

100 Houthis killed in heavy fighting outside central Yemeni city of Marib

Sat, 2021-10-09 21:31

AL-MUKALLA: At least 100 Houthis have been killed since Friday evening in clashes with government troops in contested areas outside the central Yemeni city of Marib, military officials said on Saturday.

The clashes broke out as the Iran-backed militia intensified its artillery shelling and ground attacks on government-controlled locations in Al-Kasara, west of Marib, as part of its push to seize control of the city, Rashad Al-Mekhlafi, a military official at Yemen's Armed Forces Guidance Department, told Arab News.

Al-Mekhlafi said the bodies of at least 100 fighters had been abandoned in mountains and rough areas in Al-Kasara, and that the rebels had been forced to stop their attacks after failing to break through the government's lines of defense.

"The Houthi attack (in Al-Kasara) began at nearly 8 p.m. on Friday and ended on Saturday afternoon. They used different kinds of weapons and dispatched waves of fighters."

Al-Mekhlafi added that Arab coalition warplanes had played a vital role in disrupting Houthi attempts to bring in military reinforcements to Marib and targeted their military locations and gatherings.

By Saturday afternoon, government forces had killed dozens of Houthis, including many military leaders, pushed back Houthi attacks, and scored limited advances in Marib province, Al-Mekhlafi said.

There was also fighting in the south and west of Marib, in Jabal Murad, Juba, and Al-Abedia.

Military officials denied Houthi media reports that residents in the besieged district of Al-Abedia had agreed to allow the militia to control it in exchange for a safe corridor for government troops.

"People there do not trust the Houthis. The Houthis launched many attacks to seize control of the district," Al-Mekhlafi said.

The siege is in its third week, with Houthis trying to force troops and allied fighters to surrender.

The Houthis have banned humanitarian assistance from reaching more than 35,000 people and blocked residents from leaving or entering the district.

There have been warnings from local organizations and officials about starvation if the Houthis continue with the siege.

The fighting in Marib comes as US Yemen envoy Tim Lenderking on Friday began a new diplomacy shuttle in the region to revive peace efforts to end the war in Yemen and discuss ways to stop the offensive, the US State Department said.

The US envoy, who touched down in Jordan on Friday, is visiting the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. He is meeting officials from those countries, along with Yemeni government officials and civil society representatives.

“During his meetings with international partners, Special Envoy Lenderking will address the consequences of the continued Houthi offensive in Marib, which is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis, killing civilians, and defying the international consensus on the urgent need for a peaceful resolution to the conflict,” the department said.

Thousands of Yemenis have been killed since February, when the Houthis renewed an offensive to control the city.



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Houthis under fire for killing displaced civilians in Marib
Houthis reject calls for truce, intensify attacks on Marib

Silent Jewish prayers at Al-Aqsa rejected by Israeli appeals court following protests

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Sat, 2021-10-09 21:47

AMMAN: The Israeli central court accepted the appeal by the Jerusalem police against a lower court ruling that allowed “silent” prayer by Jewish activists on the grounds of Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Wasfi Kailani, executive director of the Hashemite Fund for the Restoration of Al-Aqsa Mosque, told Arab News that the entire area of Al-Haram Al-Sharif/Al-Aqsa Mosque is an Islamic religious site that is exclusively for Muslims.

“All 144 dunums of the mosque compound is an Islamic location owned and managed by the Islamic Waqf (endowment).”

Kailani said that, while the Waqf Council welcomes visitors at certain hours, it is done with the understanding that they are welcomed to visit as tourists but not to pray, and “that the visiting rights should be open to all non-Muslims who enter Al-Aqsa with permission of Awqaf and follow their instructions.”

Kailani said Muslims from all around the world “should have access and the right of worship in Al-Aqsa.”

The earlier decision that would have changed the status quo in occupied Jerusalem was widely rejected in the region.

Jordan, whose Waqf Ministry administers the mosque in Jerusalem, condemned the initial lower Israeli court ruling. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Haitham Abulfoul said that the decision is null and void and lacks legal status under international law, which does not recognize Israeli jurisdiction on territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem.

