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HR/VP speeches

Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the plenary session of the European Parliament on the situation in Libya

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Check against delivery!

Thank you Ms President,

The recent escalation in Libya started at a moment just when the possibility for peace was becoming real. The LNA [Libyan National Army], led by General [Khalifa] Haftar, attacked Tripoli at the very time when UN Secretary-General [Antonio] Guterres was visiting the country, and on the eve of the National Conference, a Conference that still has the potential to represent a new beginning for Libya.

The European Union has worked for almost one year, very closely together with the United Nations and the [UN] Special Envoy [Ghassan Salamé], to prepare the ground for a Libyan led and Libyan owned National Conference that would prepare the ground for elections under the appropriate legal and constitutional conditions.

We have seen, day by day, the aspiration, the readiness, and the desire of all the Libyan people – the citizens of Libya – to move their country forward, to turn the page, to unite and build unity and peace. A country that has potentially an enormous capacity to move forward and a lot of resources and of potential.

The National Conference still represents the hope of an entire country. Just a few days before that military escalation took place, [I was myself together with \[Antonio\] Guterres, with the Secretary General of the League of Arab States \[Abu Gheit\], with the Chairperson of the African Union \[Commission, Moussa Faki\] and Ghassan Salamé, the UN Special Envoy](#), in Tunis in the margins of the League of Arab States Summit, reaffirming the unity of the international community to support this Libyan led, Libyan owned political process that would have helped tuning the page and uniting the

country in peace.

The offensive against Tripoli has been and is still an attack against hope, an attack against the concrete perspective of achieving peace in Libya.

We have seen this happening before: When peace becomes a real possibility, concrete, possible, it is also when the resistance against peace gets stronger and more evident.

Now we are facing a protracted conflict, with victims in high numbers – including civilians – and a stalemate on the ground. A situation on the ground that is blocked in terms of the line of the conflict but still very active in terms of clashes with the use of arms that we should not be seen used in Libya.

This confirms what we have always known in Europe and in the international community, at least in the recent years: there is and there cannot be any military solution to the Libyan conflict. If the war continues, it will only lead to greater suffering. If someone continues to seek military victory, everybody will lose.

The only scenario where the whole country, where all Libyans, in an inclusive and unified manner moves forward, is a negotiated political solution. If the Libyan parties will not seek a win-win solution, that the international community starting from the European Union would be ready to accompany and support, than all the people of Libya will continue to suffer and the entire region will continue to suffer.

I just spoke again, today, with the UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salamé. Our work is joined and the European Union supports his work on a daily basis. Our support to his work is – I would say – is even stronger today than it has ever been in the past, along three main lines on which the European Union and our Member States have acted united in these last weeks:

First, to affirm the need to open humanitarian corridors as a matter of urgency, and fully respect humanitarian international law.

Second, to establish an immediate ceasefire that I am sure the UN are ready to negotiate.

Third, to go back to the political track, with the holding of the National Conference as soon as possible to give Libyans, the Libyan people – men and women of all generations, of all cities and of the countryside of the country – the chance to outline the common way forward.

These are the three elements on which I am sure, for sure the European Union, for sure the United Nations, but I am also sure the rest of the international community will be ready to support and accompany the Libyan people.

Let me add that not only Libyans and not only the region are suffering. Refugees and migrants trapped in detention centres are also at risk. We are working with the IOM [International Organisation for Migration] and with the UNHCR [UN Refugees Agency] to evacuate them outside Libya, or to move them to safer places inside Libya.

The most recent flight that brought back home safely and voluntarily tens of migrants left Tripoli just a few days ago. Our work with the UN agencies continues, but obviously, conditions on the ground are more and more difficult by the day.

This is also why we call on all parties to allow the swift and unconditional evacuation of the detention centres on the front line, as also requested by High Commissioner [Filippo] Grandi last week.

The work we have done together with the UN agencies with the help of the African Union and the Libyan authorities on the ground has brought enormous results in this last year with tens of thousands migrants voluntarily and safely repatriated through the work of the IOM, and those in need of international protection, protected through the UNHCR channels.

