

# Australia boosts efforts to counter child exploitation

□Australia has enhanced the fight to counter child sexual exploitation offshore with the opening of a new international investigative centre in the Philippines.

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# Airstrikes up sharply in anti-Assad bastion

Author:

Tue, 2019-02-26 22:57

BEIRUT: War monitors said on Tuesday there had been a marked escalation in airstrikes in opposition-held northwestern Syria, the last major bastion of opponents of Bashar Assad, prompting thousands of civilians to flee the town of Khan Sheikhoun.

Rami Abdul Rahman, the director of the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said the regime forces had intensified artillery shelling and airstrikes that have been ramping up over the past 10 days.

“The bombing is focused mainly on towns along the Damascus-Aleppo international road,” he said. “Khan Sheikhoun has turned into a ghost town.”

According to a senior data analyst at Hala Systems, which operates an early warning system for aerial bombardment called Sentry, 13 strikes had been observed in Idlib and northern Hama on Tuesday.

“This is the third straight day in which a significant increase in airstrikes has been observed. The pace of attacks seems high – and certainly unusual compared to the last few months,” the analyst, who declined to be named, told Reuters.

## **Evacuation**

Hundreds of suspected militants and their relatives exited the last Daesh group holdout in eastern Syria aboard 11 trucks on Tuesday, an AFP reporter said.

The huge double-trailer trucks snaked toward a screening point manned by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) across the plain from Baghouz, the last hamlet still held by Daesh.

Women could be seen spilling out of the trucks as SDF fighters prepared to screen yet another batch of survivors from the last speck of the “caliphate.”

On Monday alone, 46 such trucks left the Daesh pocket, bringing to around 50,000 the number of people who quit militants-held territory since December.



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Idlib extremists kill 20 Syria govt loyalists in 3 days  
Syria force carries out major evacuation from last Daesh holdout

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## [Iranian-backed Houthis responsible for Yemen woes: UK envoy](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-02-26 22:42

DUBAI: The Houthi militia's occupation of parts of Yemen has increased people's suffering, which has been falsely blamed on a "Saudi blockade," said the British ambassador to Yemen.

"It's no coincidence that the number of people in need of aid, now at a staggering 24 million, has increased enormously since the Houthis took over

parts of the country," Michael Aron told Arab News in an exclusive interview.

The British diplomat, who was appointed ambassador to Yemen in February 2018, said the UK supports the internationally recognized government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who "was forced to flee Sanaa following a rebel insurgency that took the capital by force (in September 2014) and overthrew the legitimate government. This is a fact."

The Iranian-backed Houthis took over the presidential palace, where Hadi and his ministers remained under house arrest.

He managed to return to his hometown of Aden. In response, Houthi forces advanced toward Aden, causing Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia, which led an air campaign to defeat the Houthis.

Almost four years of fighting and five attempts at peace talks later, there is no end to the war in sight.

"There can be no military solution to this war. The longer the conflict continues, the more the people of Yemen will suffer as the humanitarian crisis worsens," Aron said.

According to the independent Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 60,000 people have been killed since 2016.

British charity Save the Children estimates that 85,000 children under the age of 5 have starved to death since 2015.

Meanwhile, a devaluation of Yemen's currency and food shortages have led to famine in parts of the country.

"The worsening economy has devastated people's purchasing power. In many cases, there's food and fuel, but people can't afford to buy it," Aron said.

"Many people believe that there's a 'Saudi blockade' attempting to starve the northwest of the country in order to defeat the Houthis. This is simply not true ... The reality is that there's no blockade."

The UK and the UN monitor food and fuel going into Hodeidah and other Yemeni ports, in an agreed process for the inspection of ships, the ambassador said.

The UN had been prevented from entering the Red Sea Mills, which has enough grain to feed 3.7 million people for a month, in Hodeidah since September 2018. Officials finally gained access on Tuesday.

A humanitarian corridor was meant to be opened in Hodeidah last month as part of the deal that was signed in December in Stockholm by the Houthis and the Yemeni government, but the UN said the militia has failed to honor the agreement.

However, Aron said the talks were a success. "Many believed they wouldn't happen or we'd be in the same situation we were in Geneva, when the Houthis didn't arrive," he added, referring to when the Iranian-backed militia

refused to attend peace talks in Switzerland in September 2018.

