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EU aid pushing Libyan refugees back to war-hit Libya

By Nikolaj Nielsen

EU Observer (15.01.2020) - <http://bit.ly/3ae6EvJ> - EU support to Libya has helped return at least 17 Libyans intercepted at sea back to their war-torn country since the start of the year, posing questions on the EU's stated claim of being a world-leader in providing asylum.

That new figure comes amid a recent spike in tensions in Libya, and a tentative bid to reach a truce between the warring factions, who are backed separately by France and Italy.

On Tuesday (14 January), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) announced just under 1,000 people had been intercepted off the coast in the past two weeks by the Libyan coast guard. All were taken to Libyan detention centres.

Among those around 17 were Libyans, according to an IOM spokesperson.

Earlier this week, the European Commission said it was in no position to comment when pressed about the fate of intercepted Libyan families at sea that are then returned to a country in the grips of a civil war.

"It is fundamentally a question of international law and additionally it is not something that the European Union has specific competence [on]," a commission spokesperson told reporters in Brussels on Monday.

It is unclear if the intercepted Libyans were seeking asylum or refuge. Around one million people have instead fled to Tunisia.

But while the commission maintains it has no competence when it comes to rescues at sea, the EU was itself instrumental in pressuring the Libyans to set up a vast search and rescue zone.

Between 2017 and 2018, it doled out over €90m in action plans that were in part baked up by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. All four are known for their staunch anti-immigrant rhetoric. Hungary has described migration as a national security threat.

Around half of the €90m went to the Libyan Coast Guard. Along with financing from the Italians, the EU spent the remainder on areas like search and rescue, surveillance and border management.

The Libyans then extended their rescue zone to some 90 nautical miles off the coast and slapped an entry ban on NGO rescue vessels. In some areas, the zone extends even further.

In turn, surveillance planes operated by Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency, informs the Libyan Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre, which is responsible for search and rescue operations in line with the international conventions. Frontex also sends the information to neighbouring coordination centres as well as to the EU's Operation Sophia.

'World protagonist of asylum'

With the massive search-and-rescue zone now under Libyan watch, in part bankrolled by the European Union, the commission and its agencies are able to cloak their roles behind international law.

That continues to cast a long shadow over an EU policy that seeks to prevent people from leaving the wrecked country in the first place.

It also stands in sharp relief to comments once made by former chief commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas who had described the EU as the "world protagonist of asylum." Now a European Commissioner, Schinas has taken the lead on new policies dealing with asylum and migration.

Meanwhile, the past week alone has seen an additional 1,100 people fleeing Libya by boat, according to the NGO Medicines Sans Frontier.

The NGO says Libyan families were among them. It also said around 600, including women and children of undisclosed nationalities, had been intercepted at sea and returned to the country.

Last September, the Aquarius rescue ship operated by SOS Mediterranee picked up 58 people. Most were said to be Libyans.

Another 32 Libyans were reportedly rescued in December by the Alan Kurdi charity boat. And last week, the German flagged rescue ship Sea Watch rescued 17 people, including a Libyan family.

Libya's Haftar leaves Moscow without signing ceasefire agreement

Turkey's Erdogan criticises breakdown in talks, says Ankara will 'teach Haftar a lesson' if he resumes Tripoli push.

Al Jazeera (14.01.2020) - <http://bit.ly/2QYi8fD> - Libya's renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar has left Moscow without signing an agreement that would have formalised a tentative ceasefire in the war-wracked country, according to Russia's foreign ministry.

After hours of negotiations brokered by Russia and Turkey, Haftar on Monday evening asked until Tuesday morning to look over the agreement already signed by Fayez al-Sarraj, the head of the United Nations-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA).

But Haftar, whose eastern-based forces launched an offensive to seize the GNA's base of Tripoli in April, left Moscow without signing the deal drafted at the indirect talks, Russia's foreign ministry was quoted as saying by TASS news agency on Tuesday.

Libyan sources confirmed Haftar's departure.

"The draft [agreement] ignores many of the Libyan army's demands," Haftar was quoted as saying by the Al Arabiya television network.

