



People walk in a popular street, in Ankara, Turkey on June 17. Turkey has made the wearing of face masks mandatory in five more provinces, following an uptick in COVID-19 cases. Health Minister Fahrettin Koca tweeted Tuesday that the wearing of masks is now compulsory in 42 of Turkey's 81 provinces. (AP)

Bodies washed up Libyan coast

Turkey violating UN's Libya arms embargo

BRUSSELS, June 18, (AP): France has accused Turkey of repeated violations of the UN arms embargo on conflict-torn Libya and says Ankara is an obstacle to securing a ceasefire there.

The European Union has a naval operation in the Mediterranean aimed helping to enforce the arms embargo, but Turkey, a NATO member whose efforts to join the EU have stalled, suspects that it is too one-sided, focusing on the internationally recognized Libyan administration in Tripoli, which Turkey supports.

"The main obstacle to the establishment of peace and stability in Libya today lies in the systematic violation of the UN arms embargo, in particular by Turkey, despite the commitments made in Berlin" talks early this year, the French foreign ministry said.

Libya has been in turmoil since 2011, when a NATO-backed uprising toppled leader Muammar Gaddafi, who was later killed. The country has since been split between rival administrations in the east and the west, each backed by armed groups and different foreign governments.

The government in Tripoli led by Faye Sarraj is backed not just by Turkey, which sent troops and mercenaries to protect the capital in January, but also Italy and Qatar. Rival forces under the command of Khalifa Hifter, who launched an offensive on Tripoli last year, are supported by France, Russia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and other key Arab countries.

"Turkey's support for the government of national accord's offensive goes directly against the efforts to secure a ceasefire, which we support," the French ministry said. "This support is aggravated by the hostile and unacceptable actions of Turkish naval forces toward NATO allies, which is aimed at undermining efforts taking place to uphold the UN arms embargo."

"This conduct, like all foreign interference in the Libyan conflict, must cease," it warned.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell is trying to secure NATO's support for the EU naval effort but diplomats and officials have said that Turkey is likely to block any such move.

Borrell, who will take part in a video meeting with NATO defense ministers Thursday, said he hopes an EU-NATO "cooperation agreement can be set up" shortly, because helping to enforce the arms embargo is in the security interests of both organizations.

Asked Wednesday what the response might be, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said "we are looking into possible support, possible cooperation, but no decision has been taken. There is dialogue, contacts, addressing that as we speak."

Borrell has highlighted some of the challenges the EU naval operation faces. He said its personnel tried to make contact last week with a "suspicious" Tanzanian-flagged cargo ship that was being escorted by two Turkish warships. He said the ship refused to respond, but its Turkish escorts said the cargo was medical equipment bound for Libya.

The operation tried to verify the information with Turkish and Tanzanian authorities, and reported the incident to the United Nations, but there was nothing more it could do, he said.

The bodies of two African migrants and a 5-month-old boy who drowned in a shipwreck over the weekend were found on the coast of Libya, a UN official said Wednesday. Separately, the Libyan coast guard intercepted a ship with 130 Europe-bound migrants and returned them to Libya.

Safa Msehli, a spokeswoman for the International Organization for Migration, said the three bodies washed up near the Libyan coastal town of Zawiyah.

They were among a dozen people who were missing and feared drowned after a boat carrying around three dozen migrants capsized in the Mediterranean Sea on Saturday. Zawiyah is about 48 kms (30 miles) west of the capital, Tripoli. Two children were reported to be among the missing migrants.

The 130 migrants intercepted Wednesday were mainly from Sudan, and included seven women and three children, Msehli said.

Libya, which descended into chaos following the 2011 uprising that toppled and killed Gaddafi, has emerged as a major transit point for African and Arab migrants fleeing war and poverty to Europe.

Most migrants make the perilous journey to Europe in ill-equipped and unsafe rubber boats. The IOM said in March that its estimated death toll among migrants who tried to cross the Mediterranean passed the "grim milestone" of 20,000 deaths since 2014.

