

Crypto-miners take down Iran electric grids, prompting crackdown

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-19 00:13

LONDON: Iran has ordered a crackdown on cryptocurrency miners after blackouts in major cities were attributed to the excess toll the activity takes on the energy grid.

Parts of Tehran, as well as Mashhad and Tabriz, have experienced repeated blackouts in recent weeks, temporarily halting production lines and plunging the cities into darkness.

State electricity company Tavanir said it had temporarily halted all known crypto-mining operations, including a Chinese-Iranian mine in Rafsanjan that is reported to have been consuming 175 megawatt hours – enough electricity to power an average Western home for 17 years.

Cryptocurrency mining is a process in which specialized computers complete progressively more difficult calculations to verify transactions and thereby produce cryptocurrencies, the most popular of which is Bitcoin.

The process is extremely energy intensive, meaning that cryptocurrency mining is most profitable in locations with cheap energy.

Because of significant state subsidies and excess fuel reserves held by Iran due to sanctions, oil-fueled electricity is very cheap in the country – less than 1 cent per kilowatt hour.

This has massively fueled production of cryptocurrencies in Iran, to the extent that in 2020, the country was responsible for 8 percent of all the world's Bitcoin production.

The effect of the crypto-mining on Iran's grids has become such a problem that the government is now offering a \$4,750 reward for tips on illegal crypto-mining locations.

At \$35,000 each, the price of Bitcoin has reached record levels in recent weeks, making mining of the currency particularly attractive in a place with few economic opportunities such as Iran.

The appeal of Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies is also relevant for states and groups that operate on the fringes of the global economy, such as Iran, Venezuela and North Korea, as well as terrorist groups.

Bitcoins can be traded outside the traditional banking system, allowing Iran to circumvent economic sanctions on its financial sectors, and terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Daesh to trade on the black market anonymously.

In 2019, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani announced that his country would

launch its own cryptocurrency to circumvent US sanctions, but little else is known about the project.

Despite the difficulty in tracing cryptocurrency transactions, in 2018 the US sanctioned two Iranians who had been converting cryptocurrency into Iranian rials on behalf of hackers who had targeted American corporations, hospitals, universities and government agencies.



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Boom or bust? Say hello to cryptocurrency lending
Call for cryptocurrency curbs to protect consumers

[**Intensifying clashes in Hodeidah kill**](#)

dozens of fighters, civilians

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-19 00:02

AL-MUKALLA: Flaring battles in Yemen's western province of Hodeidah have left dozens of fighters and civilians dead over the past five days, local officials, media reports and residents have said.

Heavy fighting broke out between government forces and Iran-backed Houthis in Hodeidah and in flashpoints in two districts in the province.

The Joint Forces, an umbrella term for three major military units located on the country's western coast, said in a statement that at least 95 Houthis, including field leaders, were killed or wounded in the fighting as the Yemeni government warned against the collapse of the Stockholm Agreement due to Houthi military escalations in the province.

Two field Houthi commanders identified as Abu Taha Al-Murtadha and Abdul Wahan Mohammed Ali, together with dozens of rebels, were killed in the fighting. Their bodies are still scattered on the battlefields in Durihimi and Hays districts, the Joint Forces said. At least 12 government troops were also killed in the fighting.

Under heavy artillery, tank and mortar fire, Houthis last week marched toward government-controlled areas in Hays and Durihimi, triggering fierce clashes that ended when loyalists pushed them back to their previous territory.

On Saturday and Sunday, the rebels staged heavy attacks on government forces, using explosive-laden drones and heavy weapons, before retreating after suffering heavy fatalities, local army commanders said. An old woman was killed and several others were wounded in the fighting and shelling, official media and an aid organization said.

The eruption of fighting in Hodeidah has prompted international medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) into putting its local health facilities on alert to handle a predicted surge in patients.

FASTFACT

The Yemen's Abductees' Mothers Association, an all-female rights organization, has accused the Houthis of abducting 95 civilians, including 13 children, during their latest military assault on Haima, northeast of Taiz.

"Intense fighting has escalated along southern Hodeidah frontlines in Yemen. The MSF team in Mocha Trauma Hospital is engaging mass its casualty plan to respond to influxes of wounded. We are intensely worried for civilians living near the frontline areas," the group said in a statement, repeating appeals to warring factions to avoid harming civilians.

"In Late 2020, MSF treated a high number of civilians from this front-line area. Civilians must not be targeted or harmed in the conflict." The MSF surgical hospital in the Red Sea Mocha received 17 wounded civilians in the previous 72 hours, the organization said on Monday.

Yemen's internationally recognized government has warned that a truce in the province of Hodeidah under the Stockholm Agreement could crumble if Houthi military operations do not stop.

