

Ethiopia pushes toward Tigray capital, rebuffs African mediation

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ADDIS ABABA: The Ethiopian government said on Saturday its forces had seized another town in their advance on the rebel-held capital of northern Tigray region, and rebuffed an African diplomatic push to mediate.

More than two weeks into Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's offensive, his government said Tigrayan forces were digging in and using bulldozers to plow up roads around the regional capital Mekelle, home to about half-a-million people.

Hundreds, possibly thousands, have died and more than 30,000 refugees have fled to Sudan. The conflict has spread beyond Tigray, whose forces have fired rockets at the neighboring Amhara region and the nation of Eritrea, spurring concern of a wider war and the splintering of multi-ethnic Ethiopia.

Abiy's government has said it will soon reach Mekelle after taking various surrounding towns. On Saturday, it said Adigrat had also fallen, about 116 km north of Mekelle.

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebels said nine civilians had died in artillery hits on Adigrat where it accused Eritrea of backing the Ethiopian army.

The army of Abiy and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki "inflicted heavy casualties on innocent civilians in Adigrat," the TPLF's communications bureau said in a statement on Facebook.

The government and military could not immediately be reached for comment, but have previously repeatedly denied targeting civilians, saying they strike only TPLF targets.

Assertions on all sides are hard to verify because phone lines and internet have been down since the beginning of the conflict on Nov. 4 and media are largely barred.

FASTFACT

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Eritrea denies TPLF allegations of sending soldiers over the border to back Abiy's offensive against the Tigrayan forces, who are also an old foe of Eritrea's.

Refugees and rights group Amnesty International have also recounted civilian deaths, though Reuters has been unable to verify those reports.

The African Union bloc has appointed former presidents Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Kgalema Motlanthe of South Africa as special envoys to seek a cease-fire and mediation talks.

Abiy, who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year for a peace pact with Eritrea, has said he wants to remove the TPLF leaders before talking.

"News circulating that the envoys will be traveling to Ethiopia to mediate between the Federal Government and TPLF's criminal element is fake," the government tweeted on Saturday.

Abiy accuses the Tigrayan leaders of revolting against central authority and attacking federal troops in the town of Dansha. The rebel leaders say Abiy's government has marginalized and persecuted Tigrayans since taking office two years ago.

Abiy denies that, saying he is seeking only to restore law and order and preserve the unity of Ethiopia and its 115 million people.

The UN and other aid agencies have said the conflict is creating a humanitarian crisis in Tigray, where many among the more than 5 million population were already displaced and relying on food aid even before the conflict.

Satellite images given to Reuters by US-based space company Maxar Technologies showed destroyed buildings lining the main road near the airport in Dansha, where the conflict broke out.

The TPLF is popular in its home region and dominated national politics from 1991 until Abiy took office. Abiy's parents are from the larger Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups.

"We will do all that is necessary to ensure stability prevails in the Tigray region and that our citizens are free from harm and want," the prime minister tweeted on Saturday.



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[Turkish government's shaky strategy against Kurds goes on](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-11-21 23:39

ANKARA: The gap between words and deeds from the Turkish government regarding the Kurdish conflict is widening.

Bulent Arinc, a founding member of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party, recently criticized the continued imprisonment of Selahattin Demirtas, former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and called for his release.

On Nov. 4, Demirtas will have spent four years in prison after he was arrested on terror support charges – a governmental tactic that the HDP called a “political coup” against the country's one and only pro-Kurdish party.

Being in detention without trial since 2016, Demirtas is kept in prison in the northwestern border city of Edirne, 1,700 km away from his hometown Diyarbakir where his family resides, making it difficult for his wife and daughters to reach him.

Referring to Demirtas' recent storybook “Devran,” which he wrote in prison, Arinc, who is also top adviser to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said: “Everyone should read ‘Devran.’ Maybe your ideas about Demirtas will not change, but you will understand what Kurds have gone through. Your ideas about Kurds might change. Our prosecutors and judges should operate on the principle of freedom.”

These groundbreaking comments theoretically suited Erdogan's statement last week saying that Turkey was initiating a new democratization period, hinting at the new judiciary reform packages that are expected for next year.

BACKGROUND

Being in detention without trial since 2016, Selahattin Demirtas is kept in prison in the northwestern border city of Edirne, 1,700 km away from his hometown Diyarbakir where his family resides, making it difficult for his

wife and daughters to reach him.

Turkey's Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul also recently criticized the lengthy pretrial detention in Turkey.

In an interview last month, Demirtas said that he believes he is behind bars because Erdogan is afraid of him.

