



BRIEFING PAPER

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Libya: upsurge of violence amid the pandemic

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Summary

The battle for control of Libya has been waged inconclusively since [Colonel Gaddafi's rule ended in 2011](#). Over the last year conflict has intensified again, with a surge in violence recently, despite the threat presented by coronavirus.

East-west split

The present line-up of forces is the Government of National Accord (GNA), supported by the UN and based in the capital Tripoli, and the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), led by General Haftar and based in the east.

The UN has mandated ceasefires and an arms embargo, but these have proved ineffectual. In 2017 and 2018 the LNA conquered much of Libya's territory and the major cities apart from the capital, Tripoli. In 2019 General Haftar announced an offensive on Tripoli.

Peace processes

The Geneva Process supported by the UN and the German-backed [Berlin Process](#) are the two international forums seeking agreement on a ceasefire. The final conference of the Berlin Process, in January 2020, seemed hopeful - outside countries pledged to refrain from interfering and to respect the arms embargo. Hopes were soon dashed, however, as it became clear that outside powers were still arming their proxies. The [Geneva process](#) has floundered, with parties saying they could not negotiate while attacks were taking place. There have also been meetings in Moscow but these have not had an impact on the fighting.

Coronavirus

In recent weeks, [fighting for the capital Tripoli has further intensified](#), at a time when the country is threatened by the coronavirus pandemic. Libyan health services were already disrupted by absence of medical staff and physical damage to facilities. One of the main hospitals designated to take Covid-19 patients has been shelled several times in the last few weeks. Electricity and water supplies in the capital have also been cut, while migrants and internally displaced people are crammed into inadequate accommodation. Tripoli is dangerously exposed to the pandemic.

Proxy battles

The conflict has become a proxy conflict between supporters and opponents of political Islam (whose most important group internationally is the Muslim Brotherhood). Turkey and Qatar tend to support political Islam and are aligned with the GNA. Opponents of political Islam include Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. These countries, along with Russia, have intervened on the side of the LNA.

The UAE, Jordan and Turkey were singled out in a [report to the Security Council](#) for violating the arms embargo.

It has also been difficult to make any progress with political negotiations because the US has not been strongly involved and European governments are increasingly distracted by the coronavirus crisis in their own countries.

The EU has launched a replacement for its [Operation Sophia](#). Unlike *Sophia*, the new [Operation Iriini](#) will focus on monitoring for compliance with the [UN arms embargo](#) rather than people trafficking.

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The UK Government supports the UN-backed Government of National Accord, and has an [aid programme in the country](#). The UK is spending £51.6 million from April 2017 to March 2021 to help build Libyan institutions while also funding humanitarian and health work with £4.29 million, in a programme due to finish this year.

1. The “second Libyan civil war”

The hardening of the Libyan conflict into two camps and General Haftar’s campaign to defeat the Government of National Accord and take the capital, Tripoli, have led some to call the present phase a “second Libyan civil war”.

1.1 East-west split

In the early days after the fall of Gaddafi,¹ a chaotic Libya was split between militias. By 2014 this resulted in the establishment of two rival governments and a large swathe of Libya under the full control of neither. The outcomes of elections in July 2012 and June 2014 failed to win broad acceptance. The rival parliaments, the General National Council and the House of Representatives, based respectively in Tripoli in the west and Tobruk in the east, emerged from the victors in the two sets of elections, and made alliances with a range of military formations.²

Libya is now split between eastern forces of the self-styled Libya National Army (LNA), led by General Khalifa Haftar and the UN-supported Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli. The GNA is headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj.

Each camp is a coalition of forces, often based in particular cities. A powerful militia based in Misrata, for example, supports the GNA.

Throughout 2017 and 2018, LNA forces advanced across Libya, taking control of oilfields and coastal cities, including Benghazi and Derna.

