

Libya Floods: As Families Search for Loved Ones, Politicians Trade Blame

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Derna's future and Libya's broader political fate will be determined by the race for recovery and the battle of narratives over who is responsible for the tragedy.

The enormity of the destruction in Derna, Libya and the surrounding region is immense. In a city of 100,000, 15-20% of the population could be dead or missing. Another 30,000 are thought to be displaced.

Storm Daniel struck overnight on 11 September, and it took the better part of two days for aid to start trickling in given the road blockages and difficulty navigating the still water and mud-covered city. Several dozen rescuers themselves are thought to be lost. Other stranded families were saved due to the city's geography, which collapsed the bridges connecting the eastern and western parts of the city.

Two upcoming battles will determine the future of Derna and the broader political future of Libya: the race for recovery and the battle of narratives over who is responsible—and thus who can fix Derna and the country more generally.

The Race for Recovery

The needs of the city remain immense. The one local hospital was quickly overwhelmed and partly flooded. It put out an urgent call for body bags and other protective equipment to prevent the spread of disease while doing what was possible to identify bodies and provide them with dignified burials.

Local NGOs, especially the Libyan Red Crescent, have been on the scene throughout as well as elements of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, the forces loyal to the eastern warlord, Khalifa Haftar. Other Libyan groups have rushed in resources or, at least made pledges.

Government of National Unity (GNU) Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh immediately allocated 2bn dinars in emergency funding for Derna, but what this money will be used for remains to be seen. The National Oil Corporation dispatched medical personnel and a ship carrying emergency equipment. And the National Electric Company has already restored power to parts of the city.

Regionally, it is no coincidence that Turkey, Egypt, and Italy were the first to deploy aid and rescue specialists. These three countries have the greatest national security interests in Libya. Egypt and Turkey, in particular, have each supported the eastern and western Libyan rivals and have provided them with political and security assistance since the 2020 ceasefire went into effect.

On its part, Egypt sent a military delegation headed by military Chief of Staff Osama Askar to coordinate relief. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was on hand to oversee a phalanx of trucks and heavy machinery headed to Libya.

Egypt also deployed a hospital ship to supplement the limited medical services in Derna and surrounding areas. These efforts demonstrate Egypt's prioritisation of eastern Libya for its national security and the fact they want to ensure their influence in case of any political disruption in the aftermath of the crisis.

Similarly, given its political and security support for the Western-based GNU, Turkey quickly deployed the Turkish Red Crescent to work alongside the Libyan Red Crescent. It also provided three cargo planes full of medical and relief supplies and is deploying a ship to set up two field hospitals. Italy dispatched shelter items, heavy machinery, water rescue teams and rescue helicopters.

Other countries have also responded with significant contributions, including the UK and France; other members of the EU including Spain and Germany; nearby Malta; regional states including Algeria, Jordan and Tunisia; and the Gulf states, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait. UN agencies are also on the ground distributing humanitarian relief.

The United States announced on 13 September that it would deploy a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) and start with an initial \$1mn contribution in relief funds. These humanitarian specialists quickly assess needs and can coordinate urgent responses in situations where significant aid is coming in but not necessarily in an organised manner.

Moreover, since the 11 September 2012 attack on the US Special Mission in Benghazi that killed US Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans, the US has only sent representatives to Eastern Libya a handful of times. If the DART team does deploy to Derna, it could set a new precedent for a more regular return of US personnel to the region.

The most indicative symbol of Libya's political dysfunction is that Dbeibeh, the prime minister of the UN-recognised, Tripoli-based GNU, cannot visit the disaster zone because he has no authority in the East other than to direct funds. Even his designated crisis committee for addressing the disaster is based in Tripoli. Instead, the pseudo-government and ministers of the breakaway and rival governments in the East with no authority to dispense have been issuing orders and declarations.

The actual power structure in the East lies with General Haftar, who controls the region in an authoritarian manner. Although the Red Crescent has done heroic work, Haftar has long imposed harsh limits on a once vibrant civil society such that many leaders or organisers have left Libya or have been quieted. (The GNU has begun similar intimidation practices, requiring NGOs to register with the government.) Since one key principle of effective humanitarian relief is working with locally organised actors, eastern Libya operates at a disadvantage, placing even more pressure on the Red Crescent.

Blame Game

The blame game has already begun even though all the bodies have not been connected. A viral video shows one irate man accusing all officials in power of their neglect of the country, only to be taken away by one of the brigades under Haftar. There is also strong criticism of local authorities for not providing timely warning—or warning at all—to evacuate the city even though it was well-known that the storm was approaching.

And in a broader context, there were studies about the need to repair or rebuild the two dams that failed. Reconstruction was budgeted and tendered to a Turkish company that could not access the Haftar-controlled area due to Turkey's relationship with the GNU. Whether the authoritarian general or the uncompromising civilians were to blame, the results were tragic nonetheless.

The first order of business is clearly humanitarian relief. Remarkably, people are still being rescued more than 72 hours after the storm hit. And hopefully, the necessary supplies and equipment will arrive to prevent the spread of disease and help survivors. But all this will occur within the fractured political space in which Libya unfortunately remains stuck.

Haftar will do whatever he can to win the narrative battle against the GNU, citing their incompetence all while repressing dissent, including by limiting access to journalists (a fruitless endeavour given the power of social media). In turn, the GNU will defend itself by blaming Haftar for his failures.

The real solution lies in the will and strength of the Libyan people to overcome this catastrophe. They came together in 2011 to oust Muammar Gaddafi and expressed their desire for change when nearly 3 million registered to vote for elections that were supposed to occur in December 2021. That vote was indefinitely postponed for several practical and political reasons, but the aspirations for change remain strong.

Now may not be the time to begin discussing elections as a solution (if only because recovery from the storm requires full-time attention for months). However, the country needs a politically neutral governance mechanism for individuals who derive their legitimacy locally or regionally. It may also be time to consider a mechanism where an international body like the World Bank can take custodianship over mega-projects, such as repairing dams.

It is among the many ironies of post-Gaddafi Libya that the country has the funds needed for its development (and no debt according to the IMF). But chronic mismanagement and poor governance have led to the disaster seen dramatically over the last week.

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