

Philippine troops to evacuate citizens in Iraq

Author:

Thu, 2020-01-09 00:04

MANILA: The Philippines on Wednesday ordered the evacuation of its nationals from Iraq amid rising tensions between the US and Iran.

The Philippine government expressed deep concerns over security in the region and raised the threat alert in Iraq to the highest level.

“The Philippine Embassy in Baghdad has been tasked to effect the mandatory evacuation of Filipinos estimated to be around 1,640 in that country,” the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) announced. The level-4 alert, according to the DFA, is raised when “there is large-scale internal conflict or full-blown external attack.”

The repatriation efforts will be led by Environment Secretary Roy Cimatu, who is set to fly to the Middle East on Thursday.

“We will do everything to bring out Filipinos there,” Cimatu said, adding that those who refuse will be forced to leave.

He also said that as Iraq is practically landlocked, Filipinos residing there would either be airlifted if the Baghdad airport is still open, or moved by land to transit points from where they could board ships or planes to the Philippines.

If they are evacuated by land, they would go through Amman in Jordan or Irbil in northern Iraq. From Amman or Irbil, they would be flown to Doha in Qatar or to Dubai in the UAE, and then board flights to Manila.

The highest alert level was also imposed for Iran and Lebanon, Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello said, adding that senior labor officials are being sent to different Middle Eastern countries – including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE – to brief Filipinos of the government’s action plan should tensions escalate.

The government is also prepared to bring home Philippine nationals from Iran and Libya.

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said the Philippine military will send two battalions to help repatriate Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) from Iraq.

“The two battalions will not be there to engage in combat,” he said, “but to facilitate or help assist in the repatriation of the OFWs, especially in Iraq,” he told reporters in Camp Aguinaldo.

The two battalions will comprise the Philippine Army’s Special Operation

Command marines and troops. A battalion is composed of between 350 and 500 officers and enlisted personnel.

Lorenzana added that if the need arises, the troops will also protect the Philippine nationals and those helping them in the evacuation process.

Asked whether they already have rules of engagement for these soldiers, the defense chief said that everything is still in the planning stage.

Lorenzana said that a brand-new Philippine Coast Guard offshore patrol vessel, the BRP Gabriela Silang, which is now in Malta, is expected to reach Jeddah in Saudi Arabia by Thursday.

The ship will be held there “for a while in case we will need the ship to shuttle OFWs from Iran or Iraq to Qatar and then from there we can maybe charter a plane or charter ships to bring them home,” he said, adding that other military assets that can be used to transport the OFWs are two landing docks – the BRP Tarlac and the BRP Davao Del Sur – with a combined capacity of 500 people.

Also to be deployed for the operation are two Air Force Lockheed C-130 cargo planes and the EADS CASA C-295 military transport aircraft.

If the need arises, the government will engage commercial planes and cruise ships as well.



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Khalid bin Salman: Saudi Arabia will do everything in its power to spare Iraq from conflict

[Yemen denies considering deal with Turkey to run ports, airports](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-01-08 23:59

AL-MUKALLA: Yemen's government has issued a firm denial of reports that it intends to allow Turkish companies – whether private or government-run – to run key ports and airports in the war-torn country.

The denial was a response to remarks made by Yemeni Minister of Transportation Saleh Al-Jabwani on a recent visit to Istanbul. Al-Jabwani then said he agreed with his Turkish counterpart that the two countries should form a joint committee tasked with developing Yemen's transport infrastructure – including ports and airports.

The government issued a statement saying that any cooperation with other countries would always take Yemen's interests into consideration. Without mentioning Al-Jabwani, the statement made it clear that his remarks do not represent the government's stance on the matter.

“Circulated remarks about arrangements related to seaports and airports do not represent the government, and some officials' visits to friendly countries are personal,” the statement said.

The internationally recognized government in Aden is in control of all of the country's major ports on the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, with the exception of Hodeida, which is currently under the control of the Iran-backed Houthi militia. The government also runs functioning airports in Hadramout and Aden.

On Wednesday, a senior government official told Arab News that the prime minister was “angry” with the transport minister and that the government's statement was intended to send a message that only President Abed Rabbo Mansour and his government have the authority to decide who manages Yemeni seaports and airports.

“Neither Al-Jabwani nor any other official has the right to give permission to other countries to run Yemeni facilities. This is a sovereign decision that can be made only by the president and the government,” the official, who asked to remain anonymous, said.

Meanwhile Yemen's Minister of Information Muammar Al-Aryani took to Twitter to call for the international community to designate the Houthis as a terrorist group.