1.2 Haftar’s Tripoli offensive

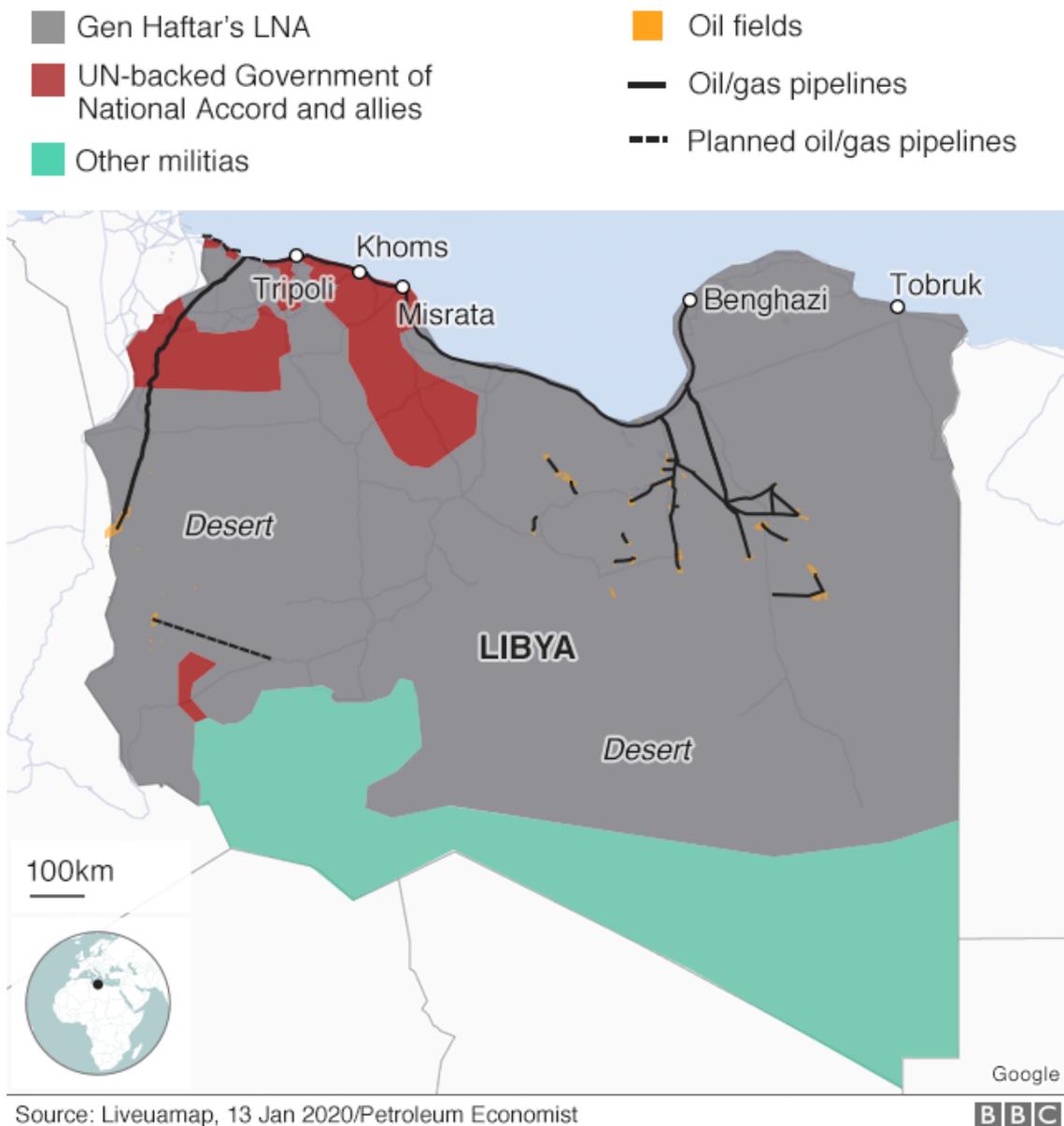
General Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army, announced an attack on Tripoli in April 2019. Since then, some 2,000 Libyans have been killed in and around the capital and more than 150,000 driven from their homes.

In January 2020 General Haftar took control of Sirte, Libya’s third-largest city, leaving the Government of National Accord in control only of Tripoli and some small areas around it.