Yemeni Foreign Minister Ahmed Awadh bin Mubarak told Arab News on Monday that a Houthi military escalation would have "negative effects" on the Stockholm Agreement, adding that the Houthis have "proved that they are not serious about peace" and are "stooges for Iran."

He said: "These are certainly negative messages adding to the crime of bombing the airport. This confirms what we have repeatedly said, that this group has no interest in peace and its decision is not in its hands, but rather in the hands of Tehran."

Awadh added that Houthis killed a government officer, attacked government forces, obstructed the distribution of humanitarian assistance and launched bomb boat attacks in the Red Sea under the nose of the UN monitoring mission in Hodeidah.

Under the Stockholm Agreement, the Yemeni government stalled a military offensive in Hodeidah city in exchange for a Houthi withdrawal from the city's seaports and a commitment to end the depositing of revenues into the central bank in Hodeidah.

Both sides agreed to enter a truce under the supervision of UN monitors. But local rights groups have said that more than 500 civilians have been killed in Hodeidah by Houthi shelling and land mines since late 2018. Last week, Yemen's Prime Minister Maen Abdul Malik Saeed appeared in an interview with foreign journalists, saying he "regretted" ending the military offensive in Hodeidah that was about to bring the city under government's control "within five days."

The Yemen's Abductees' Mothers Association, an all-female rights organization, has accused the Houthis of abducting 95 civilians, including 13 children, during their latest military assault on Haima, northeast of Taiz. The organization Sunday arranged a small sit-in in the southern city of Taiz to protest against "systematic" raids by Houthis in Haima and the abduction of dozens of civilians.

"We hold the Houthi group responsible for the lives and safety of abducted people and children," read one poster seen by Arab News.

Col. Abdul Basit Al-Baher, a Yemeni army spokesperson in the city of Taiz, recently told Arab News that Houthis killed 12 civilians, wounded 30 more and raided 63 houses during a recent offensive intended to suppress a rebellion by locals.



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Saudi Arabia's KSrelief distributes more than 35 tons of food baskets in
Yemen's Marib

[Lebanon awaits February vaccine arrival as cases surge](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-01-18 23:58

BEIRUT: Lebanon's health minister in the caretaker government, Hamad Hassan, who is in hospital fighting a coronavirus infection, has signed the first payment of financial dues for government and private hospitals from the country's World Bank loan.

The decision came after hospitals protested against delays in the paying of bills for coronavirus treatments.

About 15,000 beds have been allocated in Lebanese hospitals for use by COVID-19 patients, with 13,000 in private hospitals and 2,000 in government hospitals.

But every bed in Lebanon's hospitals is occupied, together with emergency

departments, where hundreds of patients wait for beds to become available. Lebanon's nationwide lockdown is scheduled to remain in effect until Monday. It will be reviewed after the country's infection rate is examined in the coming days.

Salma Assi, head of the Medical Equipment and Devices Importers Syndicate, said: "Companies received their requests for oxygen equipment today. Some companies expect to receive their requests during this week and others at the end of the week."

Lebanon is facing a lack of oxygen machines following a huge surge in demand as the coronavirus pandemic wreaks havoc on the country, with some citizens stockpiling them for private use.

Assi said: "A mechanism has been put in place to prevent the monopoly of these machines so that the device is delivered based on a doctor's order, only if a patient can prove a positive PCR test.

"There are a lot of machines on the market. We do not know how they were brought or how effective they are. They were sold on the black market."

Lebanon's lockdown measures have also been compromised in parts of the country. Health violations were recorded in popular areas after shop owners and craftsmen pretended to close their businesses, but continued to trade behind closed doors.

Head of the Lebanese Parliamentary Health Committee Assem Araji told Arab News: "There is a need to motivate people to stay in their homes during the remainder of the total closure, which, according to scientific information, should be for three weeks."

"We hear the cries of hungry people who live day by day and need an income, who say that they cannot afford a bundle of bread.

"Half of the Lebanese live on minimum pay, which has lost its value with the collapse of the Lebanese pound.

"What is required is cash assistance, and this has not happened yet. As for talking about support from here and there, it has no value.

"The cases that we witnessed in the middle of this month are the result of socializing in New Year's parties, but the cases that are recorded now are the result of the socializing that took place just after the total lockdown decision, because people were given a few days to go shopping, so unprecedented movement took place in supermarkets – the results of which we see today."

Araji warned that only a mass vaccination campaign could bring the situation under control.

"We expect the first batch of vaccines to arrive in the first week of February.

"The required mechanism for vaccination has been put in place, and it will take place in government hospitals. There are 35 sites for this."

Araji said that medical and nursing staff, and those aged over 75 will be prioritized for vaccination when the rollout begins.

