

Report shows Libya is threatened by foreign mercenaries, rape, slavery and torture

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Fighters loyal to Libya's Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah on guard in capital Tripoli in May
[File: Mahmud Turkia/AFP]

Tripoli, May 30 (RHC)-- Libya faces a serious security threat from foreign mercenaries and private military companies, in violation of international law.

In a United Nations report obtained by The Associated Press news agency, experts also accused seven Libyan armed groups of systematically using unlawful detention to punish perceived opponents, ignoring international and domestic civil rights laws including ones prohibiting torture.

The oil-rich North African nation plunged into turmoil after a NATO-backed uprising in 2011 toppled Muammar Gaddafi, who was later killed. It then got divided between rival governments – one in the east, backed by military commander Khalifa Haftar, and a UN-recognised administration in the capital of Tripoli. Each side is supported by different militias and foreign powers.

The report said Chadian opposition groups operate from Libya and Sudanese fighters have been recruited by Haftar. Turkish-backed Syrian fighters have been seen by the panel in government military camps in Tripoli while Haftar-affiliated Syrian fighters operate alongside Russia's Wagner Group fighters in the strategic northern city of Sirte and nearby Jufra. At least 300 of these Syrians have returned home and have not been replaced by Haftar, the report said.

The panel said it continues to investigate the deployment of Wagner fighters and the transfers of arms and related materiel to support its operations. In April 2019, Haftar and his forces, backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, launched an offensive to try and capture Tripoli. His campaign collapsed after Turkey stepped up its military support for the UN-recognised government with hundreds of troops and thousands of Syrian mercenaries.

An October 2020 ceasefire deal led to an agreement on a transitional government in early February 2021 and elections were scheduled for last December 24 aimed at unifying the country. But they were cancelled and the country now has rival governments with two Libyans claiming to be the prime minister.

The ceasefire agreement called for the speedy withdrawal of all foreign fighters and mercenaries but the panel said "there has been little verifiable evidence of any large-scale withdrawals taking place to date."

The Wagner Group passes itself off as a private military contractor and the Kremlin denies any connection to it. But the United States identifies Wagner's financier as Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch who is close to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The panel said it considers a Samsung electronic tablet left on a Libyan battlefield by a Wagner mercenary and obtained by the BBC in early 2021 to be authentic. It contained maps of the locations of 35 unmarked anti-personnel mines in the Ain Zara area of south Tripoli, which was then a front-line area under Haftar's control, supported by Wagner.

Several mines had never been reported as being in Libya before and their transfer, therefore, violated the UN arms embargo, the panel said. It added a booby-trapped mine exploded during a mine clearance operation killing two civilian mine clearers.

Experts also received information about the recovery of anti-tank mines from positions primarily occupied by Wagner in south Tripoli.

The panel said the failure to visibly mark the anti-personnel and anti-tank mines and issue warnings of their locations to civilians in the areas was a violation of the international humanitarian law by Wagner.

The panel said it identified 18 arms transfers and four examples of military training between March 2021 and late April 2022 that violated the UN arms embargo. Among the examples it cited was the Luccello, a ship flying the Comoros flag that delivered 100 armoured vehicles to Haftar in Benghazi.

The experts said four migrants suffered human rights abuses in secret detention facilities controlled by human traffickers in the areas of Tazirbu in the Libyan desert and Bani Walid near the northwest coast. They said victims were enslaved, severely beaten, deliberately starved and denied medical care.

“Two former female detainees, who were 14 and 15-year-old girls at the time, further testified to the panel that multiple perpetrators repeatedly raped them, subjected them to sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence during the period of over 18 months in a secret detention facility in Bani Walid,” the report said.

The panel said it also found that guards responsible for protecting the most vulnerable migrants in the government-run Shara al-Zawiya detention centre “took a direct part in or turned a blind eye to consistent acts of rape, sexual exploitation and threats of rape against women and girls” detained there between January and June 2021.

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