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Italy PM visits Libya strongman ahead of talks

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© POOL/AFP | Libyan military strongman Khalifa Haftar, parliament speaker Aguila Saleh and unity government head Fayez al-Sarraj (L-R) hold talks in Paris on May 29, 2018

BENGHAZI (LIBYA) (AFP) -

Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte visited the Libyan city of Benghazi on Sunday to meet military strongman Khalifa Haftar ahead of talks aimed at stabilising the war-torn North African country.

Libya's key political players are to meet international leaders in Palermo, Sicily on Monday in the latest bid by major powers to kickstart a long-stalled political process and stage elections.

Conte travelled to Benghazi, 650 kilometres (400 miles) east of Libya's capital Tripoli, to discuss the "latest developments on the Palermo conference", said a senior official from Haftar's self-proclaimed Libyan National Army.

Haftar, who visited Rome in late October, has confirmed he would take part in the conference, according to the Italian government.

But pro-Haftar Libyan media later reported that he would boycott the talks, without saying why.

Contacted by AFP, his staff declined to confirm or deny the reports.

Libya fell into chaos following the NATO-backed 2011 uprising that toppled dictator Moamer Kadhafi in 2011.

Two rival administrations have since emerged -- the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and an eastern administration backed by Haftar.

They agreed in May to hold national elections on December 10.

But acknowledging the country's chaotic political situation, the UN on Thursday conceded elections will not be viable before at least the spring of 2019.

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