LNA Forces Clash with the Government of National Accord in Libya

Libyan National Army (LNA) forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar have escalated their attacks on the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). The LNA has laid siege on the Libyan capital since April 2019, as they attempt to capture the city from the GNA, the United Nations-backed and largely internationally-recognized government of the country. Recent clashes have broken out between the two sides despite increased international pressure to halt the violence over concerns about the growing coronavirus pandemic. Both U.S. President Donald Trump and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan have expressed the need for a ceasefire in conflict-ridden nations such as Libya and Syria in the face of the ongoing global health crisis.

Diplomatic efforts to reach a solution between the warring sides have been unsuccessful in recent months. The latest round of talks in Geneva, Switzerland which took place in late February failed to make any progress, as representatives for both the LNA and GNA suspended their participation in the United Nations-sponsored peace talks. Shortly after that, the U.N. envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salame, resigned for health reasons and warned that the arms embargo on Libya was being violated consistently by both sides. Last week, the European Union attempted to appease those concerns and stated that it would launch a new naval and air mission to stop additional breaches of the embargo, however new clashes broke out between the LNA and GNA on Friday and into the weekend. Following the continued LNA siege on Tripoli, the GNA launched an offensive to push LNA forces back from key positions around the capital city and to take control of the al-Watiya air base – which has become a vital supply line for Haftar's troops. Both sides have claimed success in the skirmish, with the LNA stating that they forced GNA troops to retreat and the GNA announcing that they arrested a number of LNA fighters and foreign mercenaries.

Just a week ago, both sides expressed commitment to a humanitarian pause in fighting so that government authorities could focus on mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. There are widespread fears that the global pandemic could devastate the conflict-ridden nation, where nearly a decade of fighting has destroyed key infrastructure and created medical supply shortages. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Libya expressed major concern that a possible coronavirus outbreak would overwhelm the already-stretched aid response in the country. Since Haftar's LNA forces launched their offensive on Tripoli back in April of last year, there have been 62 confirmed attacks on health facilities and the healthcare system in Libya would be unable to cope with a significant outbreak of the virus, according to the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

The fighting in Libya has worsened in recent months, as foreign actors continue to intervene despite pledges to the contrary at a large-scale peace summit in Berlin earlier this year. It remains to be seen whether the ongoing global health crisis puts a halt to the conflict, if only for the time being at least.