

Germany pushes Haftar to join Libya peace talks

AFP, Berlin

Germany’s foreign minister headed to Libya yesterday to persuade strongman Khalifa Haftar to join an international conference on the conflict, as the UN urged support for the peace initiative. Heiko Maas said the Berlin conference -- scheduled for Sunday -- was “the best chance in a long time” for peace talks in Libya, which has been in chaos since the 2011 uprising that killed longtime leader Moamer Gaddafi.

Maas was due to meet Haftar in the eastern city of Benghazi -- one of the general’s strongholds -- days after meeting his rival Fayez al-Sarraj, who serves as head of the UN-recognised government in Tripoli.

Sarraj’s government has been under attack since April from forces loyal to Haftar, with clashes killing more than 280 civilians and 2,000 fighters and displacing tens of thousands more.

“I hope that the parties will use this chance to take Libya’s future back into Libyan hands,” Maas said in Berlin before boarding his flight.

“For that, we need readiness for a real ceasefire and the participation of both warring parties in the dialogue format suggested by the United

Nations.”

The leaders of the warring groups were in Moscow early this week at talks aimed at finalising a ceasefire orchestrated by Russia and Turkey.

But Haftar walked away without signing the permanent truce, sparking fears about the shaky ceasefire.

In his report to the UN Security Council late on Wednesday, UN chief Antonio Guterres urged all warring parties to stop fighting and “engage constructively towards that end, including within the Berlin process”.

He also warned against “external interference”, which he said would “deepen the ongoing conflict and further complicate efforts to reach a clear international commitment to a peaceful resolution of the underlying crisis”.

The Berlin conference will aim to agree six points including a permanent ceasefire, implementation of the arms embargo and a return to the political process for peace, he added.

As well as killing hundreds of people, the fighting in Libya has also spurred a growing exodus of migrants, though nearly 1,000 intercepted at sea have been forced to return this year, according to the UN.

S’pore misinformation law challenged in court for first time

AFP, Singapore

Singapore’s controversial law against online misinformation was challenged in court for the first time yesterday as concerns mount it is being used to stifle criticism ahead of elections.

The legislation gives authorities the power to order corrections placed next to posts they deem false.

Since the law came into force in October, several opposition figures and activists have been ordered to place a banner next to online posts stating that they contain false information.

The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), one of a handful of small opposition groups in the city-state, lodged an appeal last week after it was ordered under the law to “correct” three online articles.

The posts, on Facebook and the party’s website, said many Singaporeans had been displaced from white-collar jobs by foreigners -- claims the government said were “false and misleading”.

The SDP is seeking with its challenge, which got under way behind closed doors at the High Court on yesterday, to get the government order overturned.

Before it began, a judge rejected the party’s request to have the case heard in open court, said deputy attorney-general Hri Kumar Nair, who is representing the government.

SDP leader Chee Soon Juan, who had argued that the case is of public

interest, said the ruling was “very disappointing”. The small party currently has no seats in parliament.

The challenge was filed against Manpower Minister Josephine Teo, whose ministry last month requested the corrections and later rejected an application to withdraw its order.

Jihadists free five kidnapped aid workers in Nigeria

AFP, Kano

Islamic State-aligned jihadists have released five local aid workers abducted last month in violence-ravaged northeastern Nigeria, security sources and one of those freed said yesterday.

The aid workers were seized along with other passengers in two separate incidents in December when fighters from Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) disguised as soldiers intercepted vehicles on highways outside the Borno state capital of Maiduguri.

ISWAP, which split from the Boko Haram jihadist group in 2016, has focused on targeting military installations and troops since mid-2018.

However there has recently been an increase in attacks on civilians blamed on ISWAP.

Restore full citizenship

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Rights. He said the new evidence implicates government officials in ongoing efforts to erase Rohingya identity and deny them full citizenship.

The rights body, which works to ensure human rights for all, documented five recent cases of Myanmar authorities forcing or coercing Rohingyas in Rakhine State to accept the NVC.

It also obtained an internal government document informing state-, district-, and local-level officials that a team of officials would be deployed to issue NVCs to Rohingyas in internment camps in Sittwe Township.

The document, dated December 7, 2019, and signed by the head of the Sittwe Township Department of Immigration and Population, informs the administrator of Thet Kae Pyin that an “immigration mobile team” would be deployed to Thet Kae Pyin internment camp.

The document states that the team would be tasked with issuing NVCs to “Bengali people” -- a term often used by Myanmar officials to refer to Rohingyas, implying that they are from Bangladesh and their ethnic Rohingya identity does not exist. The township official copied state- and district-level officers of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population on the letter.

A 31-year-old Rohingya man in Thet Kae Pyin internment camp told Fortify Rights how state security officers forced him to accept an NVC on December 10, just three days after the document was issued.

The Myanmar government continues to confine over 125,000 Rohingyas to more than 20 internment camps in five townships of Rakhine State.

During violent attacks in 2012, extremists and state security forces forcibly displaced most of the Rohingyas now confined to the camps.

Fortify Rights also obtained a copy of the “National Strategy on Resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Closure of IDP Camps,” adopted by the Union-level Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement on November 20.