The "renaissance" pushed forward by the government looks hopeful, but at the end of the day, deeds matter more than words.

Demirtas' book, which is available on Amazon and at all bookstores in Turkey, was recently labeled "terrorist propaganda" by a Turkish prosecutor.

A day after the bombshell remarks of Erdogan's top adviser, Turkish authorities also issued detention warrants on Nov. 20 for 101 Kurdish lawyers and NGO representatives in house raids as part of an investigation. As of Saturday, half of them were released, but their personal phones were seized. "The detentions are part of a systematic policy of threatening and silencing us," the Diyarbakir Bar Association said in an official statement.

"The raids that were undertaken today have once again shown that the Diyarbakir Bar Association's voice wants to be silenced and there is a direct intervention against the work of NGOs."

Human Rights Watch and Article 19 on Nov. 19 released a joint statement saying that the Turkish government "distorted and perverted the legal process" to keep Demirtas and other HDP politicians behind bars by "misusing detention and criminal proceedings in a campaign of persecution against Demirtas in particular."

For some experts, the latest detention wave might be related to a political wing inside the government that intends to favor its alliance with the nationalist party MHP, that did not conceal its discomfort at the party's latest statements about Demirtas.

Mehmet Emin Aktar, former head of the Diyarbakir Bar Association, said there were no accusations while issuing detention warrants to the lawyers.

"During 2019 local elections, lawyers of our bar association were assigned as electoral watchdogs and they performed this professional duty with legal documents that were issued by us. Turkish authorities allegedly found some documents having the names of these lawyers and activists during a raid on the Democratic Society Congress, or DTK, which Turkish authorities claim is linked to the outlawed PKK," he told Arab News.

DTK was founded as a wide-ranging political forum gathering Kurdish civil society groups in Turkey, and played a role between 2009 and 2015 as a bridge between the government and different Kurdish groups during the peace process that aimed at ending more than three decades of conflict that cost the lives of thousands of people. However, the peace process was shelved in July 2015. Aktar said that, beyond the rhetorical promises for judicial reform in Turkey, this move was meant to intimidate Kurdish lawyers and activists in the region into silence.

"I have to say that we were expecting such a move for a long time. However, I don't suppose that Kurds will be intimidated and halt their civil society activism with such tactics," he said.



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[Lebanon's president pledges to revive forensic audit of central bank](#)

Author:

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Sat, 2020-11-21 19:27

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun said on Saturday that a forensic audit of the central bank was vital to combat corruption, and that he would get it back on track after the consultancy contracted to carry it out withdrew. Aoun said "interest-driven roadblocks" had derailed the audit, which is a key condition for foreign donors to help Lebanon out of a deep financial crisis that has posed the biggest threat to its stability since its 1975-1990 civil war.

Among Lebanon's multiple crises are growing poverty, a political vacuum, coronavirus and the fallout from a massive explosion at Beirut port in August that killed 200 people.

"Our reality today is not promising," the president said in a televised speech to mark Independence Day, adding that Lebanon was a prisoner of corruption, political scheming and external dictations.

"If we want statehood, then we must fight corruption ... and this begins by imposing the forensic financial audit," he said, adding he would not "back off" on the issue.

The caretaker finance minister announced on Friday that the restructuring consultancy Alvarez & Marsal had pulled out of the audit because the central bank had not provided all the information required to carry out the task, citing bank secrecy.

Lebanon has not yet formed a new government since the last one was brought down by the blast. Saad Al-Hariri, the Sunni prime minister-designate under a sectarian power-sharing agreement, is struggling to form a cabinet amid turf wars.



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Forensic auditor pulls out of Lebanon central bank probe
Five members of Lebanese family dead from COVID-19

Moscow stops UN blacklisting of Libyan militia

Author:

Sat, 2020-11-21 23:27

NEW YORK: Russia has stopped a UN Security Council committee from blacklisting a Libyan militia group and its leader for human rights abuses because it said it wanted to see more evidence first that they had killed civilians.

The US and Germany proposed that the council's 15-member Libya sanctions committee impose an asset freeze and travel ban on the Al-Kaniyat militia and its leader Mohammed Al-Kani. Such a move has to be agreed upon by consensus, but Russia said it could not approve.

"Our support in the future is possible, but conditioned by the provision of an irrefutable evidence of their involvement in the killing of civilian populations," a Russian diplomat told his Security Council colleagues in a note.

