied reports that an agreement has been signed with Spain for Morocco to readmit migrants rescued at sea.

Morocco dismantled 50 migrant trafficking networks operating at the local and international levels so far this year, up 63 percent compared with a year earlier, he said. Authorities had also helped combat traffickers by imposing controls on the import and sale of navigation equipment, he added.

The EU has promised €140 million (\$157 million) in border management aid to help Morocco curb migration flows. Some €30 million was disbursed earlier this year.

Zerouali said half of that aid would come in the form of budget support and half in donated equipment.

In the evening, Italian charity rescue ship Mare Jonio said it saved 30 people, including five minors and a pregnant woman, about 40 nautical miles off the Libyan coast.

"We asked the Italian MRCC (Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Center) for a safe port," the left-wing collective Mediterranea, which charters the Mare Jonio, tweeted.

Hard-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, currently campaigning for EU elections, warned he would not allow the migrants to be disembarked in Italy.

"A military ship which will have to assume its responsibility through its selected ministry is one thing, but a private vessel or one belonging to a social center, like the Mare Jonio, is another," a spokesman for Salvini said.

"For them, the ports will remain closed."

Italy's populist government has taken an increasingly hard line on migration,

and Salvini, head of the anti-immigrant League party, last month signed a new directive banning charity vessels from rescuing migrants off Libya.

Charity ships have drawn fire from Rome by attempting on occasion to stop migrants being taken back to crisis-hit Libya, which human rights organizations say is not safe for repatriations.

After Italian concerns that recent violence in Libya will spark an exodus of people determined to seek safety in Europe, Salvini has warned Italian ports are closed to those attempting perilous Mediterranean crossings.

Last August, dozens of migrants aboard the Italian coast guard vessel Diciotti were stranded in a Sicilian port before Salvini allowed them to disembark saying several bishops had agreed to take them in.

An accord was reached with the Catholic Church to have Ireland and Albania take some of the migrants.

Salvini faced a judicial investigation into his role in the initial stand-off, but the Italian senate blocked a criminal case against him.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration meanwhile urged “international solidarity” to be shown to the 36 migrants, adding that returning the group to Libya in its current volatile state would violate international law.



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## Houthis in Yemen agree to withdraw from Hodeidah

Fri, 2019-05-10 22:02

UNITED NATIONS: Yemen's Houthi militia intends to withdraw forces from three key ports in Yemen over four days, starting on Saturday, said a senior United Nations official in charge of monitoring the move.

The Iran-aligned Houthi movement and the the Yemen government initially agreed in December to withdraw troops by Jan. 7 from Hodeidah under a truce aimed at averting a full-scale assault on the port and paving the way for negotiations to end the four-year war.

Lt. Gen. Michael Lollesgaard, who heads a U.N. mission to monitor the deal, said the Houthis intended to start withdrawing on Saturday from the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras-Issa.



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## UN calls for talks, ceasefire in Libya

Fri, 2019-05-10 20:05

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council called Friday for warring Libyan parties to recommit to political talks and agree to a ceasefire as a month-long offensive on the capital showed no signs of ending.

The unanimous press statement followed a closed-door meeting called by Britain to discuss the humanitarian situation in Tripoli as world powers seek to overcome divisions about how to respond to the crisis.

Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar, whose forces hold the east of the country, launched the offensive on April 4 to seize Tripoli, seat of the UN-recognized government.

The council "is deeply concerned about the instability in Tripoli and worsening humanitarian situation, which is endangering the lives of innocent



civilians and threatens prospects for a political solution,” said Indonesian Ambassador Dian Djani, whose country holds the council presidency. The council “calls for all parties rapidly to return to UN political mediation, and to commit to a ceasefire and de-escalation to help mediation succeed.”

Russia, the United States and Kuwait spoke out against including a call to uphold an arms embargo imposed on Libya in 2011, according to diplomats. Germany had sought to include a mention of the ban after the United Nations raised concerns about new weaponry being supplied to both sides, in violation of the arms embargo.

UN envoy Ghassan Salame has been unsuccessful so far in trying to persuade Haftar to agree to turn away from the battlefield and return to talks with Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj.

Britain was forced last month to put on hold a draft resolution demanding a ceasefire in the face of council divisions.

Libya descended into chaos following the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi that has seen a bitter rivalry emerge between the Tripoli-based authorities and Haftar’s supporters scrambling for control in the oil-rich country.



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# Iran-backed armed groups in Iraq 'placed on high alert'

Thu, 2019-05-09 21:56

Iraqi armed groups backed by Iran have been placed on high alert to respond to any action by the US amid growing tension between Tehran and Washington, their commanders told Arab News on Thursday.

Iran has trained and equipped dozens of Shiite, Sunni and Christian armed factions in Iraq.

Most operate under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), a government body established in 2014 to cover forces who fought Daesh alongside the government, but they are not subject to the orders of the commander-in-chief of the Iraqi armed forces.

The US deployed an aircraft carrier battle group and other military forces to the Middle East this week in response to what Washington said was an "escalated threat" from Iran.

However, commanders of several prominent Shiite armed factions told Arab News they had received no orders to target US troops or facilities inside Iraq, and their orders were "to be fully prepared and to exercise utmost restraint."

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## HIGHLIGHTS

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- Iran has trained and equipped dozens of Shiite, Sunni and Christian armed factions in Iraq.
- The US deployed an aircraft carrier battle group and other military forces to the Middle East this week in response to an 'escalated threat.'
- Restraining the pro-Iranian armed groups and keeping them away from American personnel and facilities is one of the greatest challenges facing the Iraqi government and Iraqi leaders.

"The resistance factions are ready at the same level for both options, peace and war," one leader said. "We are fully ready and waiting to see what will happen. The interests of Iraq will decide our next direction."

