

Libyan troops seize North Korea-flagged oil tanker

Libyan government forces on Monday seized a North Korea-flagged tanker after it had loaded \$30 million worth of crude oil at a rebel-held port, officials said. The rebels, however, denied the government had taken the ship.

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Lawmaker Abdelwahab al-Qaim said the vessel had been seized at the Es Sider port, where rebels are reportedly trying to sell oil independently of the Tripoli government.

“The ship has been seized by government forces. There are no damages to the ship,” he said.

The standoff at Al-Sidra, one of Libya’s main oil export terminals, has been a major challenge to the authority of the central government. The port has been held for months by eastern fighters demanding more regional autonomy from Tripoli. The incident involving the tanker marks the easterners’ first attempt to sell oil.

At the UN headquarters in New York, Libya’s UN ambassador, Ibrahim Dabbashi, told the UN Security Council that the international community must assist Libya in detaining the ship “so that we would not have to use force against it, because such a step might cause the pollution of vast areas of the waters and coast life of the Mediterranean which would require an international effort and huge resources to control”.

Dabbashi said that Libya’s weak central authority and lack of “a deterrent force” has encouraged some “outlaws” to disrupt oil exporting ports, which has led to a 70 percent decline in Libya’s income over the past seven months.

Libya is currently using its sovereign wealth funds to run the government but if the current level of spending continues without austerity measures, he warned that “the country might face bankruptcy and the social order would be severely threatened and undermined”.

Conflicting accounts

Adel al-Tarhouni of the Libyan Revolution Operations Room, a pro-government militia, said the ship's captain surrendered in the evening. The tanker had been surrounded by a pro-government flotilla, reportedly including fishing boats armed with mortars and rocket launchers operated by militias, for two days.

Libyan Culture Minister Habib al-Amin said at a news conference that the oil tanker was under control of the naval forces. Al-Amin denied militias were involved on the government side, saying the operation was carried out by "national forces". He said an attempt to resist was met with force, but there were no casualties. He said that due to technical problems the tanker had not left the port but was in the process of being led out to another port.

Mohammed El-Harari, a spokesman for state-owned National Oil Corp (NOC), said the ship was now being escorted to western Libya.

But Essam al-Jahani, affiliated to the eastern militia, denied the government's claims. He said his group arrested some pro-government fighters.

The conflicting accounts could not be independently reconciled, and neither side immediately presented proof of its claim.

Officials say the tanker is believed to be owned by a Gulf businessman.

'Piracy'

Dabbashi, the UN ambassador, said 250,000 barrels of oil had been loaded on the North Korea-flagged tanker and the money paid for it was then diverted to the "outlaw group".

He warned the flag state, the ship's owner, and the country that takes the oil that Libya considers this "piracy against resources of the Libyan people" and will pursue efforts to detain the ship, prosecute the crew and recover the money.

Libya's central government has been weak since the 2011 overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

The east has been hit by a particularly acute security vacuum. Militias rooted in anti-Gaddafi

rebels, some with extreme Islamist militant ideologies, are blamed for attacks on security officers and others. Foreigners have also been targeted.

The Libyan news agency LANA said that the body of an Indian doctor was found on Monday with gunshot wounds in the eastern city of Derna, which is a stronghold of the extremists.

On March 2, Gunmen shot dead a French engineer in the eastern city of Benghazi, and in January, a British man and a Kiwi woman were shot execution-style on a beach 100 kilometres west of Tripoli.

Risk of oil spill

Tarek Mitri, the top UN envoy in Libya, warned the UN Security Council on Monday that the country faces the risk of “unprecedented violence” following a dramatic increase in fighting and killings in the last three months.

He said the security situation is continuing to decline and widespread frustration with the political process is mounting.

He cited the storming of the General National Congress building by protesters demanding its dissolution on March 2 and clashes west of Tripoli and in the south and southeast where political, economic and social grievances spilled over into armed violence between rival groups, many along ethnic and tribal lines.

Mitri expressed hope that a force just approved by Libya’s parliament to deter the North Korea-flagged vessel from moving from Libyan shores will succeed.

“Putting the Mediterranean at risk of an oil spill is not something that anyone in the world would welcome,” he said.

(FRANCE 24 with AP, REUTERS)

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