Does that mean President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri will be first in line for the vaccine, as they are over 80?

"There are other politicians who are over 75 as well," Araji said.



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Lebanon signs with Pfizer for 2.1 million vaccine doses
Shops shut and streets empty as Lebanon enters strictest COVID-19 lockdown

[Egyptian leader in Jordan for post-Trump strategy talks](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-01-18 23:53

AMMAN: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi was greeted upon arrival in the Jordanian capital Amman on Monday for a bilateral summit aimed at preparing the political ground for the post-President Donald Trump era. The visit followed an important meeting of Jordanian, Egyptian and Palestinian intelligence officers in Ramallah on Jan. 16.

Adnan Abu Odeh, former adviser of King Hussein and King Abdullah, told Arab News that the flurry of meetings reflects important political movement in the region.

Abu Odeh pointed to a key meeting on Jan. 11 that was held in Cairo for the Quartet for peace in the Middle East that also included the foreign ministers of France and Germany.

Jordan and Egypt are emerging as potential new members of the Quartet after the foreign ministers of both countries joined a meeting of the multilateral forum in Cairo last week.

The Quartet, consisting of the UN, EU, US and Russia, was established in 2002 to help mediate Middle East peace negotiations.

"Regional and international officials are trying to fix the problems that were caused by President Trump, especially in regards to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, support to UNRWA and the reopening of diplomatic offices between Palestinians and the US," Abu Odeh said, pointing out that Jordan has 2 million registered Palestinian refugees.

Oraib Rantawi, director of the Al-Quds Center for Political Studies, told Arab News that the flurry of movement also reflects the decision by the Palestinian president to hold new elections this summer.

"What the Jordanian and Egyptian leaders are concerned about is the possible results of the elections. They are not in the mood for any new surprises," he said.

Rantawi was referring to the victory of a pro-Hamas slate in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections that eventually triggered an international boycott of Gaza and a deep Palestinian split.

Palestinian leaders are expected to meet in Cairo in the coming days to discuss, among other issues, the possibility of Fatah and Hamas reconciling by means of participating in the coming elections with a single joint list. Rantawi also said that the recent normalization of relations between two Gulf countries and Israel will "not make much of a difference" through the Biden era.

"It is possible that some of the Gulf countries will be expected to increase support for UNRWA and to help Gaza dig itself out of the long economic siege that it had suffered from," Rantawi told Arab News.

According to the Egyptian presidency, the two leaders will discuss ways to boost Egyptian-Jordanian relations, in addition to exchanging views on regional issues in light of the keenness of both sides for regular coordination to unify efforts to protect Arab national security.

Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq are also emerging as an economic grouping with an emphasis on the need for cooperation on energy and agriculture.



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Jordan's King Abdullah, Egypt's El-Sisi meet in bid to reignite Mid-East peace talks
Jordan condemns Israel's approval of new settler homes in West Bank

[Palestinians urge EU to send monitors for May/July polls](#)

Author:

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1610995368549842800

Mon, 2021-01-18 16:54

RAMALLAH: The Palestinian prime minister on Monday called on the European Union to send observers to elections scheduled for later this year, specifically requesting EU monitors in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem. Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas on Friday signed a decree setting legislative elections for May 22 and a presidential vote on July 31, in what would be the first Palestinian polls in 15 years. Ahead of a weekly cabinet meeting, prime minister Mohammed Shtayyeh called on the EU "to prepare a team of international observers to help us, mainly in

the election process in Jerusalem.”

Israel annexed east Jerusalem following the 1967 Six Day in a move never recognized by most of the international community, which considers the area occupied Palestinian territory.

The Jewish state bans all activities of the Palestinian Authority, based in the occupied West Bank, inside Jerusalem, a city labelled Israel’s “undivided capital” by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

There has been no indication that Israel would allow Palestinian election activity within east Jerusalem.

“We will formally ask Israel to allow our people in Jerusalem to participate in the elections,” Shtayyeh stressed.

Brussels on Friday said it welcomed Abbas’s election call and urged Israel to “facilitate the holding of these elections throughout the Palestinian territory,” including east Jerusalem.

The Palestinian polls have been scheduled amid warming ties between Abbas’s Fatah party, with controls the PA, and their long-standing rivals Hamas, the Islamist that hold power in Gaza.

The 2005 Palestinian presidential vote saw Abbas elected with 62 percent support to replace the late Yasser Arafat.

In the last Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006, Hamas won an unexpected landslide.

The polls resulted in a brief unity government but it soon collapsed and in 2007, bloody clashes erupted in the Gaza Strip between the two principal Palestinian factions, with Hamas ultimately seizing control of Gaza.



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Palestinian president briefs Egypt, Jordan on election plan
Israel Prison Service to vaccinate Palestinian inmates