

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

9 November 2018

Mr. President,

Members of the Council,

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

Mr. President,

Since my last briefing in early September, the violence in Tripoli finally ended. In the one month of fighting, over 120 lives were lost, including those of 34 women and children.

As a result of the ceasefire agreements brokered by UNSMIL, the parties agreed to stop the violence. On 25 September, most of the attackers from outside the city withdrew.

Since then, we have sought to transform a challenge into an opportunity. We have dedicated ourselves to the consolidation of the ceasefire - on the ground and at a political level - to minimise the prospect of similar crisis. The new Security Arrangements Committee for Greater Tripoli crafted a comprehensive security plan for the capital which has received the endorsement of the Presidential Council. Armed Groups elements will withdraw from key installations and official buildings, while reserve forces will be deployed on the edge of the city. A Joint Operations Centre has been working well to coordinate this process forwards.

Implementation has indeed started. Several armed groups have withdrawn from positions in Ministries and have indicated a readiness to hand over the port and the civilian terminal of Mitiga airport to state control. There is a fragile but palpable sense of improvement across the capital.

The concept we have been working on is clear and balanced. While armed groups from outside the city should not attempt to invade it again, armed groups operating within the city must stop using their position to penetrate, intimidate or control the sovereign institutions. Looking forward, the city should be protected by disciplined, regular police forces

Success in the Capital is crucial, not only because it houses most of the government institutions and 30 percent of the Libyan population, but also since what works in Tripoli can be a model to be repeated in other cities across the country.

Amongst the drivers of conflict is the appalling conditions in the prisons. Hundreds of Libyans and foreigners are illegally and inhumanly detained, and used to extract ransoms. Some prisons have turned into incubators for extremist ideology and terrorist groups. While the crisis prompted the issuance of a decree ordering the judiciary to review the files of the thousands of prisoners who have been languishing in jail, only 255 have been released. This process needs to be expedited and the armed groups must return control of detention facilities to the authorities. Prisons which have effectively become for-profit private enterprises operated by armed groups under state cover should be immediately shuttered. The Mission has established a special taskforce on prison reform.

Mr. President,

The unity of this Council in its support to our efforts to broker the ceasefire was invaluable. The threat and application of sanctions to those involved in violent or criminal action appears to have had a tangible effect in altering the behaviour of many armed actors.

Impunity must end. The phenomenon of armed men assaulting medical facilities and personnel, extorting money from financial institutions and women waiting in line for banking services is immoral, illegal and criminal. This must cease immediately. This was my message Tuesday, when I visited Jalaa Hospital for Women and Childbirth to express the UN's solidarity with the staff, after these health workers were assaulted by members of an armed gang.

The appointment of a new Minister of Interior signalled a decision to seriously engage on security in a robust and more determined manner. I am pleased to report that the Minister's first decree was to establish a human rights unit within the Ministry.

There is now a window of opportunity to address the tremendous challenges Libyan security institutions have faced since 2011, and UNSMIL has seized it.

The forthcoming conference on Libya to be hosted by the Government of Italy in Palermo is an occasion for Member States to offer tangible support to the training of professional security forces. I thank the Member States who have already offered assistance. Libyans should be helped to turn the page of their reliance on armed groups for their protection.

In the medium term, we also should contribute to unify and restructure a professional, national army and contribute to the Egyptian-led process.

Mr. President,

he violence in September reflects the underlying fragility in the country. The Libyan conflict is in large part a conflict over resources, and until this is resolved, stability will remain elusive.

Libya is wealthy. Oil production reaches up to 1.3 million barrels of oil per day, and this country of 6.5 million people has seen revenues of over 13 billion dollars in just this first half of the year. However, these figures obfuscate the truth; Libyans have been increasingly impoverished while criminals employ violence and patronage network to steal billions from the national coffers.

Ironically, the violence in Tripoli offered a unique opportunity to introduce long-awaited and much-needed economic reforms. On 12 of September, a range of economic measures were launched in order to improve the living conditions of the Libyan people and reduce the opportunities for militias in the shadow economy.

The imposition of fees on foreign currency transactions caused an almost twenty-five per cent drop in the black-market exchange rate. Closing the gap between the official and black-market rate reduces the margin for exploitation. Prices have dropped for basic goods – sugar, bread, school supplies and second-hand cars.

Many of the long-standing concerns have been mitigated, with the liquidity crisis receding, and the queues outside banks shrinking. Where there used to be deficits, the public coffers are now in surplus.

This was only the first step.

More must be done to further normalise the situation, and prevent the gains being rolled back. The phasing out of fuel subsidies for direct cash transfers will increase the real income of poor families, while preventing billions of Dinars from falling into the hands of smugglers.

One of the country's underlying dysfunctions is the division of its main financial institutions.

To promote reunification and financial accountability, UNSMIL proceeded with the request made by the Presidential Council to this Council, to your council, on 10 July 2018 for a financial review of the Central Bank and its parallel branch in the East. Yesterday, I hosted the second meeting between Governor Kabeer and deputy Governor Hebri, where an agreement was reached on the terms of reference for the exercise and the way ahead.

Here too, the upcoming Palermo conference could provide an opportunity to gain more practical support to establish a system for redistribution of national wealth, not to the benefit of overnight millionaires, but for the whole population.