“We call on the international community to ... deal with the Houthi militia on an equal footing with other Iranian arms in the region by speeding up its designation as a terrorist movement,” Al-Aryani wrote.

Yemeni officials including Vice President Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, Al-Aryani, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Al-Hadhrami, have all backed the US strike that killed Qassem Soleimani, the former head of Iran’s Quds Force, widely believed to be responsible for the training and arming of the Houthis.

On Wednesday, Mohammed Ali Al-Houthi praised Iran’s retaliatory missile attacks again American bases in Iraq, accusing America of killing Yemenis.

Meanwhile, fighting continues to rage in Yemen.

Minister of Defense Mohammed Al-Maqdishi said Houthis had attacked loyalists in the western province of Hodeida – despite both sides having signed the Stockholm Agreement, which was designed to stop fighting in Hodeida and other cities.

On Tuesday, the Yemeni army’s news site, 26 September, said government troops had foiled a Houthi attempt to seize control of military locations in Beit Al-Fagiah district, triggering clashes with government forces.



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Houthi missiles kill 9 Yemeni soldiers
Yemen's Taiz National Museum Reopens After Four Years of Closure

[Making fun of men or emboldening sex pests? Egyptian song spurs debate](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2020-01-08 18:36

CAIRO: An Egyptian pop song where a man threatens a woman to force her to give him her phone number has caused a storm as it was released the day after a video emerged of a woman being sexually assaulted by a mob – a common crime during the Arab Spring.

Singer Tameem Youness has defended the track “Salmonella” – where he prays for the woman he is wooing to become sick with salmonella – as a satire on men’s reactions to being spurned in the conservative Arab country.

“I was making fun of the men who appear very romantic but when they get rejected, they go nuts and start to treat the woman badly or curse her or say things that are not true about her,” he said in a video on his Facebook page. Egypt is the Arab world’s most populous country and its pop music is listened to across the Middle East. “Salmonella” has been viewed more than 7.5 million times on YouTube since its release on Jan. 1.

Women’s rights advocates say many men will not see the joke and the catchy tune risks encouraging harassment in Egypt, where sexual assault was rife during and after the 2011 uprising that ousted veteran president Hosni Mubarak.

Youness, who is shown with blood splattered around his mouth at one point in the video, sings, “I will not go away until I get your number so do not refuse.”

More than 60% of Egyptian men said they have sexually harassed a woman or girl in a 2017 survey by UN Women and the gender equality group Promundo, which also found that most men believe women sometimes deserve to be beaten. “This (kind of song) can really incite young people to practice violence against women and violate their rights without giving them the freedom to say no,” said Nehad Abu El Komsan, head of the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights.

