



Men stand on their wooden boats under heavy rain on the banks of Buriganga River in Dhaka yesterday. — AFP

Emirati and Turkish drones battling it out in Libya skies

TRIPOLI: In Libya, where rival forces are deadlocked south of Tripoli, a months-long battle for the skies between Turkish and UAE drones has failed to break the stalemate, analysts say. Since April 4, when eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive to capture Tripoli - the capital and seat of the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) - frontlines have moved little. Faced with a standoff, the two sides have turned to sophisticated weaponry in the hope of gaining an advantage in a battle that has killed over 1,000, injured close to 6,000 and forced 120,000 people from their homes, according to UN figures.

Libya is "possibly the largest drone war theatre in the world", UN envoy to Libya Ghassan Salame said in a video released by

the United Nations on Wednesday. Salame noted "a much more intense use of drones" in recent weeks, saying they had been deployed "600 times on one side and 300 times on the other side", without clarifying the sides to which he was referring. Drones entered the military arena in June, despite a UN arms embargo on Libya in place since the 2011 revolt that overthrew the regime of Muammar Gaddafi.

"Given the intensive use of air assets in the first month of the offensive... most of the combat aircraft of the two air forces are grounded due to a lack of maintenance," said defense analyst Arnaud Delalande. "Not wanting to be left without air power, Haftar and the GNA seem to have turned urgently towards another type of craft: drones," he told AFP.

'Direct engagement'

Experts say that Haftar has procured Chinese-made Wing Loong drones from his main backer, the United Arab Emirates. His rivals turned to Ankara, which is increasingly open about its support for the GNA, to equip themselves with Turkish Bayraktar drones. Each side has since focused on trying to destroy their adversary's drones and command centers.

Haftar's forces have repeatedly carried out strikes on Mitiga airport, closing down Tripoli's only remaining air link to the outside world, saying Turkish drones or their command centers were being targeted. "This air war has become a direct engagement between the main sponsors of the LNA (Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army) and the GNA" - Abu Dhabi and Ankara, respectively, Delalande

said. Retired Libyan general Ahmad Al-Hasnaoui said that drones were providing support to ground forces and playing "an important role in weakening (enemy) forces and supply lines".

'Crucial role'

Libyan analyst Jalal Al-Fitouri said both sides have intensified air raids against enemy drone bases since the end of June. "The UAE's Wing Loongs have been looking for the runways of the Bayraktar drones to destroy the GNA's air power, but they haven't succeeded," Delalande said. "The Turks have diversified their strategy by using roads to launch their drones and by spreading relay antennas over the entire area between Tripoli, Misrata and (the central district of) Jufra to extend the

range of their drones," he added.

But irrespective of whether Wing Loong or Bayraktar drones win the air war, "the drones are not an end in themselves" if ground forces don't advance, Delalande said. Faced with static frontlines on the ground, the UN is encouraging the warring parties to relaunch a political process on hold since Haftar launched his offensive. But Delalande believes "Haftar does not intend to negotiate" and thinks the air war can be won. "He is pushing the United Arab Emirates to engage further. Airstrikes from Mirages (jets belonging to the UAE airforce) are not to be ruled out in the coming weeks," Delalande warned. Ankara, for its part, "no longer hides its support for Tripoli, without directly engaging its own air power," he said. — AFP

Dubai builders wooing buyers...

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economy, may not stabilise before 2021. "Over a period of time, some correction will happen," exposing the strong and the weak in the industry, said P N C Menon, chairman of Dubai-based multinational developer Sobha Group. The process, which will leave only the strongest firms standing, is likely to last for another three or four years, Menon told AFP at an industry expo where his firm was showcasing its latest multi-billion-dollar project, an 8.0 million square feet beachfront development of luxurious apartments and high-end townhouses.

Like Sobha Group, dozens of local and international property firms taking part in this week's Cityscape Global event were offering unprecedented payment terms to drum up business. Buyers are being asked to stump up as little as five percent of the value of the property, down from 25 percent in the boom times, and pay the rest over 10 years or more straight to the developer - without the need for a bank mortgage. Developers are also offering to cover the costly 4.0 percent municipality registration fee.

Property ownership in Dubai, which boasts the most diversified economy in the oil-rich Gulf region, is completely open to foreigners - both residents and visitors, and for investment or residential purposes. But real estate deals in Dubai plunged 21.5 percent to \$60.7 billion last year, according to government data. Property prices and rents have been on the decline since mid-2014, shedding around a third of their value. "As far as

downward trends go, this one has lasted far longer than most, and far longer than most of us expected," Lukman Hajje of research firm Property Finder said in a research paper. "With the amount of property still being launched, under construction, and being handed over - it's unlikely that we have seen the bottom of the market just yet."

Dubai property prices dropped by 5.8 percent in the second quarter of 2019, falling for the 11th quarter in a row according to central bank data. Despite the glut, last year some 22,000 new units were completed in the emirate, according to consultancy JLL, the highest number of new properties to enter the market in the past five years. JLL forecasts that up to 117,000 units could be added to Dubai's housing pool by 2020, putting further pressure on prices in a city where glitzy apartments line the coastline, and gated communities stretch back into the desert.