Mr. President,

Security and economy are two of the three pillars required for stability. The third is the political.

The Presidency Council's cabinet reshuffle on 7 October ushered in four new ministers. The UN will support further appointments which contribute to better delivery to the Libyan people of both services and security. UNSMIL's focus remains on policies, not politicians. On improving institutions, not promoting individuals.

Efforts to amend the Presidency Council continue. UNSMIL appreciates continued contact between members of the House of Representatives and the High State Council, which started in the meetings UNSMIL organised between them in the fall of 2017. We shall see if a true agreement can be reached.

Mr. President

The Libyan people, the UN and the international community have given every opportunity to the House of Representatives to act in the best interests of the country. But the House has failed to uphold its responsibilities. Months after a binding commitment to produce the legislation required to hold a referendum on the Constitutional proposal and Presidential and parliamentary elections, nothing has been seen.

It is now clear that the postponed sessions and contradictory public statements were simply intended to waste time. The body calling itself Libya's sole legislature is largely sterile.

To both Houses, elections are a threat that must be resisted at all costs, but to the citizens, elections are a means of liberation from the ineffective and increasingly illegitimate authorities. According to our latest poll, which I received this morning, 80%, eight zero, percent of Libyans insist on having elections.

Mr. President,

Countless Libyans are sick and tired of military adventurism and petty political manuvers.

The time has come to give a wider and more representative group of Libyans the opportunity to meet on Libyan soil, with no external interference, in order to devise a clean path out of the present impasse, reinforced by a clear timetable.

They want to move forwards with the National Conference, and I agree, this is the way forward.

A summer of tragic events, with terrorist attacks, the Oil Crescent crisis, Derna battles, and most recently, Tripoli clashes, have compelled us to delay this important, potentially historic event which evidently cannot be organised in times of acute polarisation or armed clashes. Now, conditions are more propitious.

The National Conference is to be held in the first weeks of 2019. The subsequent electoral process should commence in the spring of 2019.

The conference will be Libyan-led and Libyan-owned.

It will build on and develop the contributions of the thousands of Libyans who participated in the 77 preparatory meetings held throughout the country and abroad during the Spring of this year.

The conference will provide a platform for, and give voice to, the Libyan people. With it, they can push these LPA institutions; the House of Representatives, the High State Council, the Government of National Accord, to take the necessary and long-awaited steps to move forward the political process.

This conference is not, is not, to be a new institution nor an effort to replace existing legislative bodies. Rather, as provided for by the LPA itself, it shall create a space for Libyans to crystallise their vision for the transition, and no longer be ignored by their politicians. International support for the National Conference recommendations will be crucial for its success.

Mr. President,

I must now address the situation in the South of the country which is becoming ever more precarious. A complete collapse in services to the population. Rising terrorism and criminality. Rampant lawlessness. Threats to the oil fields and the water infrastructure upon which the nation relies. Foreign armed groups on Libyan soil. Shortages of everything, from fuel to cash, from medicine to food. The problems are countless, and no state institutions are there to tackle them.

Long ignored and marginalised, and now used as a theatre for outsiders, resentment in the South is deepening.

We encourage Member States to support the Libyan authorities to address the foreign presence. The threat posed by open borders has enabled the presence of ISIS, Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups across the south of Libya. This threat was again highlighted by the 29 October ISIS attack on the village of Fuqaha.

We will continue working with the local authorities to provide humanitarian assistance and urge the GNA to step up service-delivery. We would of course welcome your efforts in this field. To that effect, this month we will organise a specific briefing to the international community to present the situation in the South in all its complexity.

Whilst the East remains more stable, there are still challenges there, in political, humanitarian and security terms; including how people coming from Derna are being treated. By my next brief, we shall have opened a United Nations office in Benghazi, which will enable us to better serve people across the east of the country.

I also welcome the PC decision to establish the Women's Empowerment and Support Unit on the 24th of October; in line with LPA. This is a landmark development for all Libyan women, and UNSMIL remains committed and ready to provide support to this unit and urges the international community to do the same.

Mr. President,

Members of the Council,

Libya is caught in a futile and destructive cycle, fuelled by personal ambitions and the nation's stolen wealth. While it is a country endowed with great means in human and material terms it is fast becoming the tragedy of the lost opportunity. The risks are too high to allow this to continue. Civilians are killed in indiscriminate fighting, terrorists are looking at it as a shelter after their defeats elsewhere, human rights are violated on a daily basis, and the next generation of Libyans are held back from fulfilling their potential.

Despite the complexity of the crisis, the solution is straightforward. The path to stability is for the demands and needs of the Libyan citizens to guide the way, and the politicians to follow.

Together, we must support the citizens to speak to their institutions, press the institutions to listen, and compel these institutions in delivering upon what is required of them.

Having taught international relations a good chunk of my life, I acknowledge that competition and rivalry between powers is normal, and somehow legitimate. But its reflection on Libya is truly detrimental. Too many use it as an excuse to maintain an unfair and volatile status quo that impoverishes Libyans and transforms the country into a source of alarm for its neighbors and beyond.

The unity of the International Community is therefore crucial if we want progress in Libya's stabilization; the real challenge being to rebuild a united, legitimate and sustainable state. Not less than that.

Thank you.