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Civilian casualties mount as foreign powers continue to fuel Libya's civil war

Intense shelling of civilian-populated areas and key infrastructure in and around the Libyan capital of Tripoli has escalated over the past several weeks, despite a 24-hour curfew enacted in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

On Saturday, a spokesman for the Libyan health ministry announced that seven more civilians were killed and 17 others injured when shellfire launched by the Libyan National Army (LNA), under the command of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, struck a shelter in the Fornaj district of the Libyan capital for people previously displaced by the conflict. Among those killed in the Saturday artillery barrage was a five-year-old boy from Bangladesh.

Libya has been the scene of a bloody civil war since the NATO-led bombing and assassination of longtime ruler Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. For nearly a decade, armed factions serving as proxies for foreign interests have been carrying out a protracted fight that has led to the division of the country into two competing power centers. The LNA, which controls vast swaths of eastern and southern Libya and is aligned with an influential faction within the House of Representatives, a rival parliamentary body that relocated to the eastern city of Tobruk near the Egyptian border in 2014, is being armed by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, France and Russia.

Until recently, the LNA had scored a series of military successes since initiating its Western offensive last year to overthrow the UN-recognized government of Prime

Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, the Government of National Accord (GNA), which is based in Tripoli. The GNA is being backed by Italy and Turkey.

The United States has backed both sides in the conflict. While initially supporting the GNA government immediately following the 2015 Skhirat Agreement, the Trump administration has recently signaled support for Haftar, a former Gaddafi general and long-time CIA asset, after his forces launched their offensive to take Tripoli.

Saturday's shelling followed a previous attack on May 8, in which LNA artillery fire struck the Port of Tripoli, the Mitigia International Airport and a coastal road close to the residences of the Italian and Turkish ambassadors, killing at least three, including one civilian. That same week, five other civilians were reported killed and 46 others injured in similar attacks. In late April, LNA artillery fire struck the Royal Hospital in Tripoli resulting in extensive damage to its intensive care unit and prompting an evacuation of patients and staff.

In one of the bloodiest attacks to take place during the year-long siege of the Libyan capital, 53 migrant men and boys were killed and 130 others injured last July when an LNA airstrike hit the Tajoura Detention Center, a migrant "holding" facility located on the outskirts of Tripoli, where over 600 refugees, who had been attempting to reach Europe, were imprisoned under inhumane conditions.

For its part, the GNA government forces have recently stepped up their efforts to retake two strategic footholds controlled by Haftar loyalists in the western part of the country.

Last month GNA forces began a counteroffensive to recapture the al-Watiya airbase, a strategic LNA foothold located southwest of Tripoli, from which Haftar's forces have been launching air raids against the area in and around the capital. The GNA counteroffensive was prepared for by weeks of aerial bombing carried out using newly acquired armed drones supplied by Turkey. The GNA has also recently intensified its airstrikes against the city of Tarhouna, a critical operations center along LNA supply lines extending from Bani Walid, located southeast of the capital.

A UN report released earlier this year found that since the beginning of the LNA's western offensive through the end of last year, at least 287 civilians were killed and 369 others injured. Airstrikes have accounted for 60 percent of civilian deaths.

Libya possesses substantial oil and natural gas deposits, the majority of which are located in fields within the Sirte Basin to the east, an area that saw intense civil war fighting in 2016, and the El Sharara and El Feel fields within the southwestern Murzuq Desert.

There is an extensive network of pipelines that connect the oil and gas fields in the south to export terminals along the northern coast. Due to its crippled industrial infrastructure and limited processing capacity, much of Libya's domestic oil consumption is dependent on refined oil that is reimported from countries like Italy.

The civil war in Libya is fueled by a complex interplay between the competing interests of international energy monopolies on the one hand, and local power struggles to control oil and gas export revenues on the other.

The Italian energy giant ENI, through its joint venture with Libya's National Oil Corporation, (NOC) controls the el-Feed oil field along with other concessions in the Ghadames Basin in the southwest of the country, as well as critical export and refining facilities in the north to which oil and gas extracted from French, Spanish, Austrian and Norwegian-controlled sites within the el-Sharara field, also in the southwest, must be transported through existing pipelines. Until recently, this had given Italian interests significant leverage over their international competitors.

Additionally, while nearly two thirds of oil and gas production in Libya takes place in territory currently controlled by the LNA in the east, export revenues are collected by the UN-recognized GNA government in Tripoli.

The recent sharp plunge in international oil prices has only exacerbated tensions. In January, the LNA began a systematic blockade of export terminals and pipelines in the west in an effort to deny the GNA government critical export revenue. Oil production has dropped significantly since the beginning of the blockade from an estimated 1.2 million to 300,000 bpd, with an estimated loss of \$1.4 billion in revenue to the NOC's coffers.

Adding further complexity to the situation, Turkey's intervention into the conflict on behalf of the GNA is rooted in broader regional conflicts within the eastern Mediterranean. Ankara, which has significant investments in Libya, recently signed a maritime border demarcation agreement with the GNA government to obtain rights to offshore drilling in the eastern Mediterranean, a highly contested area with newfound deposits from which Turkey's neighbors are attempting to exclude it. The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which includes Cyprus, Israel, Greece, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Italy and Egypt, is attempting to position itself as a major player in

the European energy market, while marginalizing Turkish influence in the region. The formation of the EMGF also poses a direct challenge to Russian natural gas interests in the European market.

The mounting toll in terms of civilian casualties in Libya's protracted civil war represents yet a further indictment of the fraudulent "humanitarian" pretexts advanced by pseudo-left academics and parties to justify their support for imperialist intervention. They portrayed the 2011 US-NATO bombardment of Libya and use of Al Qaeda-linked militias as proxy ground forces as a crusade for "democracy" and "human rights". In fact, it was a war for regime change and plunder that shattered Libya society, killed tens of thousands and now could cost the lives of many more because of the country's unpreparedness in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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