

Remarks of SRSR Ghassan Salamé to the United Nations Security Council on the situation in Libya

21 May 2019

Mr. President [Ambassador Dian Triansyah Djani of Indonesia],

Let me start by wishing “Ramadan Karim” to our Muslim colleagues on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan.

Allow me to congratulate the Republic of Indonesia for its Presidency of the Security Council this month. I am grateful for this opportunity to brief you in person on our work in Libya.

Mr. President,

This is the report whose delivery I have spent the nearly last two years trying to avoid. Forty-eight days into the attack on Tripoli by General Haftar’s forces, there has already been too much death and destruction. Libya is on the verge of descending into a civil war which could lead to the permanent division of the country. The damage already done will take years to mend, and that’s only if the war is ended now.

The consequences and the risks of the conflict are already painfully clear, especially for the Libyan people: over 460 dead, 29 of them civilians. Over 2400 injured, the majority of them civilians. Over 75,000 people forced from their homes, all of them civilians. Over half of the displaced are women and children. Humanitarian actors estimate that over 100,000 men, women and children remain trapped in immediate frontline areas, with over 400,000 more in areas directly impacted by the clashes.

While the conditions for migrants and refugees in Libya were already dire prior to the conflict, these conditions have now gone from bad to worse. Nearly 3,400 refugees and migrants are trapped in detention centres exposed to, or in close proximity to, the fighting. The UN humanitarian agencies have been working around the clock to transfer the most vulnerable from the conflict-affected areas to safer locations, and I am very proud of their work.

Mr. President,

When the Secretary-General visited Libya on 3 April, his visit was intended to show the full support of the international community to the peaceful resolution of Libya's long period of upheaval.

The capital was enjoying a measure of increased security, the population a much more stable currency and an improved economic outlook, and the political process, despite many obstacles, was moving forward.

Indeed, we were on the eve of hosting the National Conference in the Libyan city of Ghadames. An event that would have brought together over 150 Libyans from across the country. There was great public excitement about what the conference could yield in terms of a way forward to end Libya's eight-year long period of transition and usher in a new period of stability and security through the ballot box. To see those who had enthusiastically accepted our invitation to Ghadames suddenly take up arms against each other to attack the capital, or to defend it, has thrown me into the deepest level of sadness for the opportunity lost and for a hope killed exactly ten days before its realization.

The attack on Tripoli also imperiled the potential of the talks which had been held on 27 February in Abu Dhabi between Prime Minister Serraj and General Haftar, the sixth of its kind between them. At those talks there had been the real opportunity to replace the Government of National Accord in Tripoli, dissolve the parallel government in Beida and create an inclusive, unified national government, which would have shepherded the country through the election process to the end of the Transitional Period. The understandings reached in Abu Dhabi had also placed the military under civilian control, a key demand of the vast majority of Libyans and many in the international community.

Mr. President,

I am no Cassandra, but the violence on the outskirts of Tripoli is just the start of a long and bloody war on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, imperiling the security of Libya's immediate neighbors and the wider Mediterranean region. The security vacuum created by the withdrawal of many of General Haftar's troops from the south, coupled with the focus of the western forces on the defense of the capital, is already being exploited by Da'esh and Al-Qaeda. In the South of Libya, the black flags of Da'esh are appearing and I am dismayed to report that since April 4, there have been four separate Da'esh attacks in the south of Libya: two attacks in Ghodwa, one in Sebha and one just a few days ago in Zella. The cumulative toll of the attacks has been: 17 killed, more than 10 wounded, and 8 kidnapped. Libyan forces that had in the past courageously defended their country against these terrorist groups are now busy fighting each other. In addition to the innocent Libyans being ruthlessly subjected to the increasing terror of Da'esh, there will be spillover of this violence to Libya's immediate neighbors.

There are numerous reports of extremists, persons under international sanctions, and individuals wanted by the International Criminal Court appearing on the battlefield on all sides. All parties must publicly disassociate themselves from such elements without delay and refer to the ICC those for whom arrest warrants have been issued. I recommend that the Council support the formation of a Commission of Inquiry to determine who has taken up arms and support the establishment of mechanisms to ensure the exclusion of unwanted elements.

No less worrying is the fact that arms are pouring in again to all sides. The blatant and televised breach of the arms embargo by the apparent delivery of a large quantity of weapons and armored vehicles to GNA forces in Tripoli a few days ago comes on the heels of earlier and ongoing deliveries of banned modern weaponry to the LNA. Many countries are providing weapons to all parties in the conflict without exception. The amount and sophistication of these weapons are already causing greater numbers of casualties. Without a robust enforcement mechanism, the arms embargo into Libya will become a cynical joke. Some nations are fueling this bloody conflict; the United Nations should put an end to it.

The conflict has been characterized by the use of airstrikes, heavy artillery and the indiscriminate shelling of residential areas. Ramadan nights, normally convivially spent in the company of one's neighbors and family, have become periods of sheer terror for the residents of the capital, waiting in fear for the next attack. Since mid-April there has been a rising number of night-time precision strikes on GNA positions in and around Tripoli by unknown aircraft, averaging five a night. On May 8 an ammunition depot belonging to the GNA-aligned Janzour Knights was hit in an airstrike that was within a kilometre of the UN compound where we work and live.

