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Remarks of SRSR Ghassan Salamé to the United Nations Security Council

21 March 2018

Thank you Madame president.

President,
Members of the Security Council,

Let me at the outset congratulate the Kingdom of the Netherlands on the Presidency of the Security Council.

I brief you today from Tripoli, where I now live, as do an increasing number of my colleagues. For the United Nations to best support Libya, we must be in Libya. I am proud to announce that we have truly returned to the country.

But we are here for the whole of Libya, and not for any one region or city. Accordingly, we are now looking to re-open our office in Benghazi. Once conditions permit, we will also seek to re-open in the South.

The United Nations has visited cities and towns across the country which we have not stepped foot in for years, and we shall continue to do so. It is essential that we hear from all Libyans, and where possible, where they live.

Madame President,

In early March I spent three days in Benghazi. I saw a city devastated by three years of conflict. Its downtown is in rubble. Signs of the recent fighting are ubiquitous.

I heard strong concerns over the economic and political situation in the country. But, behind the heated speech, there was a widespread willingness to make a fresh start and a sense of optimism. Citizens are mobilizing to rebuild their city. One of many examples is the

As Delivered

Benghazi University faculty, who took the rebuilding of their university in their own hands. This spirit provides new hope, a hope we must nurture.

Excellencies,

Libya was once a country known for its great demographic fluidity. Citizens were willing to speak to one another, traverse the land to meet, marry and trade with one another, or settle in cities far from their place of birth; all the while carrying their personal identity.

Since 2011, this demographic fluidity has been constrained, if not altogether strangled. This has produced more than 300 thousand Internally Displaced Persons, who are unable to go back to their homes and often live in miserable conditions. Others have been forced to flee the country altogether. Groups have refused to live with one another. Ideological or identity cleavages have led to widespread ostracism. A discourse of hatred has replaced peaceful interaction.

Such has been most recently demonstrated by the people of Tawergha, whose return was blocked, and many of whom now live in temporary shelters. We have conveyed a plan to expedite the overcoming of this impasse.

More generally, we are committed to reversing the mutual exclusion and sterile seclusion. Unless Libyans from all stripes and segments can come together to speak, they will be unable to agree. And unless they agree, the political process cannot progress.

Through our efforts, or working with our partners, we have made progress in reversing this situation. We have reached out to constituencies that had been marginalized, including partisans of the former regime. We have convinced ethnic groups, rival cities and political parties, who have not spoken for several years, to come together.

My mission is not to slice the cake between competing greed. First and foremost, it is one to bring Libyans together around a common national narrative.

As Delivered

This common narrative, Madame President, is crucial. We have seen a range of initiatives, some supported by the United Nations and its partners, many instigated by the Libyans themselves, to re-write it.

Mayors from all across Libya have met together to discuss vital issues of services delivery; first in Tunisia, and then in Libya. They were hosted in the homes of the people in Shahat, in the East, and met again just a few days ago in Tripoli, in the West.

Popular movements are starting across the country, demanding change and an end to plundering.

Members of the House of Representatives and the High Council of State have engaged with each other to maintain ties and alleviate divisions.

The United Nations has supported local communities in conflict to forge reconciliation agreements.

Armed groups who have been fighting each other just months ago, have accepted to sit around the same table. Facilitating some of these discussions, the United Nations helped successfully prevent clashes, sometimes at the very last minute.

These many activities and efforts are part and parcel of the process of the National Conference, which will ultimately lead to gathering after the Holy month of Ramadan.

Madame President,

Libyans insistently remind us of their wish for a new period of stability and certainty, built on accountable and unified institutions.

The present institutions are based on shallow legitimacy. They are built on tenuous mandates or are divided into competing bodies.

To lead the people, to unify the people and to take difficult decisions for the good of the people, the government must come from the people. This means elections.

As Delivered

For the United Nations, working for the conduct of fair, free, credible elections before the end of this year is at the top of our priorities.

It is vital that before these elections take place, we are certain that they will be inclusive, and their results accepted.

It is for this reason I am pleased the voter registration which ended ten days ago proceeded with great success. With one million new registrants, 2.5 million Libyans are now eligible to vote. There has been a strong participation of women and youth in the Voter Registration Update.

This remarkable participation is a clear message to all. The Libyan people want their voices heard, and they want it through elections.

I called on women at their event for International Women's Day, to translate their higher participation as registrants, into a higher participation as candidates.

The United Nations will continue to support the High National Election Commission in preparing for elections, and we will spare no effort in addressing the other preconditions for successful elections.

For any election to take place, the laws are required, and must be drafted in a consensual manner.

The efforts to adopt a permanent national constitution continue. A draft was approved by the Constitution Drafting Assembly on 29 July 2017.

It went through a judicial challenge, and on 14 February 2018, the Supreme Court recognized the validity of the Constitution Drafting Assembly vote on the draft.

However, hurdles remain to the conduct of a constitutional referendum. The question of referendum legislation is still hotly debated. Some, factions are clearly not satisfied with the content of the draft constitution.