The conflict in Libya and the escalation from the military perspective – I know that some in Europe perceive it as a growing threat of growing flows. But first and foremost, it also represents a threat to the lives of those migrants and refugees that are trapped in Libya, whose life is more at risk than others, and for which with the UN agencies, we have been trying to work to try and save lives, and to try and empty the detention centres. The military offensive is also making this work more difficult.

To conclude, let me restate very clear that a swift return to the negotiating table is essential and still possible. We believe, more than ever, that the UN track and the National Conference are the only real opportunity for a peaceful resolution. The multiplication or proliferation of different initiatives may lead to distractions that definitely would not be helpful in this moment.

Humanitarian corridors and respect for the humanitarian international law, ceasefire negotiated by the UN and return to the negotiating table and the holding of the National Conference with the full participation of the Libyan people.

I would like to add that when I say Libyan people, I refer to Libyan men and women. Let me spend one word for praising the Libyan women that sometimes have been in the shadow, trying to accompany the political process so far, in difficult conditions. I believe that the European Union together with the United Nations have an interest, as in any conflict we face, to promote the role of women at the negotiating table, and in the reconciliation process on the ground.

This is what we are trying to contribute to achieve, to support the UN work, try to unite the Europeans. If in the past, we have seen different approaches, I believe today, all European Union Member States understand that our common work is required to avoid Libyans to turn in different directions and disaggregate the potential of unity through a political dialogue that is in their hands.

[We have stated clearly last time last week the European Union united position](#) on all these lines in the name of all the 28 Member States. I would now appeal to all regional and international players to unite in support of the United Nations work, of the political perspective for dialogue and unity in Libya, to avoid stakeholders themselves find external reasons for disuniting even further.

On the EU side, I can say that today, they find common, united front in support of the United Nations efforts to bring the parties around the table and define a common perspective for Libya in peace and security.

Thank you.

Link to the opening remarks:

Closing remarks:

First of all, I am sorry that some of the colleagues that have asked questions then left the room. I would have loved to answer to these questions.

Let me also say something somehow sad that – as we discussed something so serious on which there is no surprise, unfortunately, it has been years we are struggling and working, not only the European

Union but also the United Nations, and some of our partners in the region, like the African Union or the League of Arab States, we are struggling with the situation – in what is the last session of this mandate in the Parliament, there are more spectators to this debate than Members of the Parliament. I think this issue would deserve a little bit more attention from your colleagues, but this is a praise for those of you that are in the room.

I would also like to thank you for the support to the work we have done - it has not been easy - in these recent weeks and years to build a common European position on this. You know that the starting points were not necessarily always converging, but today we do have a converging European policy and action, to stabilise the country, giving the possibility to the Libyans, the citizens, the stakeholders, the different interlocutors and institutions, as fragile as they are, as conflictual as they are, to find their own way to unite in the country.

I want to thank this Parliament for the support to this work and for some good work we have managed to achieve even in these very difficult circumstances.

I think we can be proud of two things. One is the support we have consistently given to the UN and the UN Special Envoys over time, they have always very much counted and relied on the European Union's support, politically, financially, diplomatically, on the ground. I was also very proud of the fact that our personnel went back to Tripoli before the personnel of most of our Member States.

Recently this has changed but I am looking forward to have them back in Tripoli as soon as possible. I visited myself the premises of our offices in Tripoli, re-inaugurating them after a long period of absence from the city and I am very much looking forward to this situation going back to a sort of normal, probably – as it is never fully normal in Libya and for sure not in these times.

I think that the Libyans know that the Europeans and the European Union, as an institution, has always been trying to help in a constructive and honest manner. Again, both financially, politically and diplomatically. This has been so also thanks to the support of this Parliament.

The second thing I am proud of in this difficult environment is the work we have managed to finally start and that we need to consolidate on the detention centres, aiming at emptying them and closing them together with the UN agencies. I would have dreamt of a debate in this hemicycle today on Libya and Libyans, and not always on Libya and migration, because if the situation is deteriorating on the ground in a military escalation in Libya, let me tell you very frankly: my first concern is for the human losses, for the deterioration of the prospects for the political dialogue.

