

Italy brings together Libya rivals on conference sidelines

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PALERMO, Sicily (AP) — Italy's premier hosted a meeting Tuesday of Libya's rival leaders on the sidelines of a conference aiming to help its former colony crack down on Islamic militants and human trafficking.

Photos of the encounter show Premier Giuseppe Conte presiding over a handshake between the Tripoli-based U.N.-backed prime minister, Fayez Serraj, and rival Gen. Khalifa Hifter, commander of the self-styled Libyan National Army that is based in Libya's east.

Other leaders attending the Palermo conference, including French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, also participated. The office of Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, who backs Hiftar, confirmed he joined the "mini-summit" Tuesday with Conte and other leaders.

Italy's populist government organized the two-day conference in hopes of making progress on ending Libya's lawlessness and promoting a U.N. framework for eventual elections.

But expectations were limited, with Hiftar's camp making clear that he wasn't participating in the conference itself but rather meeting with leaders of neighboring countries on the sidelines. Neither Hiftar nor el-Sissi posed for the final conference group photo.

A statement on social media Tuesday by a spokesman for Hiftar's army, Ahmed al-Mesmari, suggested that Hifter was snubbing the meeting because he accuses representatives from the Tripoli side of working with

militias he considers illegitimate, as well as Islamic extremists backed by Qatar.

However, an Italian diplomatic official, briefing reporters in Palermo, said the atmosphere of the meeting was cordial and collaborative.

Libya plunged into chaos after the 2011 uprising that ousted and killed longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi, and it is now governed by rival administrations in the east and west with both relying on the support of militias.

It has also become a haven for Islamic militants and armed groups, including several from neighboring countries, which survive on looting and human trafficking, particularly in the remote south of the country.

Italy's anti-migrant government is keen in particular to stem the Libyan-based migrant smuggling networks that have sent hundreds of thousands of would-be refugees to Europe via Italy in recent years.

AP producer Maggie Hyde in Palermo; Brian Rohan in Cairo and Nicole Winfield in Rome contributed.