

Gaddafi's 'spiritual son': the general blamed over flood catastrophe

Khalifa Haftar rose from cadet to confidant, then launched a coup against his mentor – and was airlifted to safety by the CIA. Just before Gaddafi's death he returned to Libya as a self-proclaimed national saviour. Now fingers are pointing at him over the disaster

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The water has receded. Wrapped in carpets, blankets or sheets, they lie in rows, men, women, children. Derna is burying its dead as grief turns to anger among the living: why was the town left so vulnerable to a catastrophe some had predicted?

The focus of growing public outrage is the self-styled Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and his sons. They hold sway over eastern Libya where two crumbling dams burst in a storm, causing a flood that washed much of Derna into the sea.

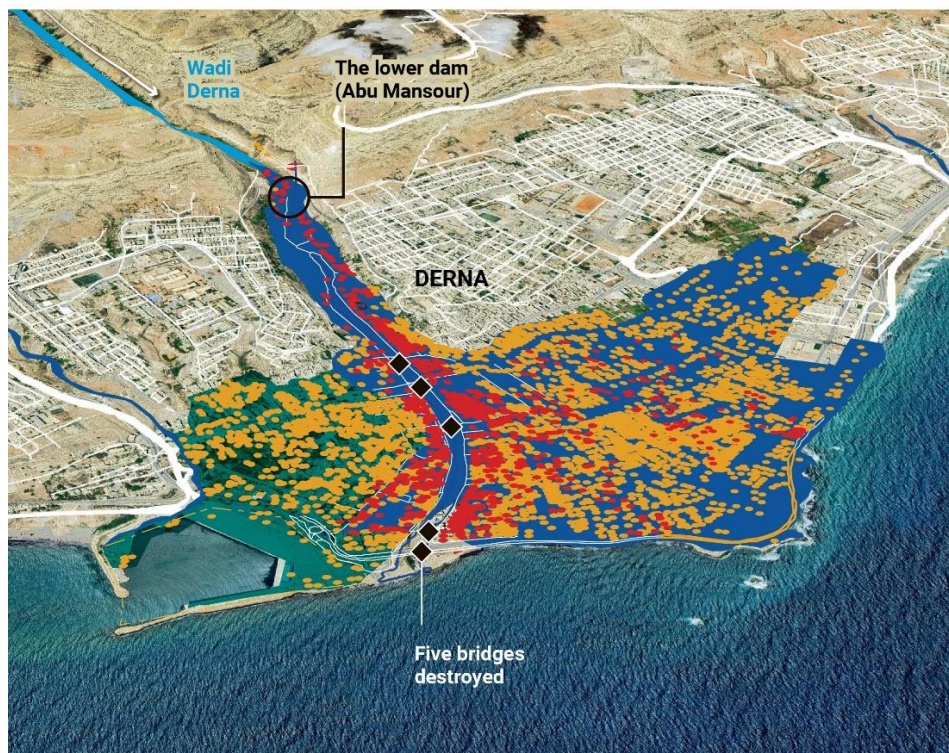
According to the Libyan Red Crescent, Monday's disaster killed at least 11,300 people in Derna. Another 10,100 are still missing.

"Haftar's people are calling it a natural disaster, but the public knows individuals are to blame, substantial budgets were allotted to maintenance and repair of the dams, but nothing was done," said Virginie Collombier of the Luiss Guido Carli University in Rome and co-editor of *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya*.

"They failed to maintain [the dams]," said Anas El Gomati, director of the Sadeq Institute, a think tank in Tripoli. "The people responsible need to be investigated for criminal negligence and corruption."

The destruction of Derna

● Buildings destroyed ● Buildings damaged ● Flood trace ● Still flooded



Graphic: The Times and The Sunday Times

Source: Copernicus, Google Earth

Haftar, 79, an American citizen with a taste for military adventures, has little interest in the details of government. He has focused on one ambition, filling the vacancy left when Muammar Gaddafi, Libya's former ruler, was dragged from a tunnel and killed in 2011 after Nato's military intervention in the civil war.

The military strongman's quest for absolute power has come to resemble a game of geopolitical poker. Backed first by the French and Americans, then Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Russia, which is happy to exploit the chaos on Nato's southern flank, Haftar held most of the aces.

But after years of civil war and chaos, he has ended up controlling only the eastern half of Libya while a UN-backed administration governs the west. Haftar's forces came close to seizing Tripoli, the western seat of power, in 2020, but were forced into a humiliating retreat: the Russian Wagner mercenaries who had been helping them abruptly pulled out of the offensive when Turkey raised the stakes by joining the fight on the other side.

The flooding may prove an even greater fiasco for Haftar. "We should not expect people's patience with their political class to last much longer," said Oliver Crowley, managing partner at Libya Desk, a risk analysis consultancy.

