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Against Seeming Odds, Assistance Comes to Derna

In the aftermath of a burst dam and massive flooding, Crisis Group expert Claudia Gazzini travelled to Derna in eastern Libya to cover the relief effort and assess the two rival governments' response.

It is devastating to visit the coastal Libyan city of Derna after dams burst and floods deluged the town in the early hours of 11 September, resulting in an estimated 20,000 deaths. The city's landmark al-Sahaba mosque and its golden dome are intact, but what remains of the city centre can best be described as a vast plain of concrete blocks. I am told the floods instantly flattened many of the buildings that once stood here, sweeping some out to sea, where they now lie in the Mediterranean mud. The few structures that withstood the flood have hardly been spared – their first four stories having been submerged when the waters roared through.

I recently had the privilege of glimpsing an alternate reality for Derna and its people. I have been an observer and analyst of Libya for the past eleven years, and I was in Derna barely two months ago. Despite years of civil war and long-term government neglect, the city was thriving. Buildings that had been damaged during the years of conflict were going back up. Workers were putting the finishing touches on a new public library. Restaurants were open for business. Now, the city is an expanse of rubble. The chances of finding the thousands still missing, let alone survivors, diminish by the day.

Fortunately, the city is receiving a helping

hand. Contrary to fears and some expectations, foreign assistance is making its way to Derna. Moreover, ordinary Libyans – even those from parts of the country ruled by Tripoli-based authorities who do not control this corner of the east – have rallied to send aid.

But while the outside help is unquestionably good news, I worry that as time passes, international attention to the city will wane and Libya's rival factions will revert to form – manipulating the crisis for financial or political gain rather than allowing it to serve as a catalyst for greater cooperation in rebuilding, whether in Derna or in the country as a whole.



Libyan volunteers walk across the devastated valley of downtown Derna. September 2023.

2 September



12 September



Bird's eye view before and after the Derna area destruction following the floods. Crisis Group/Planet Labs

The Roots of a Tragedy

The tragedy that befell Derna resulted from the sudden collapse of the city's two dams, which had been built by a Yugoslav company in the mid-1970s. They fell first and foremost because heavy rains brought by the cyclone-like storm named Daniel – which hit eastern Libya on 10 September – was channelled into the valley to Derna's south, causing water to surge over the dams and, eventually, to overwhelm them.

Work to renovate these dams had started in 2008, but it was never completed. How much blame to place on this fact is subject to debate. Local authorities and Libya's water ministry argue that even a brand-new, perfectly constructed dam could not have held back the record-breaking quantity of rain that poured down on Derna that night. It is too early to form a conclusive view as to whether this contention is accurate, though I hope to offer some thoughts on this score in a later piece. What can be said unequivocally is that a decade of poor governance, intermittent conflict and political infighting has devastated Libya in general, and Derna in particular, making its people especially vulnerable to bursting dams and other force majeure events.

Derna's struggles date back decades. The city suffered during the 42-year reign of strongman Col. Muammar al-Qadhafi. Factions in

the city had opposed his rule, and he starved it of investment in retaliation. But after a UN-mandated international coalition ousted the Qadhafi regime in 2011, the situation became even worse. Libya eventually descended into civil war. In 2014, contested elections split the country in two. The following year, Islamist militants seized Derna and declared it part of the ISIS caliphate.

While the militants were ousted in 2016, war continued in Derna for another year – this time between local Islamists, on one hand, and forces headed by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar on the other. During that time, Libya fragmented, with authority divided between two rival governments and military coalitions. The country remains split to this day, with an internationally recognised government headed by Abdelhamid Dabaiba, based in Tripoli, and a rival administration in the east, led by Osama Hamad. These factions have for the past two years focused on vying for power and money, investing only at a small scale in reconstruction of buildings and bridges in the areas they respectively control, while neglecting the country's major infrastructure, including the dams and waterways.

The government split is directly relevant to the situation in Derna because the

internationally recognised Tripoli-based government, which includes a Presidency Council headed by Mohamed Mnefi, exercises no authority in the stricken area of eastern Libya. It is the Hamad government, backed by Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), that oversees the operations in the east and has effective control

of Derna. Moreover, international donors line up on different sides of the divide – with some backing Haftar and others the government in Tripoli. There was widespread concern when disaster struck that such rivalries would impede relief efforts and prevent Derna from getting the help it needs.

Unexpected Cooperation

Yet contrary to [worrries](#), the rival governments have found a way to work together. Humanitarian aid is arriving from abroad and international rescue teams have hit the ground running. Assistance is also arriving from across Libya, offered up by supporters of both administrations, which have worked well to get supplies where they need to go.

As for foreign donors, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), both of which have for years supported the east-based LNA, were especially timely and generous with their assistance. The UAE may have sent the most planes, carrying food and material for shelters, as well as teams specialised in underwater rescue. The head of the recently established Derna emergency committee, Brigadier General Baset Bughreis, tells me that since the tragedy, “flights from the UAE bringing aid and technical teams have never stopped”. For its part,

Egypt staged a remarkable show to announce the shipment of its aid: President Abdelfattah al-Sisi presided over a [televised parade](#) close to the Egyptian-Libyan border showcasing dozens of bulldozers, trucks and ambulances entering Libya.