Dimitri Diliani, head of the Palestinian National Christian Coalition, said that the decision of the Israeli central court was the result of united efforts by Palestinians and their friends.

“This victory is the result of the popular anger of Palestinians from all walks of life, in addition to the stance of Arab countries, led by Jordan, whose monarch King Abdullah II is the custodian of Muslim and Christian holy places in Jerusalem.”

A 2014 Jordanian and Israeli understanding witnessed by the US says that Al-Aqsa is for “Muslims to pray and for all others to visit.”

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett backed down in July from statements that appeared to support the rights of Jews and Muslims to pray on the Muslim site, statements that would have marked a stark shift from Israel’s policy of maintaining the status quo at Jerusalem’s holy site.

Sources in the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office claimed on July 19 that Bennett had “misspoken” when he said both Jews and Muslims have “freedom of

worship” on the Temple Mount, which would be a potentially explosive change after decades of Jews being permitted only to visit there, but not to pray. The current tensions began when Bilha Yahalom, a Jerusalem magistrate judge known for her right-wing position, ruled that the silent prayer at the complex cannot be considered a “criminal act.”

This came in an appeal by Rabbi Aryeh Lippo against a police ban on his visits to the flashpoint site following his repeated prayers in violation of the agreed position for visits to the Muslim site.

The police appealed the decision, which caused ripple effects in Jerusalem and throughout the region.



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[Libya ‘ready for polls despite wrangling’](#)

Author:

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1633727715450493500

Sat, 2021-10-09 00:14

TRIPOLI/BENGHAZI: Preparations are almost finished for polls in war-torn Libya, the head of the electoral commission says, despite wrangling over voting laws and warnings the outcome could be contested.

"We are 80 or 90 percent ready" for the presidential and parliamentary votes in December and January, Imed Al-Sayeh, head of the country's High National Election Commission, said.

"I think there will be very strong turnout for these elections, especially as there will be direct presidential polls for the first time since Libya's independence" in 1951, he said at his office in Tripoli.

The polls are part of a UN-backed peace process that has seen a year of relative peace following a ceasefire between eastern and western camps in the North African country.

But disputes over the legal and constitutional basis of the ballots and who is eligible to stand raised doubts over the process.

Analysts warned of a return to conflict if the outcome is contested.

The presidential and parliamentary votes were initially set for the same day – Dec. 24 – but on Tuesday parliament announced that the legislative

elections, the country's first since 2014, would be postponed until January.

The HNEC said in August that more than 2.8 million Libyans had registered for the polls, out of a population of around 7 million.

Plan agreed to pull mercenaries out

Meanwhile, the eastern side in Libya's conflict said on Friday it had agreed with its opponents on a plan for a phased withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries, but gave no details or timeline for a move seen as crucial to cementing a year-old ceasefire.

Mercenaries brought by the foreign powers involved in Libya, including Russia and Turkey, remain entrenched on both sides despite the ceasefire and a parallel political process aimed at resolving the decade-long crisis through elections. Both those UN-backed efforts are seen as highly fragile, however, with a constant risk that the process could unravel.

An eastern military official said the joint committee meeting in Geneva had agreed on a "an action plan for the withdrawal of mercenaries and foreign forces in a gradual, balanced and simultaneous way."

The official added that international monitors and a monitoring mechanism were needed before any withdrawal could begin. Libyan Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush said on Sunday that a very modest number of mercenaries had already left. The committee was formed through a UN-backed ceasefire agreed on last year that followed the collapse of eastern-based commander Khalifa Haftar's 14-month offensive against Tripoli.

Libya has been ripped apart by violence since the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi, who had ruled the vast, oil-rich country with an iron fist since seizing power in a 1969 coup.

Last October's ceasefire between rival eastern and western governments, after UN-hosted talks, led to a transitional government taking office in March to usher the country toward elections at the end of this year.



