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Leaders meet in Italy to find settlement in Libya

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PALERMO, Sicily (AP) — Representatives of Libya's quarrelling factions and of countries keen on stabilizing the North African nation started meetings in Sicily on Monday, as Italy encourages a political settlement that could bolster the fight against Islamic militants and stop illegal migrants from crossing the Mediterranean to Europe's southern shores.

Italy's anti-migrant populist government organized the two-day conference in Palermo with an eye to making progress on a long-elusive goal of ending years of lawlessness in Libya. Rival Libyan administrations jockey for power, militias clash in often deadly bids to boost prestige and influence, and human traffickers exploit the chaos to pursue their lucrative business from their base in the North African country.

Arriving a few hours before a closed working dinner to begin the conference, Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte told reporters the conference aims to "help end the armed conflicts and to help the Libyan stabilization process" in the framework of the United Nations.

Eventually, the West hopes Libyans will have a democratic

election, but the conference isn't aiming to fix a date. "We want the Libyan people to be able to democratically decide their own future," Conte said.

There was skepticism on how much progress might be made toward stability at the conference in a luxury seaside hotel in large part because it wasn't clear if a key player, Gen. Khalifa Hifter, commander of the self-styled Libyan National Army with a power base in eastern Libya, would meet with his Libyan rivals in plenary sessions set for Tuesday.



A Carabiniere (Italian paramilitary) officer patrols the area next to Villa Igiea, the site of an international conference on Libya, in Palermo, Italy, Monday, Nov. 12, 2018. A gathering of leaders of Libya's quarrelling factions and of countries keen on stabilizing the North African nation is taking place Sicily. It aims to find a political settlement that would bolster the fight against Islamic militants and stop illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe's southern shores. (AP Photo/Antonio Calanni) (AP)

Conte warmly shook hands with Hifter as he greeted guests arriving for the dinner session.

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.

Conte met on Monday with Ghassan Salame, the U.N. special envoy to Libya, who last week told the U.N. Security Council that the "status quo in Libya was untenable" with the country.

One of Salame's other meetings on conference sidelines saw him exchange views on political developments with Fayez Serraj, the prime minister of the U.N.-backed government in Tripoli and a chief rival of Hifter.

Italy has been a staunch Serraj backer.

Libya's neighbor to the east, Egypt, backs Hifter. Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, among the participants, had recently reiterated Cairo's call for lifting the international arms embargo against Libya.

In an interview published Monday in Italian daily La Stampa, Conte portrayed the gathering as an opportunity to "sustain the creation and deployment of regular armed forces and security forces."

For rights advocates, the conference posed another kind of

opportunity: To draw attention to the plight of migrants trapped in Libya, now that the nearly nightly launching of human traffickers' boats from Libya's coasts has sharply dropped off as Italy and Malta have closed their ports to private rescue groups' vessels.



Police officers stand in the area of Villa Igiea, the site of an international conference on Libya, in Palermo, Italy, Monday, Nov. 12, 2018. A gathering of leaders of Libya's quarrelling factions and of countries keen on stabilizing the North African nation is taking place Sicily. It aims to find a political settlement that would bolster the fight against Islamic militants and stop illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe's southern shores. (AP Photo/Antonio Calanni) (AP)

"Amnesty International is calling on all those taking part in the conference to ensure that human rights of all people in the country, including refugees and migrants, are placed at the center of their negotiations," the rights group said in a statement.

It decried that Libya has "repeatedly delayed" the opening of a long-promised processing center for the U.N. refugees organization, to relocate refugees from "abusive detention centers."

With Libya's rich oil and gas resources, energy-rivals Italy and France have been jockeying for influence.

France hosted a meeting on Libya in May, when rival Libyan leaders tentatively agreed on a roadmap for parliamentary and presidential elections but declined to sign a declaration

outlining their commitments.

Conte's six-month-old government — and especially anti-migrant Interior Minister Matteo Salvini — sees a more stable and secure Libya as the best outcome for Italians, and for the right-wing voter base in particular.

Hifter has been instrumental in the fight against militants, going after them in their eastern hideouts and occasionally foraging into the vast and largely lawless south. However, a deadly overnight attack last month by militants from the extremist Islamic State group showed the limitations of his army.

Meanwhile, encounters on the conference's sidelines focused on encouraging Libyan economic reforms.

Stephanie Williams, a deputy to Salame, the U.N. special representative, official, said in a tweet that there was a "positive tendency" in the economic sphere. She noted that bank reserves' liquidity had increased and thus there was a decline in black market exchange activity.

"Dealing with the economic dimension of the Libya crisis will help prepare the grounds for a future political settlement," Claudia Gazzini, a former political adviser to Salame and currently a consulting analyst on Libya with the International Crisis Group, commented in a tweet.



A police officer stands in the area of Villa Igiea, the site of an international conference on Libya, in Palermo, Italy, Monday, Nov. 12, 2018. A gathering of leaders of Libya's quarrelling factions and of countries keen on stabilizing the North African

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Frances D'Emilio in Rome, and Rami Musa in Benghazi, Libya, contributed to this report.

A previous version of this story was corrected to eastern instead of western Libyan in Hifter reference.