As Delivered

However, the political process must progress as the status quo is untenable. I ask this Council to make this message on the unsustainability of the status quo clear to all the leaders of the country.

And so, Madame President, because, while there is a reason for optimism in the political process, there is also cause for concern.

A backdrop of continued violence and localized conflicts persist.

Extremists including ISIL and Al Qaeda continue to maintain a presence in Libya and have conducted recent attacks.

Armed groups, including those formally integrated into the state structures, continue to operate outside of the law, perpetrating human rights abuses. Bodies bearing signs of torture have turned up in many locations. Libyan men, women and children are increasingly kidnapped for profit, even in the heart of the Capital. Citizens are arbitrarily arrested by shadowy security forces. People are held and abused in unofficial, official or quasi-official detention prisons.

In the South, the situation in Sebha is currently of serious concern. There have been a number of fatalities, including civilians. The complex network of local animosities, the ongoing jostling of national political and military players, and the growing presence of foreign mercenaries seriously complicate the solution. The conflict risks adopting a transnational dimension that could further destabilize Libya.

To prevent further escalation, I have expressed UNSMIL's willingness to mediate should the parties request it.

I call on the Member States to support Libya's fragile transition by urging your partners there to embrace the political process, and not arms. There is space for all in civilian life, while it is abundantly clear that no military faction can hope to conquer this country.

Madame President,

As Delivered

The provision of security in Libya should be a matter for national institutions, and not for the numerous armed groups. UNSMIL has embarked on a broad conversation with the leaders of these groups, to better understand their perspectives. Too many young men earn a living carrying weapons, and they should be reintegrated into civilian life. Before May, we expect to unveil a strategy to do so.

However, we must be realistic. In a country awash with arms, disarmament will require time and much, much stronger national institutions.

Further, the arrival of more arms into Libya will only hamper such efforts and damage the political process. Unfortunately, more weapons are indeed being imported. I urge the Council to exert its utmost influence to stop arms from coming into Libya.

Madame President,

At the heart of Libya's problems is an economic system of predation. It degrades the life of the ordinary Libyan and serves the interests of the powerful. It is the main obstacle to the political process and cements the status quo.

I was concerned about this when I first arrived. Now I am truly disturbed.

This system must be shattered. Resources must flow into building a strong equitable state for all, and not into the pockets of the few.

We have built knowledge and expertise on the matter. I am grateful to the Panel of Experts for their contribution. The United Nations and partner institutions must comprehensively address this economic plundering as a key pillar of our engagement.

Human trafficking is but one of the elements of this perverted economy. It is also the most morally reprehensible. This trade has become the main source of income for some people,

As Delivered

leaving them numb to the sight of humans being traded as commodities or migrants being left to die as they fall off their packed pick-up trucks.

Libya is a destination, a transit country and a source of migration. Such an important issue, affecting the lives of hundreds of thousands must be addressed strategically and across borders. For their excellent cooperation on this issue and the political process in Libya, I thank our partners in the African Union, the European Union and the League of Arab States.

Madame President,

Libya's finances remain precarious. Despite the country now producing well over 1 million barrels a day and generating rosy macro-economic indicators, the country does not enjoy a true economic recovery.

Instead, Libyan people get poorer every year. Women from the once wealthy Tripoli bourgeoisie confess to putting their teenage children to work. Elders from the East lament that their own internal tribal emergency welfare funds are now empty.

Basic health and education services decay, as frustrated citizens cannot understand why oil production translates into a further decline in living standards.

To address the needs of the most vulnerable and the Internally displaced persons, on 25 January we launched the new Humanitarian Response Plan to provide life-saving assistance to close to a million people a year.

Madame President,

Even now there are signs of a looming monetary and fiscal crisis. Oil revenues, though high now, are vulnerable to underinvestment or sabotage. Financial institutions are divided. Government expenditure is bloated and continues to increase, but more spending, so far, does not lead to better services.

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As Delivered

Overall, the state's inability to provide services and implement the reforms needed is creating a vicious cycle.

It strengthens the self-righteous arguments of others who claim they are stepping in to fill the vacuum left by the absence of the state.

In turn, the activities of these individuals and groups undermine the ability of the state itself to fulfil its obligations. For many Libyans this abnormal state of affairs has become the new normal. This vicious cycle must stop.

Madame President,

One aspect of the Action Plan was the amendments to the Libyan Political Agreement.

When I joined the Mission, almost all stakeholders I met requested this matter be included within the Action Plan. The appointment of a new executive would have been useful, but only if

chosen in an open manner which promotes national unification and strengthens the government's ability to serve the country for the limited transition. I now believe they have little chance of being passed.

The Action Plan does not depend on these amendments, and certainly, the closer Libya is to elections, the less relevant these provisional amendments become.

However, starting tomorrow, I shall commence a new, and final attempt to realize these amendments.

Madame President,

Members of the Security Council,

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In my first briefing from Tripoli, I reported the consistent staccato of bullets overhead. The bullets are still there. The other day I was told that this was just “normal”. For the sake of the Libyan people for whom we in the United Nations work, we must refuse to accept this normality.

Thank you.