The rising cost of living in Dubai, a city with a population of 3.3 million - over 90 percent of them expats - is seen as a key element suppressing demand. The city state was ranked the 26th most expensive place in the world for expats to live in 2018 according to US consultancy Mercer, second behind only Tel Aviv in the Middle East. In 2013 Dubai ranked 90th on the same survey.

Companies whose profits have taken a nosedive have taken to setting up stands in the city's mega malls to display their products and court customers, and some are pivoting from vast condos and villas to more affordable projects. Raymond Khouzami, CEO of developer Al Thuria Group, was at Cityscape to promote the firm's 47-storey tower of mostly small studios and one and two bedroom apartments. "We have to go with the market. We have to extend our payment plans and go through bank facilities and longer payment plans. We have to drop the prices as the market requires," Khouzami said. — AFP.

MP: Kuwait's fiscal position sound...

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Social affairs ministry undersecretary Abdul Aziz

Lebanese stage protests over...

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Others chanted a popular refrain of the 2011 Arab Spring protests across the region: "The people want the fall of the regime". "We toil day and night just to be able to live," said a 52-year-old Lebanese woman, asking to remain anonymous. "They've starved us, stolen from us. Enough is enough," she told AFP, visibly enraged.

Parliament in July passed an austerity budget aimed at rescuing an economy crumbling under massive debt and unlocking billions of dollars in international aid. This week, fears of a dollar shortage have sparked anxiety over a possible devaluation of the Lebanese pound and price hikes. Local press reported that banks and money exchange houses were rationing their sales of dollars, which are used alongside the pound in daily transactions.

The head of the central bank has denied that the country is facing a currency reserve crisis, but it has become very difficult to withdraw dollars from ATMs in

Shuaib earlier said the total number of Kuwaiti women receiving social aid who had not updated their information dropped from 6,000 to only 1,130 since May. Shuaib added that in view of the increasing number of those upgrading their information, the ministry is coordinating with relevant authorities to accelerate the process so that beneficiaries can get their aid in time once the new information is attested by the ministry aid committee, which annually pays a total of KD 280 million to over 44,000 citizens.

Beirut. "There's a real problem with the high cost of living," said a 33-year-old protester who gave his name as Ali Hlshem. "The pound is getting weaker and the central bank won't admit it," said the bearded young man, a black and white keffiyeh scarf draped over his head to keep off the beating sun. If that is the case, "increase the minimum wage" of \$450, he said.

In the northern seaside city of Tripoli, dozens of protesters also gathered, some setting fire to tyres, the National News Agency said. Petrol station owners on Thursday declared a strike over banks refusing to supply them in dollars needed to pay importers. But they suspended it the following day after reaching a deal with the government to pay suppliers in Lebanese pounds.

Economic growth in Lebanon has plummeted in the wake of repeated political deadlocks in recent years, compounded by eight years of war in neighboring Syria. Lebanon's public debt stands at around \$86 billion - more than 150 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) - according to the finance ministry. Eighty percent of that figure is owed to Lebanon's central bank and local banks. The small Mediterranean country has promised donors to slash public spending as part of reforms to unlock \$11 billion in aid pledged at a conference in Paris last year. — AFP



DUBAI: This photo taken on Sept 25, 2019 shows a view of the Cityscape Global exhibition at the Dubai World Trade Centre. — AFP

Fire hits Saudi high-speed...

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The railway runs 450 km via the Red Sea port of

Saudi king's bodyguard shot...

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The incident was triggered by a "personal dispute", Al-Ekhbariya state television reported without giving further details. It added that Fagham died in hospital from his injuries and that an investigation into the shooting had been launched.

The bodyguard, with his tall, slender bearing, was well known among Saudis and often pictured attending

Jeddah, transporting passengers at speeds of up to 300 km per hour. Saudi King Salman inaugurated the railway in Sept 2018. Officials described it as the biggest transportation project in the region. In 2011, the kingdom signed a deal for a Spanish consortium to build the rail track, supply 35 high-speed trains and handle a 12-year maintenance contract. Saudi is boosting its infrastructure spending and expanding its railways - including a \$22.5 billion metro system under construction in the capital Riyadh - as it seeks to diversify its oil-dependent economy. — AFP

closely to the king. He also guarded the late King Abdullah, taking after his father who served under the former ruler for three decades. The Okaz newspaper said the public took a liking to Fagham from the days when he guarded King Abdullah. "With this, he gained the leadership's trust and the love of the Saudis," the paper said. "News of the killing has come as a thunderbolt for Saudis, who were deeply saddened by his death," it said.

Okaz described him as "the most famous of all the royal guards" and said he was known for his vigilance and tact. It said that he accompanied the king on all his travels, inside and outside of the kingdom. Fagham was to be buried yesterday evening near the Great Mosque in Makkah - Islam's holiest site. — AFP