But other countries have stepped up as well. Within a day of the flood, Türkiye and Italy (supporters of the Tripoli-based government) flew in the first members of their respective search-and-rescue teams and equipment. Days later, both dispatched ships carrying heavier equipment, including helicopters. I came across rescue workers from Jordan, Algeria, Tunisia, Spain and Malta searching for survivors in the rubble. On 16 September, on the highway into Derna, I spotted a Russian cargo plane parked at al-Abraq airport, 40km to the city's west. A local eyewitness told me that the aircraft had unloaded a team of around 40 rescuers and



Head of the Italian Civil Protection team in Derna explains how the international rescue work is organized across the city. (Right)



A team of Russian rescuers rests in the shadow of a collapsed building, September 2023.

their equipment. I met one of these teams days later, taking a break under the remains of a partially collapsed building. They have found no survivors, they told me; rather, their work consists of helping dig out the dead.

The international relief effort defies traditional geopolitical divides. It is hardly surprising that old allies of Haftar's, such as the UAE and Egypt, would step in to help. "It is in Egypt's strategic interest to ensure that things stabilise here as soon as possible", suggested a Western political analyst. But even some of the LNA's former foes are now at the forefront of search-and-rescue operations.

Türkiye is perhaps the most striking example. Only a year ago, it would have been impossible to imagine a Turkish naval vessel docking in eastern Libya, much less Turkish personnel deploying on the ground here. After all, barely three years have passed since Ankara inter-vened militarily in Libya to stop the Haftar-led advance on Tripoli. At one point in mid-2020, there was even a possibility that Ankara would launch a counteroffensive against Haftar-led forces in eastern Libya.

But Türkiye clearly does not want all of its eggs in one basket. Over the past year, it has been working hard to engage politically and build business ties with eastern Libya's authorities and military, in parallel with its diplomatic overtures toward Egypt. The current rescue

effort is contributing to strengthening those ties. Brigadier General Bughreis suggested that Türkiye is one of the biggest providers of assistance in the Derna crisis, after the UAE and Egypt. Qatar, which also sided with Tripoli during the same Haftar-led offensive, likewise has sent aid to the east.

On the ground, Libya's rival governments appear to have found a modus operandi to enable international help to reach Derna. According to a Western diplomat in Tripoli, foreign governments typically notify Tripoli of their intention to provide support. Once Tripoli approves the deployment, Haftar's people step in to arrange logistics, such as authorising the landing of planes and providing vehicles and lodging for personnel. Dabaiba subsequently sends a public thank-you note to the governments in question. I continue to hear rumours



A team of Libyan rescuers rests in the shadow of a collapsed building.



Libyan rescuer walks through the rubble, September 2023.



Jordanian rescuers at work in Derna, September 2023.

that Western assistance is being blocked, but I have found them to be unreliable, and the foreign representatives I speak to tend to have positive things to say. “We haven’t faced any difficulty in setting up operations here”, the head of the Italian assistance mission, Luigi D’Angelo, told me from a base just a stone’s throw from Derna’s devastated city centre.

It is also heartening to see that ordinary Libyans do not seem hamstrung by political allegiances when it comes to helping the people of Derna. So many have volunteered. Trucks filled with humanitarian aid coming from faraway towns line the access roads to the city, from points of origin that defy political boundaries. The Libyan Red Crescent has done a remarkable job in setting up temporary lodgings for the displaced and distributing aid. Libyan rescuers have been doing the bulk of the digging in search of survivors as well as the work pulling

out the dead. Even boy scouts are taking part in the relief effort.

Still, it is unclear whether cooperation between the two governments goes beyond facilitating international aid. A former senior UN official who has stayed in contact with Libyan politicians in both camps assured me the two are working together, albeit “out of the public eye”. There are no reported sightings of members of the Tripoli government in Derna or its environs, and I have heard from a minister of the east-based government that they are not welcome here. But, somewhat surprisingly, military and security officers from Tripoli apparently are. On 22 September, I ran into two military officers from western Libya. The day after, the Tripoli-based head of intelligence Husayn al-Aieb visited the disaster zone, flanked by his eastern counterpart Sulayman Abbar and Saddam Haftar, the field marshal’s son.



Destruction in downtown Derna, September 2023.

Two Worries

That foreign aid is arriving is good news, as is the fact that ordinary Libyans are setting aside political differences to help Derna in its time of need. But looking forward, two things concern me.

First, I fear that once the search-and-rescue efforts are called off and international attention turns to other crises, foreign capitals, especially Western ones, that have sent humanitarian aid and rescue missions to Derna will either stop engaging or substantially reduce their assistance. Some will stay: the UAE, Egypt and Russia, which have longstanding alliances with local authorities, will continue to assist at levels proportionate to their financial means. Türkiye, which appears to be focused on consolidating its newfound relations with local leaders, will also remain on the ground. But most Western countries are likely to soon forget this disaster zone. I have already seen the Spanish and the

Maltese teams leave during my stay. It is too bad: the Western presence is important. From a humanitarian perspective, European capitals have expertise to offer and are just across the sea. As a geopolitical matter, it is curious that the European powers would want to cede ground to growing Arab, Turkish and Russian influence here.

Secondly, I worry that Libya's rival governments might use this crisis in opportunistic ways. They could divert reconstruction funds, for instance, depriving those in need and souring donors on providing support. Or they could throw themselves into a bruising competition for control that detracts from the recovery effort. There are already signs of turf wars (and corresponding disinformation campaigns) between the rivals over who should take charge of reconstruction efforts. Each of the two governments has announced its own plan to hold a

“reconstruction conference”, in a bid to administer the Libyan and foreign funds earmarked for rebuilding.

One would like to believe that this crisis may finally wake up the country’s political elite to the need for it to heal its schisms and work together to face common challenges. Certainly, the cooperation that the governments,

international donors and the Libyan public have shown since 11 September suggest this possibility. But, thus far, it remains uncertain whether cooperation will endure, and the nascent competition over reconstruction monies already suggests that it may be premature to expect a meaningful break from the dispiriting trajectory of Libya’s modern history. ■



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