¹ For more about the 2011 downfall of Colonel Gaddafi and the UK’s part in that, see the Commons Briefing Papers: [Military Operations in Libya](#), October 2011; [The interpretation of Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya](#), April 2011; [The Security Council’s “no-fly zone” resolution on Libya](#), March 2011

² For more background and information on the UN-backed Skhirat process, which led to the formation of the Government of National Accord, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Libya: the consequences of a failed state](#), May 2018

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Source: [BBC](#)

In February and March, fighting near Tripoli escalated further, causing the GNA to withdraw from talks in Geneva (see below). The intense bombardment of Tripoli coincided with the first reported cases of coronavirus infection. A Tripoli resident was desperate:

We are done in this country. There is a war and we hear clashes all day, fearing a missile will fall near us. Now there is coronavirus. If it spreads in Libya, I think we can only pray.³

“...we can only pray”

³ [‘Libya battles escalate as coronavirus arrives in country’](#), Reuters, 25 March 2020

2. Attempts at mediation

2.1 Berlin Process

Starting in September 2019, the German Government hosted several meetings aimed at persuading the rival parties to agree a ceasefire and join a peace process led by the UN. Six expert-level meetings were held, feeding into a [conference in Berlin in January 2020](#). The Foreign Ministers from eleven countries attended: China, France, Russia, the UK, the United States, Italy, Germany, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. Algeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo participated as mediators and the EU, the UN, the African Union and the Arab League also participated.

The participants “committed to refrain from interfering in the armed conflict and to support the work of the UN Special Representative”, Ghassan Salamé, and gave an undertaking to “respect the existing UN arms embargo and step up its implementation”.⁴

Participants
committed not to
interfere

On 12 February the Security Council adopted [resolution 2510](#), welcoming the Berlin commitments and insisting on a nationwide ceasefire and the enforcement of the arms embargo. The UK-drafted text [was backed by](#) 14 of the Council Members, with Russia abstaining.

On 16 February, the first meeting of the Berlin Process follow-up committee was held. Since then the meetings have fizzled out.

2.2 Moscow

On 13 January, Khalifa Haftar and Fayeze al-Sarraj went to Moscow, where Russian and Turkish officials attempted to persuade them to sign a truce. Angela Merkel of Germany flew to Moscow and President Macron of France expressed support for the talks.

At the time it was viewed as a sign of the [increasing influence of Turkey and Russia](#) in the Middle East and North Africa region.

General Haftar left Moscow without signing a ceasefire agreement, and subsequent developments showed that the Moscow talks had not achieved a breakthrough.

2.3 UN-sponsored Geneva talks

5+5 talks

On 18 February the UN-sponsored process resumed in Geneva. This was the [second round of the 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission \(JMC\) talks](#) on a ceasefire. The Commission is formed by five representatives each of the GNA and General Haftar LNA, respectively.

Contentious points in those talks included:

- the return of former fighters to their communities

⁴ [UN Security Council Resolution 1970, 26 February 2011](#)

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- what kind of military monitoring was needed, who was going to do it and whether they would be armed or unarmed
- what to do with the heavy weaponry in Libya,
- what should happen to non-regular fighters, and
- who should be in charge of the police force.⁵

The negotiations broke down, although representatives of the LNA and the GNA agreed to put a draft ceasefire agreement to their respective leaderships and to meet again.

Economic and political tracks

The Geneva process also involves a political and an economic track. [Both sides pulled out](#) of a meeting on the political track on 25 February 2020, saying the discussions were impossible without progress on the military track.

A [meeting on the economic track](#) took place on 11 February 2020, and included politicians, representatives of the main Libyan financial and economic institutions and economic and financial experts. The fragmentation of Libya's economic institutions and a banking crisis were high on the agenda, but progress was limited.

Participants agreed on the Terms of Reference for the Libyan Expert Economic Commission.

Both sides pulled out of Geneva talks

⁵ ['As Libya talks resume in Geneva, UN negotiator seeks to overcome sticking points'](#), UN press release, 18 February 2020

3. Escalation amid the coronavirus crisis

3.1 Intense fighting

The Berlin commitments to end external interference and respect the arms embargo were not honoured. In mid-February a UN official described the arms embargo as "[a joke](#)" and said that the ceasefire was holding "by a thread".

Arms embargo "a joke"

Shortly after the Berlin meeting General Haftar had ramped up pressure on the GNA by blockading oil exports from the crucial eastern ports. In April 2020 the Libyan National Oil Corporation announced that the [blockade had cost Libya almost \\$3.9 billion](#).

On 2 March UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salamé [resigned due to ill health](#), as the UN denounced "indiscriminate bombing" in and around Tripoli.