US hits Syria's elite with new economic and travel sanctions

39 individuals including the Assads targeted

WASHINGTON, June 18, (AP): The Trump administration has increased the pressure on Syrian President Bashar Assad, his wife, Asma, and his inner circle with new economic and travel penalties for human rights abuses and blocking a settlement of the country's bloody nine-year conflict.

The State Department said it had designated 39 Syrian individuals, including the Assads, as well as members of their extended family, military leaders and business

Talks over dam ends in deadlock

CAIRO, June 18, (Agencies): Egyptian Minister of Irrigation and Water Resources Mohammad Abdulati has announced that the latest round of talks over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) had ended without progress due to Ethiopia's intransigence.

Ethiopia had refused to sign a tripartite binding agreement, as per the international law, on disputed legal and technical issues related to the filling and operation of the dam, said minister Abdulati in a statement late Wednesday following conclusion of the tripartite GERD talks between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia in Khartoum.

He added that Ethiopia had also rejected any binding legal mechanism to settle potential disputes over the dam or technical mechanism on the dam filling and operation during drought times.

Instead, it suggested that any understanding reached over the controversial issues shall be considered only as guidelines which they could amend unilaterally, the minister pointed out.

He unveiled, that Ethiopia, moreover, had stressed that it had the absolute right to set up projects on the Blue Nile.

Furthermore, Ethiopia rejected Egyptian and Sudanese irrigation ministers' proposal to refer the matter to the prime ministers of the three countries as a last chance to figure out a solution to the stalled negotiations.

Minister Abdulati underlined that despite the a decade-long of failed negotiations with Ethiopia over the dam, Egypt had partaken in the recent round of negotiations which were initiated by Sudan and in good faith in an effort to reach a fair and balanced agreement on the dam.

He stressed that Egypt always respected Ethiopia's right in achieving its development goals without causing any harm to the Nile downstream countries (Egypt and Sudan), he said.

Unfortunately, Ethiopia maintained its stubborn stance, he lamented.

The yearslong dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile pits Ethiopia's desire to become a major power exporter and pull millions out of poverty against Egypt's concern that the dam will curtail its critical share of the river if filled too quickly.

Sudan has long been caught between the competing interests of Egypt and Ethiopia. It stands to benefit from Ethiopia's dam, including having access to cheap electricity and reduced flooding, but it has raised fears over the operation and safety of the Ethiopian project and says it could endanger Sudan's own dams.

The three countries resumed negotiations on June 9 via video conference after months of deadlock. Officials from the US, EU and South Africa, the current chairman of the African Union, attended the talks as observers.



A supporter of pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), wearing a mask to protect from the spread of coronavirus, participates in a rally in Istanbul on June 17. Members of the party are travelling to the capital Ankara from the southeastern and northwestern corners of the country to protest an on-going government crackdown on the political movement that officials accuse of links to Kurdish militants. (AP)

Sudan's Irrigation Minister Yasser Abbas told reporters in the Sudanese capital Khartoum after talks ended Wednesday that the three counties' irrigation leaders have agreed on "90 percent or 95 percent" of the technical issues but the dispute over the "legal points" in the deal remains dissolved.

Abbas said they decided to turn to their political leadership to end the standoff. No date was set for a return to talks, he said.

"A deal should be signed before the start of the filling, (of the dam)" he said. "There is no solution but negotiations."

Ethiopia's water and irrigation ministry said that although technical issues were resolved a key legal issue had yet to be worked out.

"Beyond ensuring the optimal operation of the GERD, the negotiation requires prudence to safeguard the permanent right of Ethiopia over the Blue Nile," the statement said.

Sudan wants to ensure that water releases from the Ethiopian dam are coordinated with water levels at its Roseries dam, around 100 kms (62 miles) from the GERD, the Sudanese minister said.

He said Sudan and Egypt rejected Ethiopia's attempts to include articles on water sharing and old Nile treaties in the dam deal. "This is a deal only on the operating and the filling of the dam," he said.

Hisham Abdalla, a Sudanese negotiator, said at the news conference that they had agreed on US-brokered talks to make the deal "legally binding."

