

Rockets hit Iraqi military base hosting US forces near Baghdad

Mon, 2019-06-17 22:51

BAGHDAD: Three Katyusha rockets landed inside Taji military base, north of Baghdad, where some Iraqi troops and a number of US military trainers are stationed.

No casualties were reported, according to a statement from military officials. The attack is the second to target the base this week.

The attack comes amid rising tension in the Middle East between the US and Iran.



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'Sand mafias' threaten Morocco's coastline

Author:

Mon, 2019-06-17 21:23

MOHAMMEDIA: Beneath an apartment block that looms over Monica beach in the western coastal city of Mohammedia, a sole sand dune has escaped the clutches of Morocco's insatiable construction contractors.

Here, like elsewhere across the North African tourist magnet, sand has been stolen to help feed an industry that is growing at full tilt.

A report last month by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) on the global over-exploitation of this resource accuses "sand mafias" of destroying Morocco's beaches and over-urbanizing its coastline.

"The dunes have disappeared along the entire city's coastline," lamented environmental activist Jawad, referring to Mohammedia, on the Atlantic between Rabat and Casablanca.

The 33-year-old environmental activist leads Anpel, a local NGO dedicated to coastal protection.

"At this rate, we'll soon only have rocks" left, chipped in Adnane, a member of the same group.

More than half the sand consumed each year by Morocco's construction industry – some 10 million cubic meters (350 million cubic feet) – is extracted illegally, according to UNEP.

"The looters come in the middle of the night, mainly in the low season," said a local resident in front of his grand home on the Monica seafront.

"But they do it less often now because the area is full of people. In any case, there is nothing more to take," added the affable forty-something.

Sand accounts for four-fifths of the makeup of concrete and – after water – is the world's second most consumed resource.

Exploitation

Beaches and rivers are heavily exploited across the planet, legally and illegally, according to UNEP.

In Morocco, "sand is often removed from beaches to build hotels, roads and other tourism-related infrastructure," according to UNEP. Beaches are therefore shrinking, resulting in coastal erosion.

"Continued construction is likely to lead to... destruction of the main natural attraction for visitors – beaches themselves," the report warned.

Theft of sand from beaches or coastal dunes in Morocco is punishable by five years in prison.

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FASTFACT

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"On some beaches, the sand has nearly disappeared" in parts of the north, said an ecological activist in Tangiers. "There has been enormous pressure on the beaches of Tangiers because of real estate projects," he said.

To the south, the UNEP report noted, "sand smugglers have transformed a large beach into a rocky landscape" between Safi and Essaouira. Activist Jawad points to "small scale looting, like here in Mohammedia."

But "then there is the intensive and structured trafficking by organized networks, operating with the complicity of some officials."

While the sand mafias operate as smugglers, "key personalities – lawmakers or retired soldiers – hand out permits allowing them to over-exploit deposits, without respect for quotas," he added.

A licensed sand dredger spoke of "a very organized mafia that pays no taxes" selling sand that is "neither washed nor desalinated," and falls short of basic building regulations.

These mafia outfits have "protection at all levels... they pay nothing at all because they do everything in cash," this operator added, on condition of anonymity.

"A lot of money is laundered through this trade."

A simple smartphone helps visualize the extent of the disaster.

Via a Google Earth map, activist Adnane showed a razed coastal forest, where dunes have given way to a lunar landscape, some 200 km south of Casablanca.

Eyes fixed on the screen, he carefully scrutinized each parcel of land.

"Here, near Safi, they have taken the sand over (a stretch of) seven kilometers. It was an area exploited by a retired general, but there is nothing left to take," he alleged.

Adnane pointed to another area – exploited, he said, by a politician who had a permit for “an area of two hectares.”

But instead, he “took kilometers” of sand.

Environmental protection was earmarked as a priority by Morocco, in a grandiose statement after the country hosted the 2016 COP22 international climate conference.

Asked by AFP about measures to fight uncontrolled sand extraction, secretary of state for energy Nezha El Ouafi pointed to “a national coastal protection plan (that) is in the process of being validated.”

The plan promises “evaluation mechanisms, with protection programs and (a) high status,” she said.

Meanwhile, environmental activists are pleading against the “head in the sand approach” over the scale of coastal devastation.



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Morocco adopts law confirming Berber as official language

Iraqi PM faces protests over power shortages and graft

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Mon, 2019-06-17 01:19

BAGHDAD: Iraq's exclusion from US sanctions on Iran and allowing it to import gas and electricity will not ease the pressure on Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's government, Iraqi politicians and officials told Arab News on Sunday.

Mass demonstrations are planned for later this week in the Shiite-dominated southern provinces to protest about the lack of basic daily services including electricity and drinking water, high rates of unemployment and corruption in ministries and government departments, activists told Arab News.

Iranian energy and natural gas imports amount to about 4,000 megawatts per day, equivalent to 20 percent of Iraq's total production.