The talks in the Russian capital were held a day after a fragile ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey came into force in Libya.

The negotiations did not include the warring sides meeting face to face, but Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Monday there was "progress" and that Haftar viewed the ceasefire document "positively".

On Tuesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Ankara would teach Haftar "a lesson" if he resumed his offensive on Tripoli.

"We will not hesitate to teach a lesson to the putchist Haftar if he continues his attacks on the country's legitimate administration and our brothers in Libya," Erdogan said during a meeting of his ruling AK Party.

Erdogan last week announced that Turkey had begun deploying troops to Libya after the Turkish parliament ratified two agreements signed with GNA head al-Sarraj relating to maritime border demarcation and enhanced security cooperation.

Berlin summit

It is unclear where the developments in Moscow leave a peace summit scheduled to take place in Germany's capital, Berlin, on Sunday.

The conference, part of UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salame's efforts to bring an end to the conflict, has been postponed several times due to continued fighting along Tripoli's southern outskirts.

On Tuesday, the eastern-based forces under Haftar's command posted on their official Facebook page that they were "ready and determined" to achieve victory in their months-long campaign to seize the capital from the GNA.

"The GNA has documented several violations by Haftar's forces overnight and one pro-government fighter was killed by a sniper, according to a government spokesperson," Al Jazeera's Mahmoud Abdelwahed, reporting from Tripoli, said.

"Military sources have stated that they documented deployment, regrouping and repositioning in several axes by Haftar's forces ... building trust between the rival factions is going to be a tough task."

Tarik Yousef, director of the Brookings Institution's Doha Center, said the Berlin talks now depended on Haftar's next move.

"The talks are in jeopardy and in fact, the next potential reversal on the ground could be one that sets back Russia and Turkish diplomacy and provide a big opportunity and a test

in my view for Turkey's commitment to defending the government in Tripoli," Yousef told Al Jazeera.

Yousef said Haftar's decision to opt out of the ceasefire agreement was puzzling and could be explained in part by the diverging interests of his many backers. Haftar enjoys the backing of several states besides Russia. These include, among others, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"The speculation in Libya and abroad is that given that Haftar is not accountable to anyone in Libya, his external sponsors, other than Russia, have put pressure on him to delay, postpone or try to make gains within the ceasefire agreement."

The oil-rich country has been marred by instability since a 2011 NATO-backed uprising that toppled longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi.

It has since been split between two rival administrations based in the country's east and west amid a conflict drawing increasing involvement from foreign powers.

According to the latest UN tally, more than 280 civilians and roughly 2,000 fighters have been killed since Haftar launched his offensive in April. An estimated 146,000 Libyans have been displaced.

Efforts to demobilise and reintegrate fighters that helped topple Gaddafi into the formal security apparatus have largely failed.

Erdogan vows to defend Tripoli government after Libya talks fail

By Diego Cupolo

Al-Monitor (14.01.2020) - <http://bit.ly/2uLJUD7> - After seven hours of indirect talks, the leaders of Libya's rival factions left Moscow Monday without agreeing on a cease-fire deal.

Russian and Turkish officials — which back opposing sides — had led the effort but came away empty handed when Libyan National Army (LNA) commander Khalifa Hifter refused to sign a draft proposal he claimed did not satisfy his conditions.

In response, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Tuesday he would continue defending the internationally recognized Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). Speaking before the Turkish Parliament, Erdogan said Hifter had "run away" from cease-fire deal and vowed Turkey would not refrain from teaching the eastern Libyan commander "a lesson" if his LNA forces proceed with their 10-month-long offensive on Tripoli.

"The coup-plotting Hifter first said yes but then fled Moscow," Erdogan said. "We have completed our duty; the rest is the duty of Mr. Putin and his team."

The next round of peace talks are scheduled for Sunday at a long-delayed Berlin Conference, where international leaders will attempt once more to end a conflict that has gripped Libya since the fall of former Prime Minister Moammar Gadhafi in 2011.