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[Israel, Palestinian militants use bodies as bargaining chips](#)

Author:

AP

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1633726762770240500

Fri, 2021-10-08 23:58

WEST BANK: More than a year after his son was killed by Israeli forces under disputed circumstances in the occupied West Bank, Mustafa Erekat is still seeking his remains.

It is one of dozens of cases in which Israel is holding the remains of Palestinians killed in conflict, citing the need to deter attacks and potentially exchange them for the remains of two Israeli soldiers held by the Palestinian militant group Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinians and human rights groups view the practice of holding bodies as a form of collective punishment that inflicts further suffering on

bereaved families.

"They have no right to keep my son, and it is my right for my son to have a good funeral," Erekat said.

The Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Center, a Palestinian rights group, says Israel is holding the bodies of at least 82 Palestinians since the policy was established in 2015.

It says many are buried in secret cemeteries where the plots are only marked by plaques of numbers. Hamas holds the remains of the two Israeli soldiers killed during the 2014 Gaza war.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz said at the time that holding the remains deterred attacks and would help ensure the return of Israeli captives and remains. The Defense Ministry declined to comment on the policy.

One of the bodies is that of Erekat's son, Ahmed, who Israeli officials say was shot and killed after deliberately plowing into a military checkpoint in June 2020.

Ahmed was to get married soon, his father said: "He had a house that was ready for him." To this day, he has no idea where his son's remains are. Omar Shakir, the Israel and Palestine director at the New York-based Human Rights Watch, said Israel has turned "corpses into bargaining chips." The policy is "deliberately and unlawfully punishing the families of the deceased, who are not accused of any wrongdoing," he said.

Israel has a long history of exchanging prisoners and remains with its enemies.

In 2011, it traded more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners for an Israeli soldier who had been captured by Palestinian militants five years earlier and was being held in Gaza.

In 2008, it traded five Lebanese prisoners and the remains of nearly 200 Lebanese and Palestinians killed in fighting, for the remains of two Israeli soldiers captured by Hezbollah group two years earlier.



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Facebook wrongfully suppressed Palestinians during May violence, says HRW

[Uncle of Syria's Assad returns home from decades-long exile](#)

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Fri, 2021-10-08 23:23

BEIRUT: The uncle of Syrian President Bashar Assad has returned home from 36 years of exile to dodge arrest in France, the pro-government Al-Watan newspaper reported Friday.

Rifaat Assad, 84, arrived in Damascus on Thursday, Al-Watan said on its

Facebook page, nearly a month after a Paris appeals court upheld a four-year prison sentence issued against him last year for misappropriating public funds in Syria, laundering the spoils and building a vast property portfolio in France with ill-gotten gains.

Formerly Syria's vice president, Rifaat Assad left his home country in 1984 after mounting a failed coup against his brother Hafez, who led Syria from 1971 to 2000.

"In order to prevent his imprisonment in France .. President Assad rises above what Rifaat Assad has said and done and allows him to return to Syria," Al-Watan said.

Rifaat is not expected to take up any political role, Al-Watan added.

Dubbed the "Butcher of Hama" for his alleged role in putting down an uprising in central Syria in 1982, Assad has been under investigation in France since 2014.

He was tried for crimes allegedly committed between 1984 and 2016, including aggravated tax fraud and misappropriation of Syrian funds.

A Paris court last June dismissed charges against Assad for the period 1984 to 1996, but found him guilty of organized laundering of funds embezzled from the Syrian public purse between 1996 and 2016. He was also convicted of tax fraud.

Last month, the Paris appeals court upheld the verdict against him.

He may not have to serve in prison given his advanced age, but the confiscation of his French real estate assets, worth an estimated 90 million euros (\$106 million), ordered at his initial trial, will now go ahead.

His French fortune includes two townhouses in chic Parisian neighborhoods, a stud farm, about 40 apartments, and a chateau.

Assad and his family also built up a huge portfolio of properties in Spain, valued at around 695 million euros, which were all seized by the authorities in 2017.



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