The Libyan city of Tarhouna, which was recaptured in June by the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), had for years been controlled by the Kaniyat militia run by the local Kani family, which fought alongside Khalifa Haftar's eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA). Last month, Libyan authorities dug 12 bodies from four more unmarked graves in Tarhouna, adding to the scores of corpses already discovered since June. Libya descended into chaos after the NATO-backed overthrow of dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. Last month the two major sides in the country's war – the GNA and the LNA – agreed on a cease-fire.

Turkey backs the GNA. Russia supports the LNA. Those foreign powers have been cited in earlier UN documents as supplying weapons in defiance of the arms embargo.

The US and Germany wrote in their sanctions proposal that international human rights groups and the UN political mission in Libya, known as UNSMIL, has "received reports of hundreds of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Al-Kaniyat militia against private individuals, state officials, captured fighters, and civil society activists in Tarhouna."

"Under Mohammed Al-Kani's leadership, the Al-Kaniyat militia has reportedly carried out enforced disappearances, torture, and killings.

"In addition, UNSMIL verified numerous summary executions at Tarhouna Prison conducted by the Al-Kaniyat militia on September 13, 2019," the proposal read.



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UN-led Libya talks end without naming interim government
Tunisia-Libya border reopens after seven months

[Leader of Baha'is in Yemen complains of 'systematic' Houthi repression](#)

Sat, 2020-11-21 23:17

AL-MUKALLA: The leader of the Baha'i religious minority in Yemen has accused the Iran-backed Houthis of systematic repression against his group since seizing power in late 2014.

Hamed bin Haydara told Al-Sharea daily newspaper that Yemen's Baha'is had undergone unprecedented, increasing levels of persecution over the last six years, when the Houthis arbitrarily detained dozens of the group's followers, sentenced many to death and confiscated their assets.

"The Houthis are applying a policy of silent extermination of our cultural and social heritage. This is a type of systematic religious cleansing crime," Bin Haydara said in a rare interview with the press.

The Houthis are applying the same radical ideologies that they learnt in Iran, which deems members of religious minorities heretics, the Baha'i leader

claimed.

"There is no country in the world that has persecuted the Baha'is like Iran and the Houthis. There is a great similarity between persecution against us in Iran and Sanaa, as both use the same methods of persecution, rhetoric, rumors and lies against the Baha'is," he said.

The Houthis are applying a policy of silent extermination of our cultural and social heritage. This is a type of systematic religious cleansing crime.

Hamed Bin Haydara Baha'i leader

Bin Haydara said that he was snatched by security forces from his workplace, at Balhaf gas terminal in the southern province of Shabwa, in 2013, and had been subjected to psychological and physical torture that intensified when the Houthis stormed Sanaa.

"The real systematic persecution began in 2014, in Sanaa, and it has been on the increase since then," he said, adding that the Houthi operatives involved in abusing Baha'i abductees were trained in Iran.

In 2018, a court controlled by the Houthis sentenced Bin Haydara to death, ordered the confiscation of his assets and shut down the group's religious institutions. He was accused of apostasy, espionage and seeking to establish the religion in Yemen.

On July 30, the Houthis unexpectedly released Bin Haydara and other five detainees, and expelled them from the country on a humanitarian flight.

The group's leader said they were forcibly displaced from the country, a move that caused panic among its thousands of followers who live in the war-torn country.

The roots of the Baha'i in Yemen go back to 1844 when a senior cleric arrived in the country through the then internationally renowned Al-Mokha port, Bin Haydara said, adding that several thousand Baha'is live across Yemen.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **In 2018, a Houthi-controlled court sentenced Bin Haydara to death, ordered the confiscation of his assets and shut down the group's religious institutions.**
- **He was accused of apostasy, espionage and seeking to establish the religion in Yemen.**
- **Bin Haydara and other members of the group are living in 'safe' locations in Europe, receiving medication.**

"They hail from different components, classes and tribes of Yemeni society. They live in most cities and provinces," he said.

In Jan. 2015, Yemeni security authorities accused a member of the group of having links with Israel. Bin Haydara strongly denies that, adding that

Baha'is frequently visit sacred sites in Haifa and Acre.

"There is no relationship between us and any government abroad. We are loyal and patriotic Yemeni citizens," he said.

Bin Haydara and the other displaced members of the faith group were currently living in "safe" locations in Europe, receiving medication for wounds and diseases that they contracted during their detention inside Houthi prisons. The Baha'i leader called for the rescue of at least 20 members of the group being prosecuted by the Houthi-controlled Specialized Criminal Court, who might face death.

"Yemeni society is naturally coexistent and accustomed to intellectual, cultural and religious diversity. What is being practiced against the Baha'is nowadays completely contradicts the nature of Yemeni society and Yemeni tribes," he said.



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