On 30 March, Crisis Group reported that fighting around Tripoli was further intensifying and the plea for a truce was being ignored. Haftar's Tripoli campaign has [caused over 2,000 deaths](#) and some 10,000 injuries. About 200,000 people have been driven from their homes and almost 900,000 were already in need of humanitarian assistance before the pandemic.

900,000 in need of humanitarian help

3.2 Coronavirus

In March 2020, the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian charity, warned that [coronavirus could "decimate"](#) Libya. On 25 March, the UN Secretary General called for a [global ceasefire to deal with the emergency](#) — the same day that Libya confirmed its [first coronavirus case](#).

The UN-backed government in Tripoli has promised \$350 million to respond to the crisis. The [health system has collapsed](#), however, because of damage and because so many foreign medics have left the country, so it is not clear how the money will be spent.

Tripoli's [al-Khadra hospital](#), one of Libya's most important, has been repeatedly targeted, allegedly by militias supporting General Haftar. The hospital, designated for the coronavirus response, was closed in April 2020.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres reminded combatants that medical facilities are "protected under international humanitarian law and that attacks on them [may constitute war crimes](#)".

The siege conditions in Tripoli are causing [enormous problems for residents whose gas and electricity have been cut off](#), according to aid groups. Pipelines supplying gas and water have been cut by militias supporting General Haftar. With some [150,000 people internally displaced](#) in and around Tripoli, hygiene and social distancing are difficult. The situation of migrants in camps is worse still.

Plea for a ceasefire

On 17 March a joint statement by Algeria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Tunisia, the UAE, the UK and the US, and the EU delegation demanded a humanitarian truce.

On 27 March, the EU said that [fighting had increased](#), in defiance of the ceasefire call.

4. Why are negotiations so unproductive?

The split over political Islam

The Libyan civil war has provided a theatre for the broader confrontation in the region between governments supportive of political Islam – Turkey and Qatar particularly – who support the Government of National Accord and those opposing it, led by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who support General Haftar and claim that the GNA is led by Islamic extremists.

Lack of focus from international actors?

Russia has lent its support to General Haftar. France has allegedly “[covertly helped arm and train](#)” Haftar’s forces. Italy backs the GNA but has [not been very influential](#), despite Italy’s interests in Libyan energy and in controlling irregular migration.

The US has not been heavily involved in political negotiations. Having stood back from the 2011 campaign, Washington may still hope that Europeans can help sort out the aftermath.

Making negotiations even more difficult is the fact that pressure for a ceasefire has weakened, as officials everywhere concentrate on the coronavirus crisis.

4.1 The arms embargo

UN experts’ report

In December 2019 the UN Panel of Experts on Libya [reported to the Security Council on violations of the arms embargo](#) set out in [Resolution 1970 \(2011\)](#) and [Resolution 1973 \(2011\)](#).

The report singled out Jordan, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, who “routinely and sometimes blatantly supplied weapons, employing little effort to disguise the source”.

Importing fighters is also in breach of the UN arms embargo, but the most important intervention has been the supply of drones to the LNA, which initially gave them air superiority over the GNA. Drones armed with missiles or artillery have caused a lot of damage in the campaign for Tripoli. One advantage is their accuracy, meaning that they cause less collateral damage than conventional weapons.

Drones have dominated the conflict

The experts concluded that UN Member States should initiate an inspections regime to help enforce the embargo, as provided for in Resolutions [2292 \(2016\)](#) and [2473 \(2019\)](#).

Qatar

GNA Prime Minister Sarraj travelled to Qatar in December 2019, where Qatari Emir Tamim Al Thani pledged economic and security support for the GNA. Qatar is not named in the UN experts’ report as directly violating the arms embargo, however.

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Russia

In February 2020, Russia abstained on the UN [resolution](#) calling for enforcement of the arms embargo and a ceasefire, in a perceived snub to the UN's mediation efforts.

The resolution also decried the increasing involvement of mercenaries in the conflict. Some 200 Russians employed by the [Wagner private security group](#), including snipers, have been fighting in Libya.

