

First Gaza rocket in six weeks draws Israeli response

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JERUSALEM: An Israeli aircraft hit a Hamas position in the Gaza Strip late on Friday in response to the first fire from the territory since a November flare-up, the military said.

"An army attack helicopter targeted a Hamas military position in the south of the Gaza Strip," an army statement said.

It said it had responded after a "launch toward Israel" that Israeli media said was a rocket.

Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas said the Israeli aircraft fired two missiles which damaged one of their positions but caused no casualties.

It was the first rocket fire from Gaza since an Egyptian-brokered cease-fire announced on November 13 ended the worst flare-up around the territory since a 2014 war.

In the space of 48 hours, hundreds of rockets and mortar rounds were fired into Israel, killing one person and wounding 27.

The barrage followed a botched Israeli commando raid which killed a Hamas commander and six other militants as well as an Israeli officer.

Seven Gazans were killed and 26 wounded in retaliatory Israeli air strikes before the cease-fire took effect.

Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza have fought three wars since 2008, and mass protests along the border since March 30 have triggered deadly clashes with the Israel army that have raised fears of a fourth.

During a protest on Friday, Israeli fire killed Karam Fayyad, 26, on the border east of the city of Khan Yunis, the Gaza health ministry said.

At least 240 Palestinians have been killed since the demonstrations began, most of them by Israeli fire during border clashes but also by air and tank strikes.



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Israeli gunfire kills a Gazan during border protests
Palestinian security forces block press conference by parliament speaker

[Houthis begin withdrawal from Yemen's Hodeidah port: UN](#)

Sat, 2018-12-29 11:34

DUBAI: The Houthi militia have begun to withdraw from the port of Hodeidah, the country's key aid lifeline, under an agreement reached in Sweden earlier this month, a UN official said Saturday.

The official, who requested anonymity, said that the Houthis began to pull back from the Red Sea port at midnight (2100 GMT Friday).

However, a Yemeni government source denied reports that the Houthi militia had withdrawn from Hodeidah.

The source confirmed that the statements of the Houthi militia on Saturday on their redeployment in the port of Hodeidah were attempts that they were claiming to abide by the Stockholm agreement on Hodeidah.

"We can not accept these violations, which will lead to a failure in the agreement," the source said.

The Iranian-aligned Houthis have agreed with the government to implement a ceasefire in Hodeidah province and withdraw their respective forces.

Retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert, the head of a UN advance team in charge of monitoring the ceasefire, arrived in Hodeidah this week.

Under the deal, international monitors are to be deployed in Hodeidah and a Redeployment Coordination Committee including both sides, chaired by Cammaert, will oversee implementation. The committee started its meetings this week.

A recent report said Houthi militia fired on bulldozers of the Yemeni army during the opening of the Kilo 16 road linking Sanaa, Hodeidah and Taiz, despite both sides agreeing to open all closed humanitarian corridors from key port to the Yemeni capital.

The Arab coalition fighting to restore the legitimate Yemeni government said on Saturday that the Iran-backed Houthi militia is blocking access to a relief convoy, carrying 32 tons of flour, from Hodeidah port heading to a UN organization in the rebel-held capital Sanaa.

Spokesperson Col. Turki Al-Maliki said that the coalition's joint forces issued the necessary permits for the relief convoy and secure its passage through the areas controlled by the legitimate government in Hodeidah after completing all the coordination with the Yemeni National Army. However, he said the "Houthi terrorist group refused to allow the relief convoy to exit from the port of Hodeidah and secure its safety from the port of Hodeidah to Sanaa, which represents a deliberate obstruction to relief and humanitarian work."

The coalition's joint forces command confirmed the continued issuance of permits to all relief organizations and their movement to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people as well as supporting all the political efforts of the UN special envoy and the Sweden agreement.

Al-Maliki stressed that the actions of the Houthi militia constitute a flagrant violation of international and humanitarian law, relief efforts and what was agreed upon during UN sponsored peace negotiations in Stockholm earlier this month. The next UN-backed Redeployment Coordination Committee meeting is scheduled for Jan. 1 in Hodeidah.

The coalition also said on Saturday that the Houthi militia committed 14 violations in the past 24 hours, bringing the total number of breaches to 204 since the start of the ceasefire.

A truce in the rebel-held city of Hodeidah and its surroundings went into effect on Dec. 18 and is part of a peace push seen as the best chance yet of ending four years of devastating conflict.

Retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert is heading the joint committee, which includes both government officials and Houthi rebels, and chaired its first

face-to-face meetings on Wednesday.

Houthi Mines

Meanwhile, Yemen's national army removed hundreds of mines planted by the Houthi militia on routes leading to Hodeidah, the official state news agency reported on Friday.

An official source in the Giants Brigades, a southern resistance force, said: "The demining teams began on Friday in preparation for the return of life to the city of Hodeidah and facilitate the passage of citizens after the withdrawal of the militia from the city and its ports."

The source explained that teams managed to remove hundreds of mines and improvised explosive devices planted by the militia at the entrances to the city of Hodeidah in an operation to open safe roads for citizens to enter the city after the Houthi militia's withdrawal.

Elsewhere, the army clashed with Houthi militia in Damt district of Dhale governorate, Saudi news agency SPA reported, where at least 25 militia fighters were killed and wounded.



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Yemen's Houthi militia continues to violate Hodeidah ceasefire: Arab coalition
Yemen govt to pay civil servants in militia-held Hodeidah

Egyptian forces kill 40 suspected militants after tourist bus bombed

Sat, 2018-12-29 10:43

CAIRO: Egypt's Interior Ministry said on Saturday that security forces killed 40 militants in three separate incidents in North Sinai and Giza, a day after a bombing on a Vietnamese tourist bus in Giza killed four people.

Large quantities of weapons and explosives were found during the raids, the state news agency said.

Militants reportedly planned attacks against Egypt's security forces, tourism and Christian places of worship.

On Friday, a roadside bomb hit a tourist bus in an area near the Giza Pyramids, killing two Vietnamese tourists and wounding 12 others.

The bombing, less than 4 km from the pyramids, on the outskirts of Cairo, is the first deadly attack against foreign tourists in Egypt for more than a year and comes as the tourism sector, a vital source of foreign currency, recovers from a sharp drop in visitor numbers since the country's 2011 uprising.

The bus was traveling in the Marioutiyah area near the pyramids when the crude roadside bomb, concealed by a wall, went off. The wounded included 10 Vietnamese tourists. The other two wounded were the Egyptian bus driver and the guide.

The ministry did not say whether the suspected militants were connected to Friday's attack, but said its forces killed 30 people during raids on their hideouts in Giza where it said "terrorist elements" were planning a series of attacks targeting state institutions and the tourism industry.

Security forces also killed 10 suspected militants in North Sinai, where the country is fighting an insurgency led by Daesh.

State news agency MENA said that the suspects were killed in a gunbattle.

The ministry did not give any details about the suspects' identity or whether there had been any casualties or injuries among the security forces. The statement said the three raids took place simultaneously.

Events such as the bombing of a Russian airliner shortly after it took off from Sharm el Sheikh in 2015, killing all 224 people on board, caused tourist numbers to Egypt to plunge.

There are still no direct flights from major tourist markets such as Britain and Russia to the country's biggest Red Sea resort, Sharm el Sheikh, since that attack.

The government says fighting extremist militants is a priority as it works to restore stability after the years of turmoil that followed the "Arab Spring" protests of 2011.

Egypt's military and police launched a major campaign against militant groups in February, targeting the Sinai Peninsula as well as southern areas and the border with Libya.



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Shoura Council speaker lauds Saudi-Egyptian ties
3 die as roadside bomb targets tourist bus near Pyramids in Egypt

[Turkish, Syrian forces edge close to each other in Manbij](#)

Fri, 2018-12-28 23:41

ANKARA: With Syrian regime forces' entry into the strategic northwestern city of Manbij on Friday amid Turkey's massing of troops along the countries' border, strategic cards are being redistributed.

Isolated by the US announcement of a full withdrawal from Syria, the Kurdish militia that controls the area recently asked the regime for help ahead of a potential Turkish offensive.

The Syrian national flag has reportedly been raised in the center of Manbij,

which is located on the western bank of the Euphrates river and about 30 km south of the Turkish-Syrian border.

Ankara considers the Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) an extension of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is outlawed in Turkey and has waged a bloody insurgency for more than three decades. Moscow does not regard the YPG as a terrorist group.

Turkey's Defense Ministry said the YPG cannot make statements on behalf of the region's people or "invite other elements" to take control of it.