Though the Moscow talks ended without results, some analysts note that Russian and Turkish leadership in establishing a shaky cease-fire Sunday and bringing the Libyan opponents into negotiations has been a diplomatic victory for Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

“Just like the Astana process in Syria, these talks show that Russia and Turkey are undertaking a parallel, rival diplomacy to the classic diplomacy dominated by the West,” Jana Jabbour, a political scientist and professor at Sciences Po Paris University, told Al-Monitor. “They also showed that Turkey and Russia have become makers and shakers of politics in the region at the expense of the Europeans and Americans.”

Jabbour said Hifter likely backed out of Monday’s talks as he had more to gain from an ongoing ground offensive in which he is betting continued support from Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will give LNA forces a long-term advantage. She noted Russian and Turkish would likely seek a de-escalation of violence as neither could afford a drawn-out proxy war in Libya.

Since April 2019, the Tripoli-based government led by Prime Minister Fayez al Sarraj has been fighting off LNA forces with support from Italy, the United States and Turkey. Hifter’s ground offensive initially made slow gains, but increasingly took territory south of Tripoli this fall with air support from the UAE and mercenaries commissioned by the Russian private company, the Wagner Group. In the first week of January, LNA forces claimed the strategic port city of Sirte.

In response to such gains, Turkish officials have boosted strategic and material support for Sarraj’s GNA forces, particularly following a set of accords in November between Ankara and Tripoli vowing to increase collaboration while also demarcating new maritime boundaries between the two nations.

Sedat Aybar, head of the Africa Research Center at the Istanbul Aydin University, said growing support from Ankara and its proxy forces have helped bolster GNA defenses against Hifter’s offensive and changed the balance of power in Libya. Through coordination with Putin, Aybar told Al-Monitor Erdogan “will try to further Turkey’s hold in Libya and will work towards a lasting peace deal, which would also include Hifter and the coalition forces he represents.”

He added, “Militarily though, Turkey will not shy away from implementing what is seen as necessary upon the requests from the legitimate government.”

Still, the Russian-Turkish-led peace talks ended without progress Monday largely due to a lack of preparation, said Jalel Harchaoui, a research fellow at the Clingendael Institute. Harchaoui noted discussions on Monday did not address troop positions or delineations for new front lines, with GNA forces seeking a return to pre-offensive lines while Hifter forces aimed to maintain recent gains.

“What emerged yesterday within a few hours was the fact that nobody had actually sat down ahead of the meeting to prepare and address a pretty obvious question ... which is where does the LNA go?” Harchaoui asked during a phone interview with Al-Monitor. “Does it stay on the front line? Does it go back to April 4 lines?”

He added, "Those two extremes are both unrealistic because if you keep all the forces on the front line it leaves such a high level of tension that the cease-fire cannot possibly hold."

Moving forward, Harchaoui said Russian leverage on Hifter's forces would be essential in reaching a consensus at the Berlin Conference and beyond. Apart from military support, he said Russia has been the "economic lifeline" of LNA soldiers, as the Libyan dinars paid out to Hifter's forces are printed in Russia. Since May 2016, he said roughly 12 billion Russian-printed dinars have been sent to Hifter, giving Moscow distinct sway over developments on the ground.

This comes in stark contrast to the leverage European leaders have maintained in Libya, Harchaoui said. Disagreements between Western governments, including Germany, France and the United States, have repeatedly delayed bilateral decisions on the Libyan conflict and postponed the Berlin Conference, which was originally slated to take place in November.

Yet the pending deployment of Turkish troops following parliamentary approval earlier this month has brought new urgency to efforts to reach a sustainable peace resolution.

Until recently, European leaders were mostly "dragging their feet" on Libya, Harchaoui said, "and boom, all of a sudden you have Turkey. They find out on the 27th of November, when those two accords were signed, that the planet was not populated only with Westerners. You have other countries that are non-Western and anti-European."

He continued, "Now they understand they have postponed this Berlin Conference way too often and they need to make it happen not because they are prepared, not because they have the right approach, not because they think all their ducks are lined up, but simply because they realized they screwed up."