"Already I'm hearing calls for an international investigation of how this happened," said Tim Eaton, a Libya expert at Chatham House, the think tank. "Haftar's forces are said to have opposed evacuation of the city, people are looking for someone to blame."

Haftar's green ceremonial uniform is emblazoned with decorations. But his military record was far from glorious. "When it comes to the fighting side of things, he has not been much good," Eaton said.

He got off to a promising start as an army cadet in 1969, when he participated in Gaddafi's coup against the Libyan monarchy and ended up becoming one of the dictator's top officers. "He was my son," Gaddafi told one interviewer, "and I was like his spiritual father."

Things started to go badly wrong for him, though, when Gaddafi put him in command of Libya's forces in Chad during the "Toyota war" of 1987 when the two countries fought over a strategic strip of borderland.

The conflict was named after the Land Cruisers that Chad's troops drove into battle and Haftar's base was overrun by them: he and 400 of his men were imprisoned. He was furious when Gaddafi disavowed them. In revenge, after his release, Haftar decided to lead a coup attempt from Chad against his former mentor.

President Ronald Reagan, who branded Gaddafi "the mad dog of the Middle East", approved a covert mission to channel support to dissidents. With the backing of the CIA, Haftar set about creating a secret Salvation Front army in Chad and plotting an invasion of Libya. But someone had warned Gaddafi about the threat and the wily tyrant was one step ahead: he arranged a counter-coup in Chad, where the new regime set about destroying the anti-Gaddafi army.

The CIA had to airlift Haftar and 350 of his men to safety in Zaire, now DR Congo, before flying them to America. Haftar was given US citizenship, settling in Langley, Virginia – conveniently near the CIA's headquarters.

Little is known about his activities – if any – for the CIA in America. "After Chad they [the CIA] agreed to look after him, to find him a home for his family," an intelligence source said. "He was never much valued as an asset – they always had a high degree of scepticism about him."

After two decades in America, Haftar decided to return to Libya in 2011, just as the uprising against Gaddafi was spreading. But he did not get the backing of interim leaders to head military operations against the dictator and returned to Virginia, saying he wanted to enjoy looking after his grandchildren. Libya descended into a lawless land of militias and tribal loyalties. Three years later, Haftar released a video announcing a military coup against the central government and ranting against its inability to confront armed Islamist groups that had sprung up since Gaddafi's death.

He was widely mocked for it, not least because he was not in Libya when he made the recording. Undeterred, this self-appointed national saviour was named top military commander by the government in the east and launched a drive to push Islamist militants out of the region. His prime target was the Ansar al-Sharia group blamed for the 2012 attack in the eastern city of Benghazi in which Christopher Stevens, the American ambassador, was killed. Isis had also established a foothold in the region.

“He built himself up into a major warlord with international support,” said Peter Millett, the British ambassador to Libya from 2015 to 2018. Millett met him several times during that period at the warlord’s military base in Benghazi. “I was trying to encourage him to take a political, not a military path,” he recalled.

After a long battle against Islamist groups in Benghazi, Haftar laid siege to Derna with his Libyan National Army in 2018. Gomati accused him of war crimes. “He choked that city for a year and a half, with no food going in and a lethal bombardment,” he said.

Resentment over this treatment has lingered in the city, which had 90,000 inhabitants before the disaster. Haftar has treated it warily: rather than an evacuation, one of his sons is said to have ordered a “lockdown” as the threat from Storm Daniel became apparent.

Public anger grew when it emerged that a meeting had been held to discuss the danger of flooding only five days before the disaster. Specialists spoke of the poor maintenance of the dams and the risk of catastrophe. A poet who attended the talk at the Derna house of culture published a poem on Facebook in which he compared the rain to an alarm bell for the city. He died in the floods.

Having failed to hold back the water, can Haftar keep public anger in check?

In the twilight of his career, he appears to be grooming one of his five sons, Saddam – named after the former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein – to take over, placing him in charge of a militia accused of widespread abuses, not least the theft of \$750 million (£605 million) from a bank vault in Benghazi in 2017.

Political control

◆ Libyan National Army (Khalifa Haftar) ◆ Government National Accord (UN backed) ◆ Other militias



Graphic: The Times and The Sunday Times Source: liveuamap

His eldest son, Al-Siddiq, meanwhile, would appear to be involved in the family’s intervention in the war in Sudan. He was photographed earlier this year in Khartoum with the leader of one of the combatant groups, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, who has also enjoyed backing from the Wagner group.

In spite of Haftar’s close links with America, Washington, according to experts, has steered clear of him recently for fear of emitting mixed signals about its support for the UN-backed Government of National Unity in Tripoli.

Even so, earlier this year William Burns, the CIA’s director, made a rare visit to Libya. He met the prime minister, Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, head of the administration in Tripoli. Then, hedging his bets, perhaps, he flew to Benghazi to see Haftar. It is not known what they discussed.