On 23 March the UN-backed Government of National Accord said that Syrian fighters contracted by Wagner had flown into Libya, which the Government said risked bringing coronavirus to the country.⁶

Mercenaries from the Wagner private security company

Sudan and Chad

Sudan is part of the pro-GNA camp with Turkey and Qatar, and the 3,000 Sudanese men who arrived in Libya in December 2019 have been shoring up the GNA on the outskirts of Tripoli.

Other Sudanese armed groups have fought on behalf of both sides in Libya, as have fighters from Chad, according to the UN Panel of Experts.

Turkey

In November 2019 Turkey and the GNA had signed agreements allowing the deployment of Turkish troops in Libya, although Turkey said they would not be involved in combat. Despite this, Turkey reported two Turkish citizens had died on 25 February.

The troops, military advisers, artillery, ammunition and other equipment arrived in Tripoli in January 2020, coinciding with a controversial maritime agreement between Turkey and the GNA that purported to [share much of the Eastern Mediterranean's energy resources](#) between Turkey and Libya.⁷

Particularly important among the Turkish supplies were US-built air defence systems that reduced the threat of drones being used by the LNA.

The Turkish aid changed the dynamic of the battle and helped prevent Tripoli from falling to General Haftar.

Turkish aid changed the dynamic

[Reports suggest that Turkey is also organising Syrian ethnic Turkmen militias](#) and members of the Free Syrian Army, a total of some 2,000 fighters,⁸ to fight for the GNA for money. Turkmen are ethnically related to Turks. Both the Free Syrian Army and the Turkish Government have denied that this is taking place.

⁶ ['Libya says foreign mercenaries could bring coronavirus to region'](#), *Financial Times*, 23 March 2020

⁷ Neighbours Greece and Egypt have protested about the maritime agreement. It is connected with the dispute over Cyprus, where Turkey has been drilling for gas in contested waters near the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

⁸ 'Suspected military supplies pour into Libya as UN flounders', *Guardian*, 11 March 2019

UAE

The UAE has supplied (and possibly operated) Chinese-made drones in Libya, which gave General Haftar air superiority. There have been more than 100 UAE military flights to Libya, possibly carrying military supplies.⁹ According to the UN, this included supplying the Russian aerial defence system Pantsir-S1 to Haftar's forces.

⁹ [‘Suspected military supplies pour into Libya as UN flounders’](#), *Guardian*, 11 March 2020

5. The EU military operation

In February 2020 [EU leaders agreed](#) to terminate [Operation Sophia](#),¹⁰ and launch a new mission in the Mediterranean to support the Berlin process. It would focus on policing the UN arms embargo with a mixture of naval, satellite and aerial surveillance assets.

Operation Iridi

After two months of negotiations over the new operation, EU Foreign Ministers formally launched [Operation EUNAVFOR MED Iridi](#) on 31 March 2020; the mandate will initially last until 31 March 2021.

The operation will work within the framework of UN Security Council Resolutions,¹¹ which allow for the inspection of vessels on the high seas off the Libyan coast that are suspected of carrying arms and related material to and from Libya.

As secondary tasks, the operation will also:

- Monitor illicit exports from Libya of crude oil and petroleum products.
- Contribute to the capacity building of the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy.
- Disrupt human smuggling and trafficking networks.

At a press conference, EU High Representative Josep Borrell answered questions about the rescue of migrants at sea:

Anyone in the sea has to be rescued. That is international law. These ships are not patrolling the sea looking for people to be rescued, their mission is clearly one: I want to put all the importance to the fact that this is not [Operation] Sophia. It is a completely different operation. The main purpose is to control the arms embargo.

Earlier Mr Borrell stated that if the operation proved to be encouraging migration, naval assets would be withdrawn from the area concerned.¹²

Reaction

One commentator argues that the EU's [naval operation will favour General Haftar](#) because it focuses on disrupting arms deliveries by sea, the route by which the GNA gets most of its supplies. General Haftar, on the other hand, receives most supplies by air or overland across the border from Egypt.

Russia called for *Operation Iridi* to explicitly commit to observing international law.

Several commentators have called for *Operation Iridi* to be accompanied by stronger diplomatic pressure on countries intervening in Libya.

Iridi will "favour Haftar"

¹⁰ Operation Sophia was mandated until 31 March 2020. Its main aim was to tackle organised crime related to migrant trafficking, while monitoring the arms embargo was secondary.