Mr. President,

The large number of casualties has overburdened already weakened health facilities struggling with shortages of medical personnel and supplies. Eleven ambulances were directly hit by airstrikes, rockets and shelling while on duty. I am appalled by the apparent disregard for the due protection of personnel engaging in vital medical tasks and recall that attacks against health workers constitute a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law.

We are also deeply concerned by the sharp increase in abductions, disappearances and arbitrary arrests since the start of the current conflict. At least seven officials and employees were arbitrarily detained or kidnapped in East and West Libya. The fate of all these individuals remains unknown, and there may be others who have disappeared under

similar circumstances. Journalists also face increasing threats, intimidation and violence, often in connection with reporting on the conflict.

I therefore call for your unequivocal support in insisting on the application of International Humanitarian Law with all parties to the conflict. We need to demonstrate to those who commit violations that impunity will not prevail. We need to sanction those who use the fog of war to settle violently personal or political scores.

As the conflict rolls on, Libya's social fabric is unraveling at an alarming rate. Calls for a halt to the fighting and reconciliation amongst the warring parties are being drowned out by internal and regional parties who have weaponised social media to drive fake news, false narratives, and expressions of hatred that more deeply divide the population. The Mission has established a mechanism to monitor hate speech on-line and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has already referred a number of cases of incitement to Facebook.

Mr. President,

The UN maintains an active presence on the ground in Libya, in Tripoli and through our hub in Benghazi. We have naturally scaled down our non-essential personnel given the situation but we remain in Libya, alongside the Libyan people to deliver as best we can. Over 42,000 people have received some kind of assistance through UN programs since the start of the conflict.

Prices of food are rising across the country as shortages start to occur. Insecurity and resource demands of the parties to the conflict are exacerbating these shortages, particularly in regards to fuel.

Another casualty of the conflict is Libya's infrastructure, including electricity and water. Already unable to meet demand, the water supply to the capital and the whole of north-west Libya has been weaponised as armed groups have cut off the Man Made River to extract concessions. This act put tens of thousands of people in immediate danger and may constitute a war crime. Such acts must be condemned in the strongest terms.

The only positive economic indicator is that all parties have so far acted in the national interest by not impeding the oil supply.

However, there are indications that the eastern branch of the National Oil Company is again attempting to export oil in violation of the sanctions' regime. This illegal attempt risks dividing the National Oil Company, which remains the primary source of revenue for the country, and the national social safety net.

Mr. President,

Don't discount Libyan resilience in the face of this tragic turn of events. Since 30 March, Libyan citizens have shown admirable resolve in democratically electing new municipal councils in 22 municipalities in the western and southern parts of Libya. Eighteen of these councils have already sworn-in their mayors. It is unfortunate that some elections had to be postponed for security reasons. In that regard, I note that efforts by the parallel government in the East to appoint Mayors or block municipal elections from being held are a denial of the rights of all Libyans to elect their local representatives. It is vital to keep the pilot light of democracy alive in Libya, and I appeal to the Council to lend its unqualified support to the continuation of the municipal election process.

Mr. President,

There is no military solution to Libya. This is not a cliché, it is a fact, and it is high time for those who have harboured this illusion to open their eyes and adjust themselves to this reality. Libya's mosaic of communities cannot be governed without alliances and relationships stretching across the country. It was to be through the National Conference bringing these myriad communities together that hope for an inclusive, peaceful and prosperous future existed.

I hear many Libyans telling us that the political process cannot ignore the present war as if it did not take place. They are right; there is a before and after April 4 and we, as impartial mediators, need to adjust that process in order to bridge the deep gap of mistrust that has prevailed since that date. Our consultations with the parties, as well as with men and women of influence, have not ceased and we struggle to maintain a minimum of political fluidity among the various groups who, sooner rather than later, will need to come back and devise together a better future for their children, and a more peaceful formula for power and resources sharing. For that, Libyans need for the international community, instead of being the amplifying mirror for their divisions, to work in unison to mitigate and alleviate these divisions.

A better future is still possible, but we all must be seized with the fierce urgency of now while the front lines remain on the outskirts of Tripoli and before the battle moves, God forbid, to the capital's more densely populated neighborhoods. This will require concerted and immediate action by the international community.

Without the international and regional stakeholders recognizing that Libya is not a prize for the strongest but a country of 6.5 million people who deserve peace and the right to collectively determine their own path forward, the future of Libya will be bleak. I fear that without immediate action to stop the flow of arms and pressure on Libyan parties to

the conflict to enable a return to serious dialogue, Libya will descend into civil war which could potentially lead to a Hobbesian all-against-all state of chaos or partition of the country.

Full civil war in Libya is not inevitable. It may occur by the will of some parties, and by the inaction of others. I hear Libyans resigning themselves to a conflict of many months or even many years. My duty, and that of this family of nations, is to tell them: No. You need to stop the fighting and stop it now, for the sake of your loved ones, for the sake of your country, and for the sake of international peace and security.

I therefore request this esteemed body to take up its responsibility to urge the silencing of the guns and for the warring parties to engage with the Mission to ensure a full and comprehensive cessation of hostilities and a return to an inclusive UN-led political process.

Thank you.