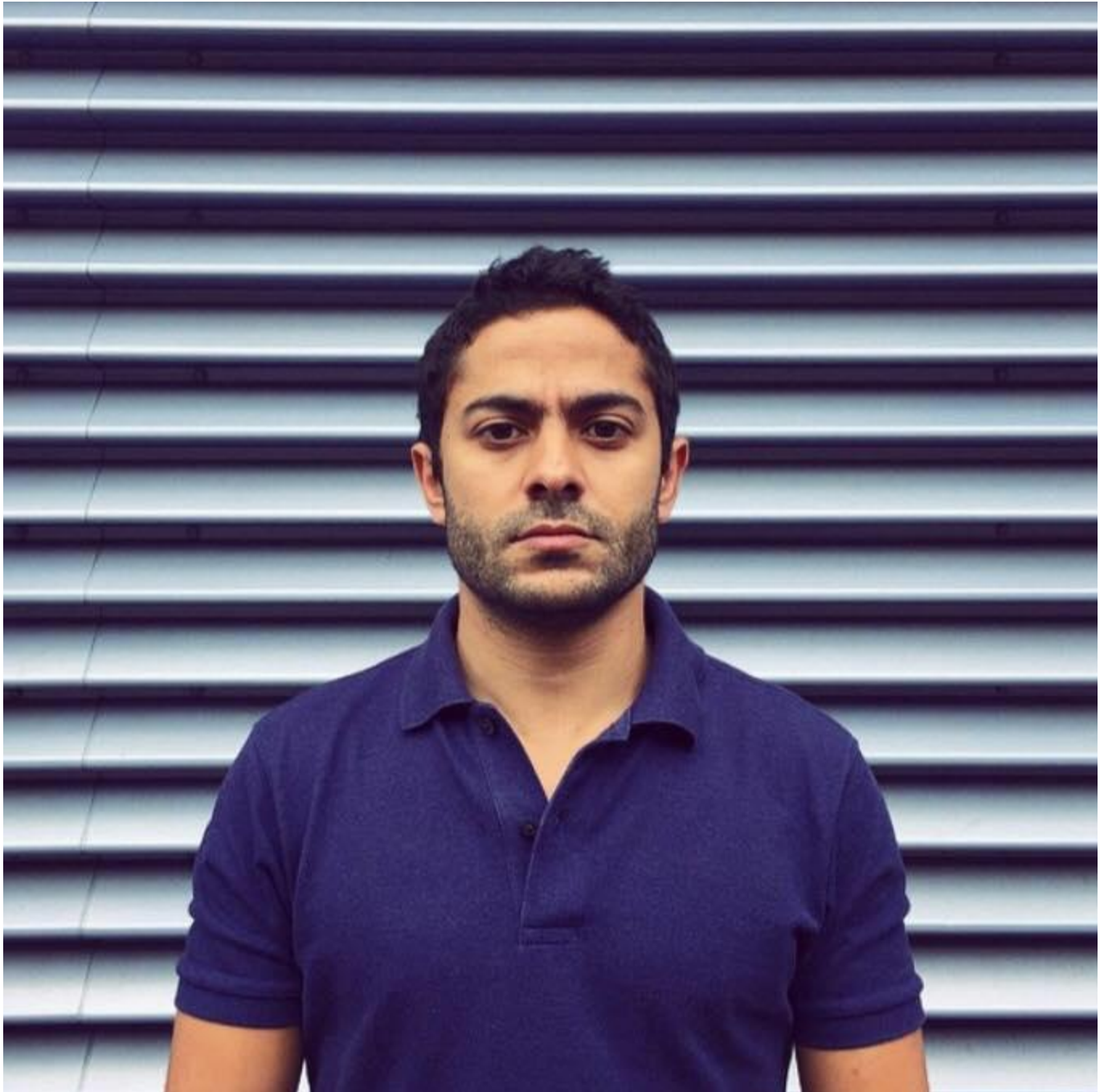
The timing of the song’s release – a day after footage emerged of a woman being groped by a mob during New Year’s Eve celebrations in Mansoura, about 130km northeast of Cairo – was insensitive, she said.

Authorities have said they are investigating the incident.

President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi ordered a crackdown on sexual harassment after a woman was assaulted in Cairo's Tahrir Square during his 2014 inauguration, with a law introduced that year prescribing a minimum of six months in jail or a fine.

Not everyone is worried about the song.

"The song is insulting and humiliating to women but I am against banning it," Maggie Mamdouh, a 25-year-old engineer, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "This will be a violation of freedom of expression."



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How Eskai is changing the way women shop in Egypt

[Rockets land at Iraq's Ain Al-Asad air base that contains US forces – reports](#)

Wed, 2020-01-08 02:13

BAGHDAD: At least nine rockets slammed into an Iraqi air base in the country's west early Wednesday where US and coalition forces are based, security sources told AFP.

The attack on the Ain Al-Asad air base came after pro-Tehran factions in Iraq had vowed to join forces to "respond" to an American drone strike that killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi top commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis in Baghdad last week.

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Trump says US withdrawal would be 'worst thing' for Iraq

Tue, 2020-01-07 22:36

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump said Tuesday that a US troop withdrawal from Iraq at this stage would be the "worst thing" for the country, after Baghdad's parliament demanded the expulsion of American forces.

"At some point we want to get out, but this isn't the right point," Trump said. "It's the worst thing that could happen to Iraq."

Iraqi MPs have urged the government to expel the 5,200 US troops stationed in the country in response to the drone attack that killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and top Iraqi military figure Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis.

Trump backed away from his earlier insistence that he has the right to order the bombing of Iran's cultural treasures during a war.

Facing strong criticism that such attacks would be a war crime, Trump said he was "OK" with following international law. However, he repeated an earlier complaint that he found the restriction unfair.

"Think of it: they kill our people, they blow up our people and then we have to be very gentle with their cultural institutions. But I'm OK with it," Trump told reporters.

"You know what, if that's what the law is, I like to obey the law."

He added a warning that if Iran "does anything that they shouldn't be doing, they're going to be suffering the consequences and very strongly."

Trump previously prompted an outcry from domestic critics, the Iranian government and the UN's cultural agency UNESCO when he said that he did not need to abide by international law on protecting such sites in war.

"It doesn't work that way," he said.

Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper had both sought to walk back the threat.

Iran boasts an ancient culture with two dozen places on UNESCO's list of world heritage sites.



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Saudi Arabia's Deputy Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman meets Donald Trump in Washington Trump threatens sanctions on Baghdad after lawmakers call on US troops to leave