¹¹ UNSCR [1970 \(2011\)](#), [2292 \(2016\)](#) and [2473 \(2019\)](#).

¹² [Remarks after the Foreign Affairs Council](#), 17 February 2020

6. UK relations

6.1 Support for the GNA

The UK Government supports the Government of National Accord. On 31 March 2020 Middle East Minister James Cleverly re-iterated the UK's support for the GNA:

The UK continues to support the Government of National Accord as the UN-endorsed government in Libya, and remains active in efforts to end the current fighting and to support a return to UN-led political talks. This month, I met separately with Libyan Prime Minister Serraj and with Interior Minister Bashaga. Ministers are also in regular contact on Libya with their European partners. The Prime Minister represented the UK at the Berlin Conference on Libya on 19 January, alongside other European and international leaders, and urged those present to respect the UN Arms Embargo and support a ceasefire. The conclusions of the Berlin Conference were endorsed by UK-drafted UN Security Council resolution 2510 (2020). In February, I attended the first meeting of the International Follow Up Committee to the Berlin Conference, in Munich.¹³

6.2 GNA view

During his trip to the UK, Libyan interior minister Fathi Bashagha visited Parliament and told MPs that British businesses could participate in economic development and reconstruction projects if the UK stepped up its aid to the UN-recognised Tripoli Government of National Accord. He also said UK help was needed to tackle illegal migration and terrorism. Mr Bashagha said:

We are here to reinforce and support international efforts and support the role of the UK in creating peace in Libya, and to stop the war so that we can develop cooperation between us. When we are looking to reinforce the relationship with the United Kingdom, we will be creating an ambitious plan for development and for rebuilding the country and creating security again.¹⁴

6.3 UK aid

Conflict, Security and Stability Fund

Through the Conflict Stability and Security Fund, the UK Government is funding a £51.6 million programme from April 2017 to March 2021.¹⁵ Areas of support are justice sector reform; mine action; municipalities and basic services; political institutions; civil society and media; local level stabilisation and resilience; countering and preventing extremism; and economic reform.¹⁶

¹³ [HC Written question – 33482](#), 31 March 2020

¹⁴ 'Libya's Tripoli-based government seeks UK backing in war with General Khalifa Haftar', *Daily Telegraph*, 12 March 2020

¹⁵ The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), which began operating in April 2015, replaced the former Conflict Pool. Its objective is to prevent conflict, respond to crises and build stability overseas. For more information see the Commons Briefing paper [UK aid: frequently asked questions](#), February 2020

¹⁶ CSSF Libya programme summary 2017-21

Humanitarian and health assistance

The UK is also helping to improve Libyans' access to primary health care. With a budget of £4,289,994 for the period 2017-20, the programme aims to:

- Improve access to emergency health care by supporting International NGO partners
- meet acute needs by supporting the International Red Cross
- improve humanitarian coordination and data collection.¹⁷

6.4 Human rights

The UK Government supports the International Criminal Court's (ICC) work in Libya. [The ICC](#) was set up to bring perpetrators of the most serious crimes to justice. After the prosecutor presented her 18th report on the situation in Libya, the UK's ambassador to the UN commented:

The United Kingdom strongly supports the work of the International Criminal Court. Its role in holding accountable those responsible for the most serious crimes in Libya is of paramount importance.¹⁸

¹⁷ Department for International Development, [Humanitarian and Health Assistance to Libya](#)

¹⁸ [Supporting the ICC's role in pursuing accountability in Libya](#), Speech by Karen Pierce, UK ambassador to the UN, 6 November 2019

7. Further reading

[*The Qatar crisis and regional ramifications*](#), Commons Briefing Paper, October 2019

[*North Africa regional overview 2018*](#), Commons Briefing Paper, November 2018

[*Libya: the consequences of a failed state*](#), May 2018

[*Libya November 2016 update*](#), Commons Briefing Paper, December 2016

[*Libya: deepening conflict*](#), Commons Briefing Paper, November 2014

[*Military Operations in Libya*](#), Commons Briefing Paper, October 2011

[*The interpretation of Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya*](#), Commons Briefing Paper, April 2011

[*The Security Council's "no-fly zone" resolution on Libya*](#), Commons Briefing Paper, March 2011

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