Ankara said regime forces' entry into Manbij is a "psychological act," but Moscow said it is a positive step for the region's stability.

A high-level Turkish delegation – comprising the defense minister, foreign minister, national intelligence chief and presidential adviser – will head to Moscow on Saturday.

Russia will also host the leaders of Iran and Turkey early next year to discuss the Syrian conflict.

Nihat Ali Ozcan, a security analyst at Ankara-based think tank TEPAV, said he does not anticipate a direct clash between Turkish and Syrian regime troops. "It's more likely that the Ankara-supported Free Syrian Army (FSA) and regime forces may fight," he told Arab News.

The FSA, which has moved to the outskirts of Manbij, is expected to be an essential part of a potential Turkish military offensive. Ozcan said Ankara will not react ahead of the meeting with Russian officials.

Ankara will ask Moscow to allow it to use Syrian airspace, the Turkish daily Hurriyet reported on Friday. But experts say if not managed properly, the crisis may deepen in the coming days.

"If the Syrian regime goes eastward to limit the movement of Turkey and the FSA, it may lead to a clash between Turkey and Syria, and subsequently between Turkey on the one hand, and Russia and Iran on the other," Ozcan said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on Wednesday said Moscow and Ankara are in close coordination over Syria, "including military counterterrorist operations."

Timur Akhmetov, a researcher at the Russian International Affairs Council, told Arab News that if Moscow encourages the Syrian regime to retake Manbij, it would be a sign of Russian mistrust of Turkey's intentions in northern Syria.

Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute, said a clash between Turkish and Syrian regime forces is very unlikely.

"The regime wants to take back all of Syria, and Turkey wants Rojava (a semi-

autonomous Kurdish region in northeast Syria) to disappear. The regime is overwhelming Rojava as it takes the rest of the country. Ankara will just sit and watch this from the sidelines,” he told Arab News.

Ankara has prioritized restraining Kurdish nationalist ambitions in regions bordering southeast Turkey.

Cagaptay said what happens in Manbij will be the blueprint for what happens elsewhere in Rojava.



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Civilian exodus from Daesh's last Syria bastion
Syria army enters Manbij in new alliance with Kurds

[Yemen's Houthi militia continues to violate Hodeidah ceasefire: Arab coalition](#)

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Wed, 2018-12-26 16:40

JEDDAH: The Arab coalition fighting in support of the legitimate Yemeni government on Friday said that the Houthi militia had violated the cease-fire agreement 16 times over the last 24 hours.

The coalition said that this brings the total number of breaches to 190 since the start of the cease-fire.

A truce in the rebel-held city of Hodeidah and its surroundings went into effect on Dec. 18 and is part of a peace push seen as the best chance yet of ending four years of devastating conflict.

Retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert is heading the joint committee, which includes both government officials and Houthi rebels, and chaired its first face-to-face meetings on Wednesday.

"We support the Yemeni army's commitment to the cease-fire and the Sweden deal," the coalition said in a statement.

However, earlier on Friday, the Houthi militia prevented the Yemeni government's delegation from leaving the port city of Hodeidah, after concluding consultations with a UN team tasked with monitoring the cease-fire between the legitimate Yemeni government and the Iranian-backed Houthi militia.

Meanwhile, a number of civilians, including children, were wounded in a public square in the center of the city of Taiz in a bombardment launched by the Houthi militia, reported the Saudi Press Agency (SPA).

It cited local sources as saying the militia bombed the so-called Freedom Square while crowds of worshipers were preparing to perform Friday prayers. Cammaert arrived in Hodeidah on Sunday from the rebel-held capital Sanaa, after meeting with government officials in Aden.

Yemen's warring sides agreed at peace talks in Sweden this month on the cease-fire to halt an offensive by government forces and the coalition against Hodeidah.

The UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution authorizing the deployment of observers to oversee the truce.

The UN monitoring team aims to secure the functioning of Hodeidah's port and supervise the withdrawal of fighters from the city.

The text approved by the Security Council "insists on the full respect by all parties of the cease-fire agreed" for Hodeidah.

It authorizes the United Nations to "establish and deploy, for an initial period of 30 days from the adoption of this resolution, an advance team to begin monitoring" the cease-fire, under Cammaert's leadership.

(With AFP) □



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Yemeni army opens new front in Houthi stronghold of Saada