The document instructs authorities to facilitate “citizenship verification in camps slated for closure”. In practice, citizenship verification in Rakhine is implemented through the NVC process.

The vast majority of more than one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh refuse to return to Myanmar until the government restores their rights and ensures protections.

In September last year, Fortify Rights published a 102-page report -- Tools of Genocide -- revealing how the Myanmar authorities forced and coerced Rohingya to accept NVCs in a systematic campaign to erase Rohingya identity and deny Rohingya citizenship.

The Chinese government previously urged the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh to fast track the return of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to northern Rakhine State, despite objections by Rohingyas, the UN, human rights groups, and others due to protection concerns.



Palestinians scuffle with Israeli troops following the demolition of a Palestinian home which Israeli authorities said was built without a permit in the village of Al-Dirat near the West Bank town of Hebron yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

More extreme weather ahead

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The UN agency said that average global temperatures during both the past five-year (2015-2019) and 10-year (2010-2019) periods were the highest ever recorded.

“Since the 1980s each decade has been warmer than the previous one,” the UN agency said in a statement, warning that “this trend is expected to continue”.

The United Nations said last year that man-made greenhouse gas emissions needed to tumble 7.6 percent each year to 2030 in order to limit temperature rises to 1.5 Celsius -- the more ambitious cap nations signed up to in the landmark Paris climate deal.

Current pledges to cut emissions put Earth on a path of several degrees warming by the end of the century.

NOT A FLUKE

Taalas said that since modern records began in 1850, the average global temperature had risen by around 1.1 degrees Celsius, and warned of significant warming in the future.

“On the current path of carbon dioxide emissions, we are heading

towards a temperature increase of three to five degrees Celsius by the end of the century,” he warned.

Gavin Schmidt, director of Nasa’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies which provided one of the datasets, added that the trend line was unmistakable and could not be attributed to normal climate variability -- a position taken by US President Donald Trump.

“What’s happening is persistent, not a fluke due to some weather phenomenon: we know that the long-term trends are being driven by the increasing levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere,” he said.

Data from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration meanwhile revealed that polar sea ice coverage continued its downward trend in 2019.

Both the Arctic and Antarctic oceans recorded their second-smallest average annual sea-ice coverage during the 1979-2019 period of record, the agency said.

BROKEN RECORD

WMO also highlighted a new study published this week in Advances

in Atmospheric Sciences with data showing that ocean heat content was at a record high in 2019.

The past five years were also the warmest on record in terms of ocean heat content, that study showed.

Since more than 90 percent of excess heat is stored in the world’s oceans, their heat content is a good way to quantify the rate of global warming, WMO said.

Conservationists said the UN agency’s findings were to be expected. “It is no surprise that 2019 was the second hottest year on record -- nature has been persistently reminding us that we have to pick up the pace,” said Manuel Pulgar-Vidal, leader of WWF’s global climate and energy practice, calling for dramatic measures to halt the warming trend.

“This is not so much a record as a broken record,” added Chris Rapley, a professor of climate science at University College London.

“The message repeats with grim regularity. Yet the pace and scale of action to address climate change remains muted and far from the need.”

Senate prepares to set trial in motion

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our nation. We can do this, and we must.”

The two articles of impeachment -- one for abuse of power and the other for obstructing the House investigation -- were delivered in blue folders in a solemn procession by the newly appointed House managers, seven Democrats who will prosecute the case against the president.

“So sad, so tragic for our country, that the actions taken by the president to undermine our national security, to violate his oath of office and to jeopardize the security of our elections, has taken us to this place,” Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said as she signed the articles.

“This president will be held accountable,” she said. “No one is above the law.”

The solemn formalities underscored the grimness of the occasion, Trump becoming only the third US president in history to be placed on trial in the Senate.

“We feel we are carrying out the will of the framers of our constitution, and that’s a pretty serious load,” said Adam Schiff, the Democratic lawmaker tapped to lead the prosecution team.

TWO WEEKS

Trump is accused of secretly holding up

\$391 million in aid to Ukraine between July and September to pressure Kiev to investigate former vice president Joe Biden, the Democratic frontrunner in this year’s White House race.

The president is also charged with obstruction for holding back witnesses and documents from the House impeachment investigation in defiance of Congressional subpoenas.

He was formally impeached on December 18.

But Pelosi held back on delivering the articles to the Senate as she pressured McConnell to agree to subpoena the witnesses and documents that the White House blocked from the House probe.

McConnell has refused to commit, saying the issue will only be decided after the trial’s opening arguments and questioning, which could take two weeks.

A Trump administration official told reporters Wednesday that they expect the trial to last no longer than two weeks, suggesting McConnell could use his 53-47 Republican majority in the Senate to stifle calls for witnesses and quickly take the charges to a vote.

“I think it’s extraordinarily unlikely it will be going beyond two weeks,”

the official said, on condition of anonymity.

With impeachment rules requiring a two-thirds super-majority to convict and remove a president, Trump’s acquittal is widely expected.

Earlier Wednesday Trump ridiculed the investigation and trial, as he has for months.