Obviously there is a risk of migration for the European Union, but there is first and foremost a risk for the migrants themselves, for their lives, and I thank those of you that have raised this, because I think we have first and foremost to take into consideration the fact that every person we are referring to are human beings.

Secondly, there is a work we need to do with Libya and with the Libyans for the sake of Libya and Libyans themselves. It is not only transit country, it is a neighbouring country and it is a country that deserves to be treated as a partner from our side.

Having said that, in recent years we have started to work with the UN agencies – IOM, UNHCR –and with the African Union to empty the detention centres, to contrast the trafficking and the smuggling of human beings. In one year or so, we have managed to help the IOM and the UNHCR - in particular the IOM - to evacuate some 40,000 stranded migrants and refugees from the detention centres, back to either the centres of the UNHCR from where they are, then protected further, or to their countries of origin, also with the cooperation of the African Union and its Member States.

Obviously, as I was signalling all of this work in a situation that is militarily escalating and less secure on the ground becomes more difficult. This is why I supported and I reiterate this again, the call that Filippo Grandi [UN high Commissioner for Refugees] has made last week for all parties to guarantee access to the personnel, the staff of the UNHCR and the IOM to the detention centres, and this work to be continued, because it is extremely important and vital for their own sake.

Some of you have asked me specific questions that relate more to our work on migration than to Libya. I am happy to be very clear on that. I was already on the record on these issues and I have been very clear that the European Union does not consider Libya as a safe country. This is something that not only myself but also other colleagues from the Commission have repeatedly stated. This position has not changed and it seems quite self-evident given the current circumstances.

Some of the Members of the European Parliament have asked me about [EUNAVFOR MED] Operation Sophia. As you know, because this has not been a secret, my suggestion to the Member States had not been that of withdrawing the naval assets. I have always argued in favour of the naval assets to remain in the international waters, because they have proven to be a very effective deterrent for the smugglers and the traffickers. If the arrivals from Libya to Italy have gone down by more than 80% in the last couple of years it is thanks to the presence of Operation Sophia at sea, among other things but mainly. Obviously you see the contradiction in terms of having a naval operation without naval assets.

Unfortunately the decision of Member States have been in another direction. I still hope that they can reconsider their decision and decide to redeploy naval assets in the international waters. I think that in these particular circumstances, it would make a lot of sense, not only to deter the activities of the smugglers and the traffickers of human beings across the Mediterranean, but also to fulfil the duties and responsibilities we have taken of implementing the UN Security Council resolutions when it comes to the arms and the oil embargo control, that obviously can be much more effectively carried out with a naval presence at sea.

Again, I have no problem in saying this again in this hemicycle, I have said it publicly already very openly, I believe that without the naval assets, Operation Sophia will not, is not able to fulfil its full mandate in an effective manner. I hope Member States will reconsider this decision. It is their responsibility, their choice and I hope they will come to different conclusions in the coming weeks.

I would like to conclude by saying that I would like to thank again all of you, from different political groups, for the support to this strong call and strong work that we are doing on the ground, not since yesterday but since years together with the UN, in this moment, for going back to a Libyan owned and Libyan led political process that can be the only hope for the country to get out of this endless transition, of the conflict, to de-escalate the military tensions and attacks, and to find a way to create strong inclusive institutions and peace in the country.

I believe that we can clearly say that apart from a few voices, I have seen here broad support for the strong call, first of all, to open humanitarian corridors for delivery of urgent humanitarian aid, an immediate ceasefire, the return to the political track and the convening of a National Conference under the auspices of the UN, that we have prepared together, supported together and that, I believe, still represents the hope for Libyans to have a proper country and a proper present and future.

Link to the video:

Press contacts

Press Contacts:

Maja KOCIJANCIC

[Maja KOCIJANCIC](#)

Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations

+32 (0)2 29 86570

+32 (0)498 984 425

Matteo ARISCI

[Matteo ARISCI](#)

EEAS Press Officer

+32 (0)2 29 80833

+32 (0)460 84 2115

www.eeas.europa.eu

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