

# Pro-Haftar forces say will maintain oil blockade

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AFP | Tripoli

A blockade of Libya's oil production will continue, forces loyal to strongman Khalifa Haftar have warned, despite the country's National Oil Corporation announcing this week the resumption of production.

Libya, which sits atop Africa's largest proven crude oil reserves, is torn between the rival powers of the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and eastern-based Haftar.

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A picture taken on June 3, 2020 shows an oil refinery in Libya's northern town of Ras Lanuf

the production and export of oil from the country's most important fields and terminals, claiming they want a fair distribution of the oil revenues managed by

Tripoli. "The closure of ports and oil fields will be maintained until the demands of the Libyan people are satisfied," said a statement published late Saturday on

Facebook by pro-Haftar forces spokesman Ahmad al-Mismari. "Only one oil tanker" is authorised to load "a quantity of stored oil", as agreed "with the

international community and brotherly and friendly countries" that have requested it, said the statement without elaborating.

Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) had announced Friday the resumption of crude production and exports after a nearly six-month shutdown due to conflict dividing the country.

A first ship was due to start loading crude from the Al-Sidra oil port in the east of the country, the NOC had said.

But the state oil giant warned it would take time for output to return to previous levels because of major damage to energy infrastructure. Supported by Turkey, pro-GNA forces have scored important victories in recent months, regaining control of the northwest and driving out forces loyal to Haftar, who had launched an abortive offensive in April 2019 to seize Tripoli.

Haftar is backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia.

The NOC had invoked force majeure in response to the blockade -- a measure used in exceptional circumstances that

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Oil exports are the source of almost all state revenue in Libya, which has been mired in chaos since the ouster and killing of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a 2011 NATO-backed uprising.

allows it to be exonerated from liability in the event of non-compliance with oil delivery contracts.

The company said Friday that it had "lifted force majeure on all oil exports from Libya".

Earlier this month, the NOC had reported talks, "supervised by the United Nations and the United States", to allow the resumption of production.

# UN team to visit 'time bomb' tanker

● The market value of the oil is now estimated at \$40 million, half what it was before crude prices crashed, although experts say poor quality could push it even lower.

AFP | Dubai

Yemen's Huthi militia have given UN inspectors the green light to inspect a decaying oil tanker abandoned off the coast with 1.1 million barrels of crude on board which experts say could rupture at any time.

A breach of the vessel would have disastrous results for Red Sea marine life and tens of thousands of impoverished people who depend on fishing for their livelihood.

The 45-year-old FSO Safer is anchored off the port of Hodeida under the control of the Iran-backed Huthis, who have previously blocked efforts to send inspectors to assess its condition.

Top Huthi militia leader Mohammed Ali al-Huthi said on Twitter last month that the Huthis want guarantees the vessel will be repaired and that the value of the oil on board is used to pay salaries of their employees.

The market value of the oil is now estimated at \$40 million, half what it was before crude prices crashed, although experts say poor quality could push it even lower.

Like other economic and aid issues in Yemen, the plight of the tanker has become a bargaining chip, with the Huthis accused of using the threat of disaster

to secure control of the value of the cargo. Yemeni Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalik Saeed on Thursday said the money for the oil should be spent on health and humanitarian projects.



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warned the Safer could explode and cause "the largest environmental disaster regionally and globally".

Apart from corrosion to the ageing vessel, essential work on reducing explosive gases in the storage tanks has been neglected for years. Experts said the latest problem emerged in May with a leak in a cooling pipe.

"The pipe burst, sending water into the engine room and creating a really dangerous situation," said Ian Ralby, CEO of IR Consilium, a global maritime consultancy which follows the vessel closely.

A team from Yemen's Safer Exploration and Production Operations, a public oil company partly controlled by the Huthis, sent divers in to fix the leak, narrowly avoiding the ship sinking, Ralby said.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned last week that if the tanker ruptures "it will devastate the Red Sea ecosystem" and disrupt key shipping lanes.

"The Huthis must grant access before this ticking time bomb explodes," he said.

Hodeida port is a lifeline for northern Yemen with 90 percent of all supplies coming through it. Any disruption would inflict further hardship on a country which is again on the brink of famine after long years of conflict. If the vessel ruptures "you're going to have two catastrophes", said Lise Grande, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Yemen.

"There's going to be an environmental catastrophe that's bigger than almost any other similar kind ... and it's going to

be a humanitarian catastrophe because that oil will make the port of Hodeida unusable," she said.

Independent Yemen-based environmental group Holm Akhdar -- Arabic for "Green Dream" -- warned an oil spill could stretch out from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and into the Arabian Sea.

The region's ecology would need over 30 years to recover from an oil spillage of that size, it said in a recent report, adding that about 115 of Yemen's Red Sea islands would lose their biodiversity and natural habitats.

In a country where the majority of people already rely on aid to survive, an estimated 126,000 fishermen, including 68,000 in Hodeida, would lose their only source of income.

IR Consilium said any salvage operation after an oil spill would be greatly hampered by the coronavirus crisis.

"In the midst of a global pandemic and on the edge of a conflict zone, the chances of

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Yemen's port city of Hodeida is controlled by the Iran-backed Huthi militia

an early and adequate response are vanishingly small," it said in a report.

Doug Weir, research and policy director at the UK-based Conflict and Environment Observatory, said that without an independent assessment "it is impossible to determine when an incident might occur, or its form and severity".

"However the risks are clear, and the longer the dispute continues, the greater they become, and the more complex and expensive any salvage operation will be."

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