A commander in the Badr Organization, the largest pro-Iranian Shiite armed faction, told Arab News no orders had been issued by Iran to target US

interests in Iraq, but they had been told to “be ready and await instructions.”

### **Greatest challenge**

Restraining the pro-Iranian armed groups and keeping them away from American personnel and facilities is one of the greatest challenges facing the Iraqi government and Iraqi leaders.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in Baghdad on Tuesday for an unannounced four-hour visit. He met President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi “to obtain assurances that the Iraqi government can curb these factions and cut any financial supplies to Iran through Iraq,” a US adviser in Baghdad told Arab News

“The targeting of the US embassy in Baghdad, or any other US target inside or outside Iraq, by these factions would be considered a declaration of war between Iran and US,” the adviser said.

“So the situation depends on the efforts of the president and prime minister to curb these factions, with the help of Iran.”

The US Republican senator Marco Rubio said on Thursday: “If they attack our 50,000 US personnel and our facilities in Iraq, it should be considered no different than a direct attack by Iran.”

The US is thought to be most concerned about Kata’ib Hezbollah-Iraq and Asa’ib Ahl Al-Haq, the most hostile anti-American Shiite armed factions, who carried out deadly attacks against US troops in Iraq from 2007 to 2011.

However, a senior Kata’ib Hezbollah-Iraq commander told Arab News they would not attack any US target if the US did not use Iraqi territory to attack Iran.

“Shiite resistance, especially Kata’ib and Asa’ib, have always been at the forefront of supporters of the Iraqi government ... and avoided embarrassing it in many previous situations, so we would not do this now,” he said.

“But if the Americans use Iraqi territory to strike Muslims in the Islamic Republic of Iran, we will respond, as it would be our ideological duty. In that case, we would not be alone and all the factions of the PMU would join us.”



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# Lebanon students get classes in surviving war and disasters

Author:

Thu, 2019-05-09 21:49

TRIPOLI: For students at Takmiliyat Al Kobba 2nd School in Tripoli in northern Lebanon, getting an education used to mean risking their lives in a hail of bullets.

Pupils would dash down the exposed steps at the school, which was caught on the boundary between two warring sects, hoping to reach safety. But not all made it.

Mekdad Dergham, 8, was killed as he left the school in 2010.

"This child, for his bad luck, he was going back downstairs to go home and unfortunately he didn't arrive. The bullet was faster than him," school director Raghida Abdel El Hamid Chamsin told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, speaking from her office.

"I still remember he was in the third grade. Every year, I would say, 'If he was still alive he would be in fourth grade,' next year I would say 'He should be in the fifth grade'."

Now the school is working with the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) to train children on how to stay safe during conflicts and disasters.

Around the world, people facing multiple threats, from worsening storms to violent uprisings, often are helped to deal with just one at a time, leaving them still vulnerable to others, researchers say.

But joining up preparedness efforts – as is happening in Lebanon – can save both cash and lives, they say.

In Lebanon, the war in neighboring Syria that erupted in 2011, with opposition fighters battling to topple Bashar Assad, triggered Lebanon's worst instability since its own 1975-90 civil war.

This included several bouts of fighting in Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city and a historic base for fighter groups, that left hundreds dead and injured.

But as well as struggling to cope with conflict, Lebanon's 6 million people also face natural hazards: The country is crossed by three major earthquake fault lines and is at risk of flooding, landslides, wildfires and storms.



## Increasing resilience

Recent years have seen growing efforts to increase the country's ability to cope with disasters.

A decade ago the prime minister's office established a national disaster risk management unit, supported by the UN Development Program.

This aims to "support the Lebanese government in its efforts to reduce exposure and vulnerabilities in order to reduce the risk of disasters," a government spokesman said in an email.

A Lebanon Crisis Response Plan was developed in 2017 with the support of international partners, aiming to protecting the most vulnerable and support stability in the fall-out from the Syria crisis.

Much of the national disaster risk management work focuses on raising awareness of hazards and increasing collaboration within a heavily sectarian society.

But schools have also been a focal point, with the government helping to develop educational materials such as a board game targeting children aged 9-15 called "If you don't know, it's a disaster."

The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction has long argued that children should be offered disaster training, as they are among the most vulnerable in a crisis and schools often act as focal points for wider communities.

"It is very important to safeguard our future generations and ... to enhance a culture of prevention and awareness," said the government spokesman.

## Regular drills

Although fighting has died down in Tripoli in recent years, mock gunfire still rings out at Takmiliyat Al-Kobba 2nd School and about 200 other government schools during regular drills run by the Lebanese Red Cross.

During a recent armed conflict drill, students quickly evacuated their classrooms and took shelter in the school's theater.

"I feel afraid," 14-year-old Amal Ibrahim said after the practice. "But when I think of the steps I should do, I feel less frightened because I know how to protect myself."

Students' relatives are invited to learn about the drills – not least because otherwise they might risk their own lives by coming to school to try to save their children in a disaster, said Kassem Chaalan, an LRC project manager.

"In studies we did, a number of the deaths and injuries were either caused by

attempts to escape or to rescue others,” said Chaalan.

The school training is also seen an opportunity to increase disaster resilience within wider communities. “You can create this culture among children at schools, and then they will be able to transfer this culture to their families,” said Chaalan.

The school training includes information on how to recognize a disaster, where to shelter, when and where to evacuate, as well as the basics of first aid and firefighting.

“When we used to hear (the) sound of bullets, we used to be too scared to know what to do. It was so confusing,” said Houssam Khaddooj, an 18-year-old former student who now volunteers with the LRC on the drills.

“If this had happened before, the area would have coped better. We would have been able to take care of ourselves, to raise awareness among those who are younger than us.”



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