

Paris says its missiles found on pro-Haftar base

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Paris, France

France said its missiles had been found at a Libyan base used by forces loyal to strongman Khalifa Haftar, in an embarrassing admission raising fresh questions about its role in the conflict.

Confirming a report in the *New York Times*, a defence ministry statement said US-made Javelin missiles discovered in a camp south of Tripoli in June had been purchased by France.

But it denied supplying them to Haftar in breach of a UN arms embargo, saying French forces operating in the war-torn country had lost track of them after they were judged to be defective.

“Damaged and out-of-use, these weapons were being temporarily stocked in a warehouse ahead of their destruction,” the statement said. “They were not transferred to local forces.”

The anti-tank missiles, worth \$170,000 (150,000 euros) each,



Fighters loyal to the internationally-recognised Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) displaying US-made Javelin anti-tank missiles and precision guided munition, which were reportedly confiscated from forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar in Gharyan.

were seized when forces loyal to the UN-recognised government in Tripoli overran the pro-Haftar base in Gharyan, 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of Tripoli.

The ministry statement did not explain how the missiles were lost.

The find could boost suspicions that Paris is backing Haftar on the ground.

Claudia Gazzini, senior Libya analyst at the International Crisis Group, an NGO, said the

town of Gharyan had in the past housed facilities for obsolete weapons.

But she said there were unanswered questions about whether French troops were present when the base was overrun.

“The French need to clarify in greater detail,” she said. “The open question is whether or not they are actively supporting Haftar forces in their offensive on Tripoli.”

Haftar has been branded a warlord and dictator-in-the-making by his opponents.

On April 4, he launched an offensive on the Libyan capital seeking to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj.

The fighting has claimed at least 1,000 lives and displaced tens of thousands of people.

French presence

In a video distributed by

pro-Sarraj forces, a captured pro-Haftar commander alleges six French military advisors and other soldiers were at the base in Gharyan when it was overrun.

This was dismissed as “fake news” by the French embassy in Tripoli.

France under President Emmanuel Macron has publicly denied taking sides in the conflict and has called for a UN arms embargo to be enforced.

French special forces and

members of its DGSE intelligence service are, however, known to be operating in Libya, which descended into chaos after a 2011 uprising and NATO-backed military campaign against late dictator Moamer Kadhafi.

“These weapons were for the protection of forces undertaking intelligence and counter-terror missions,” the French statement said.

Proxy war

The Libyan conflict has drawn in a range of regional and international actors and the country is awash with foreign weaponry despite the UN embargo.

“Before, the violations were happening but people were still cautious,” Gazzini said. “But now it is quite the contrary. There is no shame in boasting about the arrival of new equipment.”

The UN-recognised government in Tripoli headed by Sarraj controls a much smaller section of territory around Tripoli in the west and draws support from Turkey, Qatar and Italy, analysts say.

In May, the government posted pictures showing the arrival of Turkish BMC Kirpi armoured vehicles at Tripoli port.

France’s role has caused tensions.

Macron threw himself into diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict after his election in May 2017, seeing the instability as a major security worry and a source of migration to Europe.

He invited Haftar and Sarraj to a peace conference in Paris in 2017 which was seen as giving the commander international legitimacy for the first time.

Japan’s Hayabusa2 asteroid probe set for final touchdown

● The mission hopes to collect pristine materials from beneath the surface of the asteroid that could provide insights into what the solar system was like

Tokyo, Japan

Japan’s Hayabusa2 probe began descending yesterday for its final touchdown on a distant asteroid, hoping to collect samples that could shed light on the evolution of the solar system.