Although slow, progress has been made, and there has been a significant reduction in military activity, specifically in Hodeidah, as well as regular meetings between the warring sides, which was not the case previously, Aron said.

Last month, delegations from both sides met in Jordan to discuss prisoner swaps. As a result, Saudi Arabia released seven prisoners the day after a Saudi prisoner was freed by the Houthis.

Last week, the warring parties agreed to start withdrawing forces from the main port of Hodeidah.

This came after Maj. Gen. Patrick Cammaert, who had been heading the UN operation monitoring a cease-fire in Hodeidah, was replaced by Lt. Gen. Michael Lollesgaard due to a disagreement with the Houthis.

Aron said the international community will react strongly if the Houthis put the peace process at risk.

The next round of talks will take place when "sufficient progress has been made" on the Stockholm agreement, he added.

"I hope and believe we're much closer to the end than the beginning of this war," he said, although adding that there is still a long way to go.



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[Michael Aron](#)

UN regains access to Red Sea mills grains in Yemen Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait pledge \$1.25bn to Yemen aid effort

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## [Anger and apprehension haunt ruined Sinjar](#)

Author:

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SINJAR: It is dawn in Sinjar and the only sounds are the footsteps of guards patrolling a golden-domed shrine on a hill overlooking a vista of collapsed rooftops.

More than three years after Daesh was driven out of this city in northern Iraq, all that remains in the once bustling market are the bomb-scarred facades of shops. Dozens of streets are blocked by metal barrels – a sign of unexploded ordnance that has yet to be cleared.

In a city whose former occupiers slaughtered thousands of minority Yazidis, water is scarce and power intermittent. The closest hospital to reopen is a 45-minute drive away. There are only two schools.

The physical devastation is extreme, but it is not the city's only challenge. Caught in a power tussle between Iraq's central government and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government, the city also struggles with a political impasse.

"It is in ruins. There has been no progress at all," said Ibrahim Mahmoud Ezzo, 55, the Yazidi owner of about a dozen shops, all of which are damaged.

Overrun by Daesh in 2014 and liberated by an array of forces the following year, little has been rebuilt and only a fraction of the population has returned. Residents say both the Kurdish regional government and the central government have made no effort at construction.

Sinjar lies in a sensitive area straddling the borders of Iraq's Kurdistan region and neighboring Syria, Iran and Turkey.

"The PKK are here, the police are here, the Popular Mobilization Units are here, the army is here," Ezzo said, listing the names of various units of the Iraqi government forces and militias that are in the city and around it.

"We don't understand what the situation is," Ezzo said.

The KRG had controlled the region without much objection from Baghdad since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 until 2017 when, in retaliation for an independence bid, the central government pushed out the KRG, its Peshmerga forces and allies, and brought in their own.

These included a Shiite paramilitary force, the Popular Mobilization Units known as PMU, as well as the national army and the police.

Dindar Zebari, the KRG coordinator for international advocacy, said: "In Sinjar today, there is no legitimate authority, there are no official and decisive security forces."

"The KRG is not ignoring the problem in Sinjar," he said, urging Baghdad to share responsibility for this area with Peshmerga and ensure the removal of militias including the PMU.

A central government spokesperson could not immediately be reached for comment. Officials privately attribute the slow pace of rebuilding to security problems in the area and red tape in approving a reconstruction budget for Nineveh province.



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# [Tunisian attacks suspect assaults judge at hearing](#)

Author:

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TUNIS: Tunisian authorities say a man suspected of several extremist attacks has assaulted a judge with his gavel during his trial at a Tunis military court.

The 33-year-old Adel Ghandri was brought to court Tuesday alongside several other suspects accused of attacking a military station in Ben Guerdane, near the border with Libya, where assailants allegedly tried to create an emirate on behalf of the Daesh group two years ago.

According to a statement from Tunisia's military justice system, Ghandri managed to seize the judge's gavel and hit him on the head. It was not clear if the judge was injured in the incident.

Ghandri is suspected of involvement in the Ben Guerdane attack and of playing a role in two other attacks in Tunisia that killed 60 people, mainly tourists, in 2015.



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