

Rival Libya leaders meet for first time since May

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13 Nov 2018 06:00PM

World

FILE PHOTO: Khalifa Haftar, the military commander who dominates eastern Libya, arrives to attend an international conference on Libya at the Elysee Palace in Paris, France, May 29, 2018. REUTERS/Philippe Wojazer

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PALERMO, Italy/BENGHAZI, Libya: Libya's two main rival leaders met on Tuesday for the first time in more than five months, as Italy hosted a conference seeking to reconcile the country's rulers a week after the United Nations shelved plans to hold an election next month.

Prime Minister Fayed al-Serraj, whose weak but internationally recognised government is based in western Libya, met the commander who rules most of the east, Khalifa Haftar, in Palermo, Sicily, an Italian government source said.

Haftar had flown to the conference on Monday evening and was holding meetings on the sidelines, despite having said he would not participate. A photo showed him meeting Serraj in the presence of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

More than eight years after long-serving dictator Muammar Gaddafi was toppled by Western-backed rebels with NATO air support, no central authority has asserted control over Libya and armed groups control the streets.

The United Nations has blamed a spike in violence for its decision to shelve plans to hold an election next month. It still aims for a vote next year, but says Libyans should first decide what sort of election they want to hold.

Italy, the former colonial power which has large oil and gas interests in Libya and has been working to halt people-smuggling from the Libyan coast across the Mediterranean, had called the summit in an effort to reconcile Libya's competing factions.

Haftar, a former officer in Gaddafi's military who lived for years in exile in the United States, has emerged as the leader of the most powerful armed faction, having defeated Islamist militants in the east with support from Egypt and Arab states.

Serraj heads the government in the west, which has struggled to exert control beyond the capital Tripoli. Rival parliaments in the east and west also claim legitimacy as the legislature for the entire country.

Although he met Serraj, Haftar poured scorn on the summit.

“I will not take part in the summit even if it takes 100 years,” he said in a television interview viewed by Reuters before it was aired. He said in a statement he had come to Italy only to have bilateral meetings with leaders of neighbouring countries.

Libya has been eager to play a high profile role in Libyan diplomacy, competing with France which staged a conference in May, the last time Haftar and Serraj met. The May conference produced a commitment to hold the December election which has now been indefinitely postponed.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a strong supporter of Haftar, was in Palermo for the conference, along with officials from Western countries, Arab states and Russia. Sisi and Haftar both skipped the opening dinner on Monday evening.

On Monday U.N. Libya envoy Ghassan Salame told Reuters he hoped another attempt to hold an election will take place by June but Libyans should first hold a national conference in early 2019 to decide on the poll's format.

France has been courting Haftar, who is supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which see his forces as a bulwark against Islamists. Italy is seen as the main backer of Serraj and his weak Government of National Accord (GNA), and has worked with local groups in Libya to stop Europe-bound migrants from embarking by boat.

(Reporting by Ayman al-Warfalli and Ulf Laessing; Editing by Peter Graff)