The US three-month extension waiver allowing Iraq to import Iranian gas and electricity is expected to dampen some of the anger and give Abdul Mahdi's government a chance to find more radical solutions to the electricity shortage caused by terrorist actions, lack of planning and government corruption over the past 15-16 years.

People in Basra plan to take to the streets on July 20, activists told Arab News.

"Unemployment, scarcity of electricity and potable water and corruption are all still in place and none have been addressed despite the fact we have been protesting every year," Sheikh Raied Al-Fraijai, the head of Basra tribal council and one of the Basra's key activists, told Arab News.

"We will demand the dismissal of Abdul Mahdi and his government," he said. Electricity supply from the national grid does not exceed a 12-hour-a-day average during the summer, when temperatures exceed 50 degrees Celsius. This is one of the most powerful engines of the demonstrations, which usually turn violent and lead to clashes between protesters and security forces.

Last summer demonstrations extended to most of the southern provinces and Baghdad. There were massive riots, especially in Basra and Amara, where government and party headquarters were set on fire, as well as the Iranian Consulate. At least 22 demonstrators and security personnel were killed. Controlling the demonstrations and preventing Iraqi political forces from exploiting them is one of the challenges facing both local governments and activists.

Security services in Basra were on high alert on Sunday after the circulation of an image of a leaflet with the slogan of Daesh on it calling for support for the protests and inciting demonstrators to attack members of the "Savage army," a term used by Daesh to describe the Iraqi army.

“This game (the circulation of the leaflet) aims to give the necessary cover for the local government in Basra to target us,” an activist told Arab News. “Now they (local officials) have a good pretext to come after us. They can easily say that we are belong to Daesh or just say these are aimed to provide the cover for sabotage and targeting security forces.”



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[Kuwaiti eco-activists show how to win the war on waste](#)

Sun, 2019-06-16 23:31

KUWAIT CITY: Kuwait has been facing serious challenges in managing its solid waste for some time now.

The dumping of non-biodegradable materials such as plastic into landfills and the subsequent migration of leachate, causing groundwater contamination, has also been equally worrying.

Sanaa Al-Qamlaas, a witness to the unethical dumping of all kinds of waste materials into these sites, said she first felt the need for a change in the management of waste in Kuwait several years ago.

“I often visited landfills and it was hard for me not to tear up watching them,” she said. “I decided that we had to stop at least plastic from going into these landfills as it had a major negative impact on the environment.”

Al-Qamlaas got together with her best friend, Farah Shabaan, and her nephew, Soad Al-Fozan, and soon Kuwait’s first polyethylene terephthalate (PET – plastic) bottle recycling project, Omniya, was born.

Starting in August 2015, the trio initially focused on the collection and recycling of PET bottles as “there were massive quantities of these bottles in the landfills and these were ignored even by the scavengers as they were light-weight,” said Al-Qamlaas.

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Sanaa Al-Qamlaas

With a 1,000 dinar (\$3,300) budget in hand and no plan for the road ahead, Al-Qamlaas and Shabaan decided one weekend to simply send WhatsApp messages to the people on their contacts list, asking them to segregate their plastics and to drop them in cardboard containers that would be provided at their homes.

Once done, the two friends went to each home to pick up the collected plastic.

“We just sent the message to our friends, but we were in for a surprise when the former minister of social affairs, Hind Al-Sabeeh, contacted us asking us what we were up to. It was a positive indicator of how powerful social media can be,” remembers Al Qamlaas.

The ex-minister encouraged them and told them to get a certification for their initiative.

Omniya’s message was also noticed on Instagram by the chairman and director general of the Environment Public Authority (EPA), Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Humoud Al-Sabah, who instructed his team to assist the women in their new project.

Omniya started getting calls from residents asking them for containers for their own bottles.

“We went to each home, spoke to everybody, taught them how to crush the plastic bottles, how to segregate plastic; once the bags were full, we took them back in our cars.”

Initially Al-Qamlaas and Shabaan were challenged by the rubbish that users put in with the plastic.

“Our cars stank and our homes too, but all that changed once people knew what to segregate,” said Al-Qamlaas.

They visited 4,500 homes in the first year, going back and forth picking up bottles, followed by visits to around 100 schools to spread awareness. They soon collected enough bottles to get on to the next step – recycling.

With partial financial help from the Kuwait National Fund, Omniya set up the country’s first PET recycling plant.

“We just started production a year ago; we are still hugely in debt as we have to pay our land rent and operate our machinery and do not have any air-conditioners in the factory. But we are producing hot-washed, high-class PET flakes, that we now sell to Ireland, Italy and Turkey – markets with niche specifications,” says Al-Qamlaas.

Realizing that they needed more support to run a factory, the team roped in the private sector for sponsorships and partnered with various organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Ministry of Education as well as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Today, Omniya is a familiar name in Kuwait and the passion is still strong.

“We have just one aim – to stop plastic from going to these landfills,” Al-Qamlaas said. “The road is long and we are tired but we owe it to our country – to the next generation.”

