

Houthi offensive 'risks new humanitarian crisis in Yemen'

Author:

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AL-MUKALLA: Yemen is on the brink of another humanitarian crisis as the Iran-backed Houthis press ahead with their large-scale offensive on the central city of Marib, where more than 750,000 displaced people have sought shelter, UN and Yemeni officials warn.

Mark Lowcock, the UN's humanitarian chief, has warned against the impact of the Marib attacks on people who have fled fighting in their hometowns.

"An assault on the city would put 2 million civilians at risk, with hundreds of thousands potentially forced to flee – with unimaginable humanitarian consequences. Now is the time to de-escalate, not to add even more to the misery of the Yemeni people," the UN official said in a Twitter post on Tuesday, without mentioning the Houthis.

Earlier this month, the rebel militia resumed a major military offensive on Marib, the last stronghold for the internationally recognized government in the northern part of the country and an oil and gas-rich city, sparking heavy fighting with army troops and allied tribesmen that claimed the lives of hundreds of combatants on both sides.

Escalating fighting has forced hundreds of people who live in displacement camps near the battlefields to flee to other shelters inside Marib.

Echoing UN concerns about the humanitarian situation in the city, Yemeni government officials and aid workers say the Houthi offensive has triggered a new wave of displacement from Marib's Serwah area as the rebels seek to break government defenses.

"I saw today four families cramming into one car and fleeing fighting in Al-Zor in Serwah," Yahiya Hussein, a local air worker in Marib, told Arab News by telephone on Tuesday.

Dozens of families are still heading to Marib's cramped camps to escape the fighting, he added.

Hussein, who fled Houthi-controlled Sanaa in 2016, said that militia attacks on displacement camps have increased in the past two weeks and large explosions have forced many people to flee.

"People here are hungry. They live in panic and fear, and have no jobs," he said.

Unlike many lawless Yemeni areas, Marib has enjoyed peace and stability since early 2015, becoming a major haven for hundreds of thousands of people who fled the fighting and Houthi repression.

Local and international aid workers have warned that the Houthi invasion of Marib will trigger a huge displacement from the city to the other government-controlled areas or neighboring countries.

Hussein said that only pressure from international organizations on the rebels can save the city and country from disaster.

“International organizations and right groups should seriously and strongly intervene by pressuring the Houthis to stop their offensive on Marib,” he said.

Fighting intensified on all fronts in Marib on Tuesday after a brief lull the previous day as government forces pushed back militia attacks and made limited gains in the Serwah area.

Yemen’s defense ministry said that army troops and allied tribesmen engaged in heavy fighting with the Houthis, halting the rebels’ progress.

Arab coalition warplanes carried out several sorties, targeting Houthi military reinforcements heading to Marib battlefields, the ministry said.

Airstrikes by coalition warplanes have tilted the balance of the war in favor of government forces and stopped militia advances in Marib and other battlefields.

Several Yemeni MPs have called on the government to withdraw from the Stockholm Agreement and resume a military offensive on the western city of Hodeidah to ease rebel pressure on government forces in Marib.

Mohsen Basurah, deputy parliamentary speaker, said the Houthis are pushing ahead with their offensive on Marib despite suffering heavy casualties.

He urged the Yemeni president to launch a general mobilization and move military units from liberated areas in southern Yemen to Marib to shore up government forces.

“History will not forgive us if the Houthi enter Marib,” Basurah said on Twitter on Monday.



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Houthi offensive on Marib threatens prisoner swap talks, says government minister UN Yemen envoy demands rebels halt Marib attack

[Houthi snipers accused of targeting children in Taiz](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-16 22:53

LONDON: Houthi snipers have been accused of “systematically” shooting hundreds of children in the Yemeni city of Taiz.

The Rasad Coalition said as many as 450 children have been killed or wounded in the city in the past six years, and the Houthis have deliberately targeted them.

The human rights group said it denounced such “crimes against humanity,” and urged the UN and its special envoy to Yemen to launch an investigation to “expose such crimes and violations” and bring the perpetrators to justice.

An example of a child being shot by a Houthi sniper is the case of 8-year-old Ruwaida Saleh, who was shot in the head in August 2020 while collecting water

in the Kalaba district of Taiz.

In a BBC documentary, Ruwaida's uncle Hamid Saleh said she was attacked by a Houthi sniper who, according to the Rasd Coalition, refused to let anyone come to her aid, continuing to fire as she lay dying in the street.

"When she fell, her brother Amri was next to her," Hamid said. "He was strong, brave. He tried to drag his sister to the footpath on the other side, and then she was rushed to the hospital.

"Of course, she was in a very bad condition. Thank God, she had two operations. She stayed in the intensive care unit for about four or five days, in a coma. She is stable now, somehow."

Saleh bin Saleh, Ruwaida's father, told the BBC that her health "is getting better but she can't sleep because her head hurts. She is still sick. When she tries to sleep, she can't, and she always shakes her head. Ruwaida is scared. Whenever she hears a sound she thinks she will be shot again."

