

Coalition says 'good progress' in north Syria buffer zone, thousands return to government-seized areas

Author:

AFP

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TAL ABYAD, Syria: The US-led coalition said Sunday that "good progress" was being made in implementing a buffer zone in northern Syria along the Turkish border.

Turkey and the United States last month agreed on the so-called "security mechanism" to create a buffer between the Turkish border and Syrian areas controlled by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

The YPG led the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in battle against Daesh in Syria, but Ankara views the Kurdish fighters as "terrorists."

The United States and Turkey launched their first joint patrol of the border areas on September 8, but Ankara has accused Washington of stalling in the week since.

A coalition delegation on Sunday met with members of a military council in Tal Abyad, a northern town from which Kurdish forces started withdrawing late last month.

"We are seeing good progress for the initial phase of security mechanism activities," the coalition said in a statement handed out to journalists.

"The coalition and SDF have conducted multiple patrols to identify and remove fortifications to address concerns from Turkey," the statement said.

"Four joint US and Turkish military overflights" by helicopter were also carried out, it said.

Little is known about the buffer zone's size or how it will work, although Ankara has said there would be observation posts and joint patrols.

"We will continue the removal of certain fortifications in the security mechanism area of concern to Turkey," the coalition statement said.

Riad Al-Khamis, a joint head of the Tal Abyad military council, said the SDF had withdrawn from the area, to be replaced by the local forces.

He announced US-Turkish "joint patrols in the coming days to ensure the security of the border and the area."

"They will be joint patrols between the coalition or United States and Turkey in coordination with us, the Tal Abyad military council," he said.

"The coalition has promised to train the military personnel (of the council) – who are from this area – and support them logistically," he told reporters. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has threatened to go his "own way" if the buffer zone was not set up by the end of September "with our own soldiers."

Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on Tuesday belittled efforts to create the safe zone as largely "cosmetic."

Syria's Kurds have established a semi-autonomous region in northeastern Syria

during the country's eight-year war.

Erdogan has repeatedly threatened to attack Kurdish-held areas in northern Syria, and the prospect of a US withdrawal after the territorial defeat of Daesh in March again stoked fears of an incursion.

Damascus labelled the first patrol last week as a flagrant "aggression" that seeks to prolong Syria's war.

Turkey has already carried out two cross-border incursions into Syria, the latest of which saw Turkish troops and Ankara's Syrian rebel proxies seize the northwestern enclave of Afrin last year.

Meanwhile, state media reported on Sunday that thousands have returned to their hometowns in northwest Syria after military advances by government loyalist against militants and allied rebels, .

"Thousands of citizens return to their villages and towns of the northern Hama countryside and the southern Idlib countryside," state news agency SANA said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, reported "around 3,000 people" going home from other areas under regime control. Since August 31, a cease-fire announced by regime backer Russia has largely held in northwestern Syria, though the Observatory has reported sporadic bombardment.

SANA said the returns came amid "government efforts to return the displaced to their towns and villages."

The Idlib region of around three million people, many of them displaced by fighting in other areas, is one of the last holdouts of opposition to forces backing Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Moscow announced the cease-fire late last month after four months of deadly violence that displaced 400,000 people, most of whom fled north within the militant-run bastion, according to the United Nations.

Regime forces had chipped away at the southern edges of the militant-run stronghold throughout August, retaking towns and villages in the north of Hama province and the south of Idlib province.

Syria's civil war has killed more than 370,000 people since it started in 2011 with the repression of anti-government protests.

Assad's regime now controls more than 60 percent of the country after notching up a series of victories against rebels and militants with key Russian backing since 2015.

But a large chunk of Idlib, fully administered by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate since January, as well as a Kurdish-held swathe of the oil-rich northeast, remain beyond its reach.





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Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

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Sat, 2019-09-14 18:27

RIYADH: The president of the Arab Parliament has praised King Salman's

position on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's announcement that he will annex the Jordan Valley if he is re-elected on Tuesday. Mishaal bin Fahm Al-Salami also welcomed King Salman's call for an emergency Organization of Islamic Cooperation foreign minister's meeting on the issue. He told Saudi Press Agency that the king's stance has highlighted the responsibilities of the entire international community to "take decisive and effective measures to stop Israel's expansionist policies." Netanyahu sparked widespread condemnation after pledging on Tuesday to annex the strategic Jordan Valley, which accounts for around a third of the occupied West Bank.



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Trump discusses possible mutual defense treaty with Israel's Netanyahu

Sat, 2019-09-14 18:46

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump said on Saturday he had spoken with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about a possible mutual defense treaty between the two nations, a move that could bolster Netanyahu's re-election bid just days before Israelis go to the polls.

"I had a call today with Prime Minister Netanyahu to discuss the possibility of moving forward with a Mutual Defense Treaty, between the United States and Israel, that would further anchor the tremendous alliance between our two countries," Trump said on Twitter.

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– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [September 14, 2019](#)

He added that he looked forward to continuing those discussions later this month on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly session in New York.

The timing of Trump's tweet, just days before Israel's election on Tuesday, appeared aimed at buttressing Netanyahu's effort to remain in power by showcasing his close ties to Trump.

Opinion polls predict a close race, five months after an inconclusive election in which Netanyahu declared himself the winner but failed to put together a coalition government.

Netanyahu's Likud party is running neck-and-neck with the centrist Blue and White party led by former armed forces chief Benny Gantz, who has focused heavily on looming corruption charges Netanyahu faces.

Trump previously bolstered Netanyahu's candidacy when he recognized Israel's claim of sovereignty over the Golan Heights ahead of the elections earlier this year.

Some Israeli officials have promoted the idea of building on Netanyahu's strong ties to the Trump administration by forging a new defense treaty with the United States, focused especially on guarantees of assistance in any conflict with Iran.

But some of Netanyahu's critics have argued that such an agreement could tie Israel's hands and deny it military autonomy.



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Author:

BY ASHRAF SWEILLAM | AP

ID:

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Sat, 2019-09-14 13:04

EL-ARISH: Egyptian security officials said at least three soldiers and three militants have been killed in a militant attack on a checkpoint in the restive northern Sinai province.

They said the militants opened fire Saturday on the Mahajr checkpoint in the coastal city of El-Arish, and that the attack also wounded two soldiers.

The officials said the soldiers chased the militants and killed three of them. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak to the media.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack.

Egypt has for years been battling a long-running insurgency in North Sinai that is now led by an affiliate of Daesh. The fighting intensified in 2013 after the military overthrew an elected but divisive Islamist president.



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Egypt's El-Sisi defends military against corruption claims
Teen Egyptian girl's case puts legal system under spotlight

[Egypt's El-Sisi defends military against corruption claims](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

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Sat, 2019-09-14 13:50

CAIRO: Egypt's president is refuting corruption allegations raised by a businessman about the country's military in a series of recorded testimonials that went viral on social media.

Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi said Saturday that allegations of embezzlement and misuse of public funds in building new presidential palaces are "sheer lies and defamation."

He said: "I've built presidential palaces and I will continue to do so. I am building a new country. ... All of this is not mine. It's Egypt's."

El-Sisi was responding to claims by contractor Mohammed Ali, who said he worked for the military for 15 years, alleging massive spending, abuse by authorities and misuse of public funds.

He has denied the allegations without elaborating. He has called the claims against the military an attempt to topple Egypt.



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