“Here we go again, another Con Job by the Do Nothing Democrats,” he wrote on Twitter.

On Tuesday Democrats released newly acquired files that showed Trump’s personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani working with Ukrainian-born American Lev Parnas early last year to pressure Kiev to investigate Biden.

They also showed the two, working with Ukrainian officials, trying to force out the US ambassador to the country, Marie Yovanovitch, eventually removed by Trump.

In a televised interview that aired Wednesday, Parnas told MSNBC that “President Trump knew exactly what was going on.”

“He was aware of all of my movements. I wouldn’t do anything without the consent of Rudy Giuliani or the president.”

Qatar scraps unpopular exit permits

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Qatar has made a series of reforms to its employment regulations since being selected to host the 2022 World Cup.

It also dropped the exit visa requirements for other foreign workers -- including civil servants, oil and gas workers, and employees of government bodies including Qatar Airways.

“Now a domestic worker has the right to enter and exit the country without their employer’s permission,” labour ministry under-secretary Mohamed al-Obaidly told AFP.

“We are working on a complete system of (labour) legislation.”

The announcement came after Human Rights Watch published its annual report Tuesday, saying Qatari “reforms have not gone far enough, and implementation has been uneven”.

Domestic staff must give their employers 72 hours’ notice before leaving under the new rules.

Companies can also designate up to five percent of staff as “responsible”

roles, such as those with financial oversight, who will still be required to seek managerial approval to leave.

Some two million foreigners work in Qatar, many employed directly or indirectly on vast infrastructure projects for the 2022 World Cup.

One Filipina domestic worker in Qatar told AFP she welcomed the latest changes.

“There’ll be no more hassle,” she said of the roughly 100,000 domestic workers like her based in the Gulf country.

In February 2019, Qatar said it was committed to labour reforms, following an Amnesty International report alleging it was failing to stop widespread abuse of workers.

“The International Labour Organization warmly welcomes these changes which will benefit many migrant workers in Qatar,” the head of the UN agency’s Qatar project office, Houtan Homayounpour, said yesterday.

“The removal of exit permits is an important milestone in the

government’s labour reform agenda.”

Alongside the exit permit reforms, Qatar also announced in October it would remove the requirement for some workers to obtain employers’ permission before changing jobs.

Doha is also due to introduce a permanent minimum wage this year to replace the current temporary floor of just \$200 per month.

Indian bakers

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secretary general, Naushad, said Guinness World Records had assessed the cake as being 6,500 metres but their confirmation of the exact length was pending.

That much cake would surpass the Guinness record held by Chinese bakers in Zixi county who made a fruitcake almost 3.2 kilometres long in 2018.

“This is an effort to showcase our skills to the world,” Naushad, who uses one name, told AFP.

“We ensured hygiene and taste are up to the mark.”

Egypt accuses Turkish news agency staff of ‘false news’

AFP, Cairo

Egypt has accused four staff of Turkey’s state news agency Anadolu whom it arrested of spreading “false news” and working with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood group.

Police raided their Cairo office Tuesday and formally arrested them Wednesday at a time of rising tensions between the rival nations.

The interior ministry charged that the news bureau was a front for a “Turkish troll farm ... intent on broadcasting false news about the country’s political, economic, security and rights situation”.

It published the full names of those arrested -- three Egyptian journalists and one Turkish citizen who handled the office’s finances.

The ministry said the employees were working “with the aim of distorting the image” of Egypt and said their cases had been referred to the prosecution.

Turkey has summoned Egypt’s charge d’affaires to protest the raid.

The Turkish and Egyptian governments are fierce rivals, since Ankara strongly supported Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood administration that was overthrown by a military ouster in 2013.

Egypt outlawed the Islamist group in the same year.

Ankara and Cairo are also on opposing sides of the Libyan conflict.

Turkey supports the UN-recognised government in Tripoli, which is under siege from forces loyal to eastern-based general Khalifa Haftar, who is supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

The United States, an ally of both Turkey and Egypt, said it had seen news reports on the raid and arrests.

“If true, we call on the Egyptian government to release the detained journalists and allow for a free and open press in Egypt,” a State Department spokesperson said.

Sculpting

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, an artwork representing the mass killings by the Pakistani army and their collaborators in 1971, and a map of Bangladesh with Bangabandhu’s face on it.

Her political conscience guided her in making the sculpture of Sheikh Russel, youngest son of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, standing in front of the killers of the Father of the Nation and his family members. Russel was only 10-year-old when the killers took his life on the fateful day of August 15, 1975.

“I modelled the figure of Sheikh Russel after my 3-year-old son Tinu Roy, who died at home from lack of medical care during the Liberation War,” said Emilia, her grief evident in her work.

The mother of five children, now around 70, lives in Rahutpara under Goila union of Agailjhara, and sometimes travels abroad to one of her two sons.

With age, Emilia has developed different types of physical complications, but is still active in her artistic ventures.

The only recognition this artist seeks is to be able to present some of her creations to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on the eve of Mujib Borsho, to be observed marking the birth centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

“That is the last wish of my life,” Emilia said.