As well as showing disturbing images of Amri dragging his sister's body to safety, the BBC documentary also shows footage of children playing in the street outside Ruwaida's house, including several "playing dead" as if also being shot at by snipers.

In another segment, BBC journalists were forced to run to the house of a second family affected by the conflict in Taiz, under threat of being fired at by Houthi snipers.

Abdu Qaid Ahmed's 10-year-old son Saber was killed in 2020 by a sniper while out with his brother, also fetching water for his family.

"He (the sniper) shot Saber first," Ahmed said. "The bullet entered through (his chest) and went out his back. He died very quickly."

Mohamed, Saber's 7-year-old brother, was shot by the same sniper in the stomach but was able to return home, where he hid.

His mother Fatiya said: "When I came and took the blanket off him, I saw he was bleeding. I screamed and screamed and screamed. Then my neighbors came and took him from my arms.

"Then I was screaming 'bring me Saber, bring me Saber, I'm sure Saber is afraid I will beat him because he took his brother with him.' They told me he was in the morgue."

Fatiya said Mohamed had been left permanently scarred and traumatized by the event, always hiding when he hears gunfire, and with serious behavioral issues.



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[Turkey dodges EU tax blacklist as critics slam corruption](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-16 22:47

JEDDAH: Turkey is facing increasing pressure over its tax status after the EU granted an extension to demands that Ankara meet its tax transparency guidelines.

If Ankara fails to harmonize its tax policy in line with EU requirements, it could be placed on a tax haven blacklist if member states reach a consensus.

Brussels has criticized Turkey for failing to meet international standards on the automatic exchange of tax information, including tax transparency and prevention of tax evasion.

Turkey, which was already granted until the end of December 2020 to fix the issue, is on the EU's gray list of offenders that includes other countries required to reform their tax policies.

However, some EU countries, including Austria, France and Greece, refused to give more time to Turkey. But Germany granted the extension, citing reasons of "political expediency."

The EU tax haven blacklist, which was drafted in 2017, will be updated in October this year.

The bloc is trying to improve international tax governance by tackling tax evasion through illegal non-payment or underpayment of taxes. It is also tackling tax avoidance through the use of legal means to minimize tax liability, and money laundering in third countries.

EU efforts involve listing non-EU countries that encourage abusive tax practices in order to push them toward reforming legislation. Once they enact reforms, they can be removed from the list.

The Turkish opposition has also questioned the government over irregularities in its tax reforms.

The government granted the "gang of five" construction companies – Cengiz, Kalyon, Limak, Kolin and Makyol – tax incentives and exemptions 128 times over the last decade.

However, concessions given to companies with close ties to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party have stirred debate among the public, with many saying that it represents a double standard as the majority of citizens must pay a disproportionate amount of tax.

"Tenders are being handled without any supervision. Irregularities and corruption go unpunished. This is why they don't care about the law anymore. The system is corrupted," Murat Agirel, a dissident journalist who was recently jailed for his work, told Turkish media.

However, following legislation alone will not prove sufficient for Turkey to align with EU tax regulations. Turkish "front" companies, designed to take part in government contract bids and ensure that a specific company is guaranteed to win a tender, recently made headlines in the country.



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[Palestinians accuse Israel of blocking COVID-19 vaccines to Gaza](#)

Author:

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RAMALLAH: The Palestinian Authority on Monday accused Israel of refusing to allow some 2,000 coronavirus vaccine doses destined for Gaza health workers into the blockaded coastal strip.

The health ministry of the PA, based in the occupied West Bank, had planned to send the Russian Sputnik V doses to Gaza, a separate territory run by Hamas.

But on Monday evening, the ministry said Israel had blocked the transfer. Israel carries "the full responsibility of this arbitrary move" said minister Mai Al-Kaila in a statement, saying her ministry was coordinating with international organizations to organize the delivery as soon as possible.

COGAT, the Israeli authority that runs civilian affairs in the occupied Palestinian territories, said the PA had requested to transfer 1,000 vaccine doses to Gaza but that "this request is waiting for a political decision." Israeli sources had told AFP in recent days that the transfer was not a simple administrative measure under the purview of COGAT, but rather a political decision possibly linked to talks between Hamas and Israel.

The two sides have fought three wars since 2008, and Israel has demanded the liberation of two Israeli hostages reportedly still in Gaza as well as the remains of two soldiers killed in the last war, in 2014.

Earlier Monday, the PA said it had pushed back the rollout of its vaccination campaign in the West Bank due to a delay in deliveries.

It had said it was anticipating a shipment by the middle of this month, enabling it to start vaccinating the general public in the occupied West Bank while sharing stock with Hamas.

"There has been a delay in the arrival of the vaccine," Palestinian prime minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said ahead of a weekly cabinet meeting, without providing further details.