• This report is part of a series being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.



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[UAE FM and Egyptian president meet in Cairo](#)

Sun, 2019-06-16 21:10

DUBAI: UAE's Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in Cairo on Sunday.

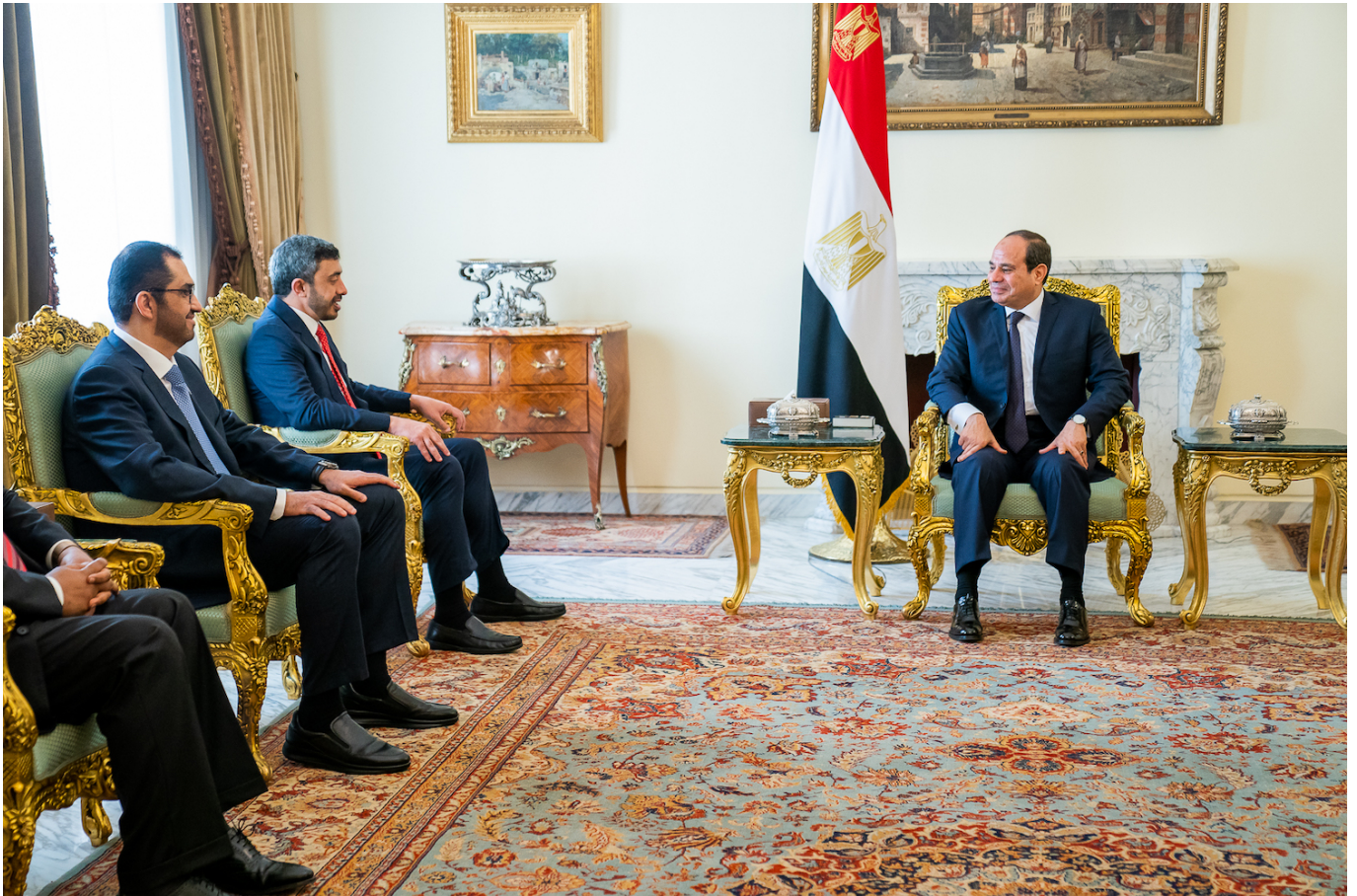
Sheikh Abdullah commended the role played by Egypt in ensuring regional stability, and noted that the current circumstances in the region necessitate "cementing pan-Arab solidarity and cooperation to confront the besetting challenges," Emirates News Agency (WAM) reported.

El-Sisi reaffirmed his country's support for the UAE in light of recent

developments in the Arabian Gulf.

“Egypt is avidly following up the ongoing developments in the Arabian Gulf region, particularly the latest incidents that posed a menacing threat to the safety of maritime navigation ,” said El-Sisi, asserting his country’s support for the governments and peoples of “UAE and other countries against various challenges, including attempts to destabilize the region.”

Sheikh Abdullah and El-Sisi also reviewed the latest developments in Sudan and expressed solidarity with the people of Sudan to survive the current critical stage that the country is in and fulfill their ambitions.



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