



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Flood victims rage in eastern Libya - is a repeat of the 2011 Arab Spring on the horizon?



The authorities in eastern Libya have been trying to repress protests of their citizens, who are furious at their inability to prevent the severe consequences of recent floods and the large number of victims.

The authorities of the eastern part of the divided country, with the military administration of the Libyan National Army (LNA) and its commander, General Khalifa Haftar, apparently fear the escalation and spread of discontent in otherwise strenuous security and economic conditions.

Immediately following the mass protests earlier this week, officials have expelled all journalists from the Mediterranean coastal town of Derna.

In the city of about 100,000 people, Internet and cell phone connections have since been disrupted, some journalists have been detained and questioned by the authorities, and visa requests from foreign journalists have been denied. According to a UN announcement, one of their teams was prohibited from entering the city.

These measures seem quite repressive, given that several hundred people protested on the square around the Sahaba Mosque in Derna, demanding responsibility for the massive destruction and casualties due to the floods.

Their target was the speaker of the parliament, Aguila Saleh, because he tried to remove the government's responsibility for the consequences of the floods, attributing them to "fate" and God's will.

Similarities with 2011

However, angry residents of Derna seek an apology from the authorities for the 2 dams that burst upstream of the town due to the torrential rains. In addition, the proposal that international institutions conduct the investigation into the disaster's causes rather than domestic ones, in whom citizens obviously lack confidence, particularly infuriated the authorities.

The crowd set fire to the house of the mayor of Derna, Abdulmenam al-Ghaithi, who held the post during the days of the floods, but was replaced by a decision of the authorities of eastern Libya. Apparently, this did not satisfy the protesters.

The events in Derna were unavoidably reminiscent of the massive protests during the "Arab Spring" of 2011, which resulted in the removal of long-time dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. At the time, Libya entered a vortex of internal conflicts and the de facto division of the country into 2 parts, which continues today.

The harsh reaction of the authorities to the first street threat from angry citizens shows that they are also aware of their incendiary potential and the possible repetition of the traumatic events of 12 years ago.

Particularly worrying for the loyal military administration of eastern Libya have been the calls of street protesters in Derna to compatriots from Benghazi, the largest city in the east of the country, to join in the protests.

Their chants that "all Libyans are brothers", are actually a call for rebellion in other parts of the country, which have also suffered significant human casualties and tragic destruction.

"We feel this is a moment of change. Hopefully, this can be the legacy of this horrible disaster", Elham Saudi of the Libyan organisation Lawyers for Justice told The New York Times.

Problems with the arrangement with Russia

The authorities of eastern Libya, which do not have international recognition, have actual reasons to be worried because the discontent of citizens due to the catastrophic consequences of the floods adds to the already existing long list of general insecurity, corruption and internal chaos for which there is no solution in sight.

General Khalifa Haftar is in the middle of a sensitive transition of his multi-year partnership with the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group after the coup attempt and assassination of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and the Kremlin's decision to absorb Wagner members into the regular army.

About 1,200 Wagner Group members have been a significant security support for Haftar's government for years, because they provided security for the most sensitive military and commercial facilities, bases and oil facilities.

With the coup attempt at the end of June and the death of Wagner Group leader Prigozhin 2 months later, his clients in eastern Libya have been forced to change their cooperation arrangement with Moscow.

The visit of the Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov to Benghazi was arranged at the end of August when he had talks with Khalifa Haftar. No details were released from the meeting, but one of the topics was Russia's request for its warships to access the ports of Benghazi or Tobruk.

These Russian demands to strengthen its presence in the Mediterranean and the north of Africa place Haftar under significant pressure from NATO.

This was also the topic, if not the main reason, for General Michael Langley, commander of the U.S. Africa Command, to visit Libya this week, where he brought a large amount of humanitarian aid, and also spoke with the government in Tripoli and with Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi.

Internal struggles for supremacy

Ultimately, the risk of spreading people's discontent in the east of Libya finds Khalifa Haftar and his entourage heavily involved in internal struggles for supremacy, given his age (80) and failing health.

The struggle for influence and Haftar's legacy is not only between tribal leaders and the numerous militias involved in governing the eastern part of the country, but also within his family.

Two of Haftar's sons, Saddam and Belqasir, to whom their father has already entrusted some management responsibilities, have been working hard on their reputations within the clans and the public, preparing to take power, but more often as rivals, not as partners.

The catastrophic consequences of the floods in the east of Libya threaten to turn into a new crisis, this time regarding public health and epidemiology issues, which the government has yet to show the competence to deal with.

Burdened by corruption and internal friction, it fears the spread of popular discontent, remembering well that it was precisely on such a wave a decade ago that it reached the top.