He said the launch of vaccinations for the general public would be announced "at a later time," when sufficient supplies arrive.

The PA is expecting some two million doses ordered from various manufacturers, in addition to vaccines from the UN-backed Covax program, set up to help less wealthy nations procure vaccines.

It began vaccinating frontline health care workers earlier this month with an initial procurement of 10,000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine, as well as several thousand doses of the Moderna product via Israel.

The Jewish state, which is carrying out one of the world's fastest vaccination campaigns per capita, has faced international calls to share its stocks with Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and Israeli-blockaded Gaza.

The PA has registered nearly 115,000 coronavirus cases in the West Bank, including nearly 1,400 deaths, while Hamas has recorded nearly 53,600 cases in Gaza, including 537 deaths.



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[Dahlan likely to return to Gaza before May 22 legislative elections](#)

Tue, 2021-02-16 00:35

GAZA CITY: The Fatah breakaway Dahlan movement is returning to the Gaza Strip after a 14-year absence.

The movement is led by Mohammed Dahlan, who has lived in the UAE since a dispute with President Mahmoud Abbas forced him to leave the West Bank. He sought refuge there after Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007.

Last Sunday two of the movement's members went back to Gaza. One of them was Abdel Hakim Awad, who heads the Dahlan election department. He is also one of the founders of Fatah Youth in Gaza and has a remarkable presence among young people and the student movement.

The return also follows Dahlan representatives meeting the Hamas delegation that took part in the Palestinian national dialogue in Cairo earlier this month.

There are legislative elections on May 22, but Dahlan spokesman Imad Mohsen played down the return's timing. It had been scheduled since 2018 and was not primarily related to the polls even if it coincided with it, he added.

Hundreds of Fatah members left the Gaza Strip fearing for their lives after the 2007 split, which led to Hamas' control of the coastal enclave, and joined the movement formed by Dahlan.

Mohsen said about 300 Fatah activists were in Egypt and elsewhere, and that there was no legal problem preventing their return to Gaza. "It is expected that large numbers of these brothers will return in the near future," he told Arab News.

A Palestinian source, who preferred to remain anonymous, told Arab News it was possible that Dahlan himself would return to Gaza before the May 22 elections.

Observers have linked these developments with Dahlan's possible participation in the elections, whether through a separate list or with a unified Fatah list if there are successful reconciliation efforts between Abbas and Dahlan.

"Our firm position from the beginning is to run the elections with a unified list of Fatah and, in the event Abbas refuses to do so, we will run in the elections with a list that includes leaders of the movement," said Mohsen. "It consists of personalities with national, professional and youth competence, so that they meet the challenges that plague the Palestinian cause. We are part of the Palestinian scene, and no party can exclude us or prevent us from participating in this democratic path. Therefore, our movement will participate in all elections, including the presidential (one), in the form it deems appropriate with the requirements of the current situation."

There are different views about Dahlan's influence on the election results and Fatah's ability to make gains and not repeat the scenario from the 2006 elections, when Hamas achieved an overwhelming majority.

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He said it was in Hamas' interest to have multiple Fatah lists because this approach would enhance its chances of achieving remarkable results.

He added that Fatah currently faced great challenges, not just from Dahlan's list but also from Marwan Barghouti, who has not yet decided on participating in the elections.

"The best option is a unified Fatah, and if that is not possible, it will have the option of a partnership list with Hamas," Saada told Arab News.

He believed it was too early to determine the extent of the damage as there were three months left before the polls and that options were still under discussion.

Options

The legislative elections will be followed by presidential elections on July 31 and then elections to form the National Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization on Aug. 31.

A member of the Fatah Central Committee, which is responsible for national dialogue, said that Fatah would start dialogues with all factions to build a broad national front in which everyone could participate for the elections.

Jibril Rajoub also said that "all options are open, including running the elections with a single list, if it is not possible to agree with the rest of the factions."

Fatah Revolutionary Council member Abdullah Abdullah said that while Fatah was united and did not suffer from any division, Dahlan was an industry and not a national movement.

"Dahlan is a person who is dismissed from Fatah and adjudications have been issued against him," Abdullah told Arab News. "He is not able to run in the elections. As for the members of his movement, who are mainly Fatah, there is nothing that prevents them from returning to Fatah."

But political science professor, Naji Shurrab, said that Dahlan's movement had become a reality that could not be ignored.

"During the past few years the movement has proven that it has become an organization with a presence and the masses not only in Gaza or the West Bank, but in the diaspora," he told Arab News. "It has clear regional and Arab support. It has elements of financial strength, and it has succeeded in

attracting youth.”

He ruled out internal Fatah reconciliation being achieved during Abbas’ lifetime and said that recent laws and judicial amendments made by the president were his attempts to exclude Dahlan from competing in the elections.

Shurrab said that Fatah would be the biggest loser from Abbas’ refusal to reconcile with Dahlan and unify the movement in the upcoming elections.



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