"Ethiopia, however, in this round retracted, suggesting that the deal to be a guiding one that could be modified or canceled. This is a very serious situation," he said.

executives. Many were already subject to US sanctions, but the penalties also target non-Syrians who do business with them.

Separately, the Treasury Department said it has imposed penalties on 24 individuals, companies and government agencies that "are actively supporting the corrupt reconstruction efforts" of Assad.

Syria's foreign ministry said the measures were a violation of international law and showed that US officials were behaving like "gangs and bandits." The Assad government also accused the US of hypocrisy, saying that in light of the recent domestic unrest across America, the United States should be "the last to utter words about human rights."

Asma Assad, who had not been previously targeted, was cited as becoming what the State Department said was "one of Syria's most notorious war profiteers." She has increasingly sought to centralize all charity work under her aegis and the Syria Trust for Development, where most foreign aid for postwar reconstruction is channeled.

The sanctions are the result of legislation known as the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, named after the pseudonym of a Syrian policeman who turned over photographs of thousands of victims of torture by the Assad government.

"Today's designations send a clear message that no individual or business should enter into business with or otherwise enrich such a vile regime," White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany said in a statement.

Nearly half of the designated entities are construction companies involved in development projects, primarily in Damascus, the Syrian capital, on land expropriated from displaced Syrians.

"To make way for five-star real estate, the regime has evicted and razed the property of tens of thousands of residents from areas in Damascus that were until recently working class neighborhoods sympathetic to the opposition," the Treasury Department said in a statement. "Treasury's action today exposes individuals and entities, including private-public partnerships, that seek to profit from this displacement and reconstruction."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the designations represent "the beginning of what will be a sustained campaign of economic and political pressure to deny the Assad regime revenue and support it uses to wage war and commit mass atrocities against the Syrian people."

"Anyone doing business with the Assad regime, no matter where in the world they are, is potentially exposed to travel restrictions and financial sanctions," Pompeo said in a statement.

Besides rights abuses, those targeted also were hit for obstructing a peaceful political resolution to the long-running conflict.

Among those newly designated were Assad's sister Bushra; his brother, Maher, and his wife, Manal; Mohamed Hamsho, the head of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce; his wife, Rania al-Dabbas; his son, Ahmed, a show jumper in Syria's equestrian team in the 2012 Olympics; and Ghassan Ali, a right-hand man of Maher Assad, and Samer al-Dana, who are leaders of the Syrian military's Fourth Division. The powerful Fourth Division is also designated.

The announcement was widely expected, and before it, Syria devalued its currency by 44 percent and announced a new official exchange rate for the pound.

Syria's troubled economy has sharply deteriorated, prices have soared and the pound had collapsed in recent weeks, partly because of fears that the sanctions would further isolate the country.

Experts say the new sanctions will be a heavy blow to a nation where more than 80 percent of the people already live in poverty, according to the United Nations. Syrian government officials have called it "economic terrorism."

Syria is already facing sanctions – some in place even before the war – imposed by the United States and European countries against officials or individuals linked to Assad's government. The new penalties will likely severely affect the inflow of foreign capital particularly for postwar reconstruction, especially from Russia and Iran, Assad's main allies, as well as China and neighboring countries.

The Washington-based Syria Justice and Accountability Center said the sanctions were "aiming to deter foreign financial engagement and commercial reconstruction agreements with the Assad government."

But the group said the penalties also contain provisions exempting humanitarian goods and services, similar to other sanctions, and intended to ensure the flow of aid and mitigate the economic consequences on the Syrian people.

People are hoarding dollars, and many commercial transactions have stopped. The government, in an effort to control the flow of foreign currency and the exchange rate, has cracked down on hawalas, or offices of exchange that are used by the majority of Syrians.

A financial crisis in neighboring Lebanon has affected the Syrian banking sector and Syrians who had saved or did commercial transactions through Lebanon. Iran's economic woes, and the economic impact of coronavirus restrictions in the region, have added to the crisis in Syria.