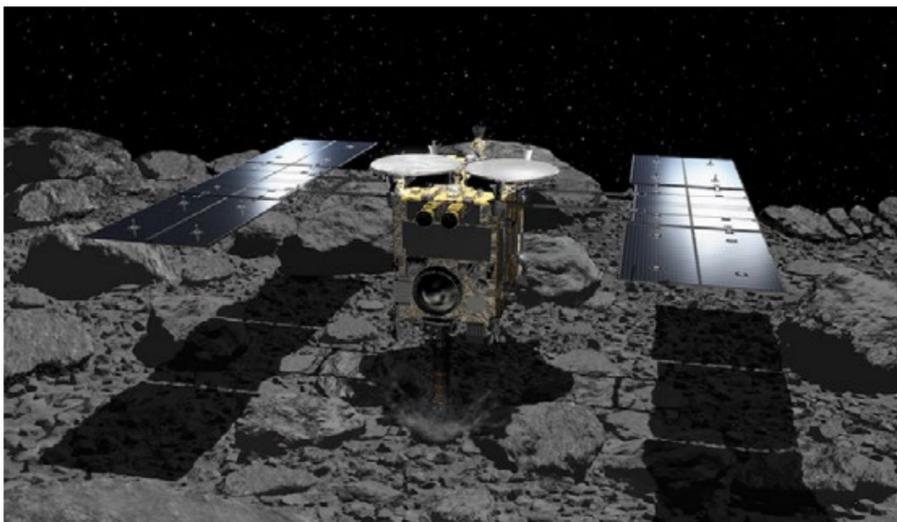
“At 9:58, we made a ‘Go’ decision for the Hayabusa2 probe’s second touchdown,” the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said in a statement.

By early afternoon, JAXA said the probe had descended around five kilometres and was on track to touchdown today on the Ryugu asteroid, some 300 million kilometres (185 million miles) from Earth.

If successful, it will be the second time it has landed on the desolate asteroid as part of a complex mission that has also involved sending rovers and robots.

The mission hopes to collect pristine materials from beneath the surface of the asteroid that could provide insights into what the solar system was like at its birth, some 4.6 billion years ago.

To get at those crucial materials, in April an “impactor” was fired from Hayabusa2 towards



Artist’s concept of the Hayabusa 2 spacecraft touching down on asteroid Ryugu.

“This is the second touchdown, but doing a touchdown is a challenge whether it’s the first or the second,” Yuichi Tsuda, Hayabusa2 project manager, told reporters ahead of the mission.

“The whole team will do our best so that we’ll be able to complete the operation,” he said.

‘Extremely attractive materials’

Hayabusa2’s first touchdown was in February, when it landed briefly on Ryugu and fired a bullet into the surface to puff up dust for collection, before blasting back to its holding position.

The second touchdown requires special preparations because any problems could mean

the probe loses the precious materials already gathered during its first landing.

A photo of the crater taken by Hayabusa2’s camera shows that parts of the asteroid’s surface are covered with materials that are “obviously different” from the rest of the surface, mission manager Makoto Yoshikawa told reporters.

The probe is expected to make a brief touchdown on an area some 20 metres away from the centre of the crater to collect the unidentified materials believed to be “ejecta” from the blast.

“It would be safe to say that extremely attractive materials are near the crater,” Tsuda said.

The touchdown will be the last major part of Hayabusa2’s

mission, and when the probe returns to Earth next year scientists hope to learn more about the history of the solar system and even the origin of life from its samples.

“I’m really looking forward to analysing these materials,” Yoshikawa said.

At about the size of a large refrigerator and equipped with solar panels to keep it powered, Hayabusa2 is the successor to JAXA’s first asteroid explorer, Hayabusa -- Japanese for falcon.

That probe returned with dust samples from a smaller, potato-shaped asteroid in 2010, despite various setbacks during its epic seven-year odyssey and was hailed as a scientific triumph.

Hayabusa2 observes the surface of Ryugu with its camera and sensing equipment but has

also dispatched two tiny MINERVA-II rover robots as well as the French-German robot MASCOT to help surface observation.

Its photos of Ryugu, which means “Dragon Palace” in Japanese and refers to a castle at the bottom of the ocean in an ancient Japanese tale, show the asteroid has a rough surface full of boulders.

Launched in December 2014, the Hayabusa2 mission has a price tag of around 30 billion yen (\$270 million) and is scheduled to return to Earth with its samples in 2020.

But its mission has already made history, including with the creation of the crater on Ryugu’s surface.

In 2005, NASA’s Deep Impact project succeeded in creating an artificial crater on a comet but only for observation purposes.



Researchers and employees working at a control room for the Hayabusa2 mission in Sagami-hara city, Kanagawa prefecture.

Ryugu in a risky process that created a crater on the asteroid’s surface and stirred up material that had not previously been exposed to the atmosphere.