

US rejects UN suggestion its Syria air strikes could constitute 'war crimes'

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Thu, 2019-09-12 15:26

GENEVA: Washington's top envoy for Syria rejected Thursday an allegation put forward in a UN report that some US-led air strikes in the conflict-torn country could possibly be categorized as indiscriminate attacks, amounting to "war crimes."

James Jeffrey, the US special representative on Syria, dismissed findings published in a UN report on Wednesday suggesting that the US-led coalition had with a number of air strikes in the country "failed to employ the necessary precautions to discriminate adequately between military objectives and civilians."

The UN Commission of Inquiry, which has been investigating human rights violations in Syria's drawn-out war for the past eight years, pointed to a series of air strikes carried out by the coalition in January in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor, including one that killed 16 civilians.

"The Commission finds that there are reasonable grounds to believe that international coalition forces may not have directed their attacks at a specific military objective, or failed to do so with the necessary precaution," the report said.

"Launching indiscriminate attacks that result in death or injury to civilians amounts to a war crime in cases in which such attacks are conducted recklessly," stressed the Commission, which has also suggested in previous reports that US-led strikes in Syria could amount to war crimes.

The Commission has also repeatedly accused the Syrian government and its main backer Russia, as well as other actors in the conflict of a wide range of war crimes.

"We take extreme care in every military operation," Jeffrey told journalists in Geneva when asked about the report.

"We do not accept the findings of that particular body," he said.

Jeffrey was in Geneva Wednesday for consultations with the UN envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen.

Pedersen, a seasoned Norwegian diplomat who took over the job in January, is trying to help create a committee to draft a post-war constitution for Syria. His predecessor, Staffan de Mistura, stepped down after his four years in the post ended with a year-long abortive push to form the constitutional committee.

But Pedersen, who has been consulting extensively with the various Syrian actors, as well as with countries with influence in the conflict, voiced optimism that the constitutional committee could soon see the light of day. Following his meeting with representatives from Britain, Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United States Thursday, he told journalists he was "confident that we are moving forward."

“Hopefully I can have positive news on this in the very near future.” Numerous rounds of UN-led peace talks have failed to end a war that has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with the repression of anti-government protests.



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Hungary to appoint Syria diplomat in thawing of ties

[Sudanese on the streets, call for new judicial appointments](#)

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Thu, 2019-09-12 14:57

CAIRO: Thousands of Sudanese rallied in the capital Khartoum on Thursday in the largest protest since the country’s transitional government was announced, demanding the chief of the judiciary and general prosecutor be

removed because of alleged ties to ousted autocratic former president Omar Al-Bashir.

Sudan's Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change, the umbrella coalition representing different pro-democracy parties and groups, called for a "million-man march" to pressure the joint civilian-military Sovereign Council – formed last month as part of a power-sharing deal between protesters and the generals – to appoint judges known for their competence as well as political impartiality.

The generals had previously dismissed nominations put forward by pro-democracy protesters for Sudan's two top judicial posts.

"Judicial and legal reforms should be a top priority during the transitional period; however, we have seen inaction on the part of sovereign council to appoint a new head of the judiciary and a new general prosecutor," Ahmed Rabie, a leader of the Sudanese Professionals' Association, said. The group has spearheaded protests since Al-Bashir was still in power.

The Sovereign Council, comprised of five military members and six civilians, is expected to rule the country along with a cabinet and a legislative body for a little more than three years. Last week, prime minister Abdalla Hamdok, a longtime economist, announced the make-up of his cabinet after several weeks of deliberations.

The announcement of transitional state institutions came following pressure from the United States and its Arab allies amid growing concerns the political crisis could ignite a civil war.

"The Sudanese revolution does not only aim at changing a president or bringing in new ministers but it aims at restructuring the Sudanese state," said Rabie. "Hence, it is illogical to have officials belonging to the ancient regime on top of the state's civil and judicial apparatuses."

Both incumbent judiciary chief and public prosecutor were appointed by the military council, which took over the helm of state after ousting Al-Bashir in April. Under the terms of the power-sharing deal, the military council was dissolved and replaced by the Sovereign Council.

"This rally is an important step toward the restructuring of the judicial system so that we can embark on a period of transitional justice where leaders of the old regime as well as those responsible for the massacre of protesters after Bashir's ouster could be prosecuted," said Rasha Awad, editor of the online Sudanese newspaper Altaghyeer.

The power-sharing agreement capped several months of negotiations and tension between the generals and protester movement. In early June, talks were suspended after a deadly military clampdown on the protesters' main sit-in in the capital left more than a hundred killed. The attack had remained a thorny issue even after both parties resumed talks.

In Thursday's rallies, protesters waving Sudanese flags chanted: "The people want the martyr to be avenged," in reference to those killed during the crackdown. They also raised banners reading: "The appointment of new judiciary chief and public prosecutor is a revolutionary demand."

Awad noted that the generals had previously dismissed nominations put forward by pro-democracy protesters for the nation's two top judicial posts.

"These rallies are basically addressing the military members inside the sovereign council because those members do not share the same views as Sudanese revolutionaries," she said.





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Sudan's ruling council, rebel leaders agree on peace talks roadmap Sudan's new leader to visit South Sudan

[Sudan's ruling council, rebel leaders agree on peace talks roadmap](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2019-09-11 16:54

JUBA: Sudan's ruling council and rebel leaders have agreed on a roadmap for peace talks that are expected to begin in October and last about two months, officials from both sides said on Wednesday.

The council, a transitional government, has made peace-making with rebels fighting Khartoum one of its main priorities as it is a key condition for the country's removal from the United States' sponsors of terrorism list.

The council took over the reins of government in August after military and civilian parties and protest groups signed a three-year power-sharing deal after months of strife following the removal of long-ruling authoritarian president Omar Al-Bashir in April.

South Sudan brought together members of the council and rebel leaders from several areas.

Thousands of people have been killed in Sudan's civil wars, including the conflict in the western Darfur region, where rebels have been fighting against then-President Bashir's government since 2003.

Sudanese officials and rebels signed the initial agreement in front of diplomats to set a two-month period for talks, starting on Oct. 14 and running until the middle of December.

"Today's signing aims at the implementation of the peace confidence building that came in the constitutional declaration," said Yasir Arman, the deputy chairman of the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLM-North).

Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, a member of the sovereign council and head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), signed the deal on behalf of the government.

"We want assure you and the people of Sudan that we are ready to pay all the damages of the war and we will assure you that time of war is gone forever," Dagalo said.

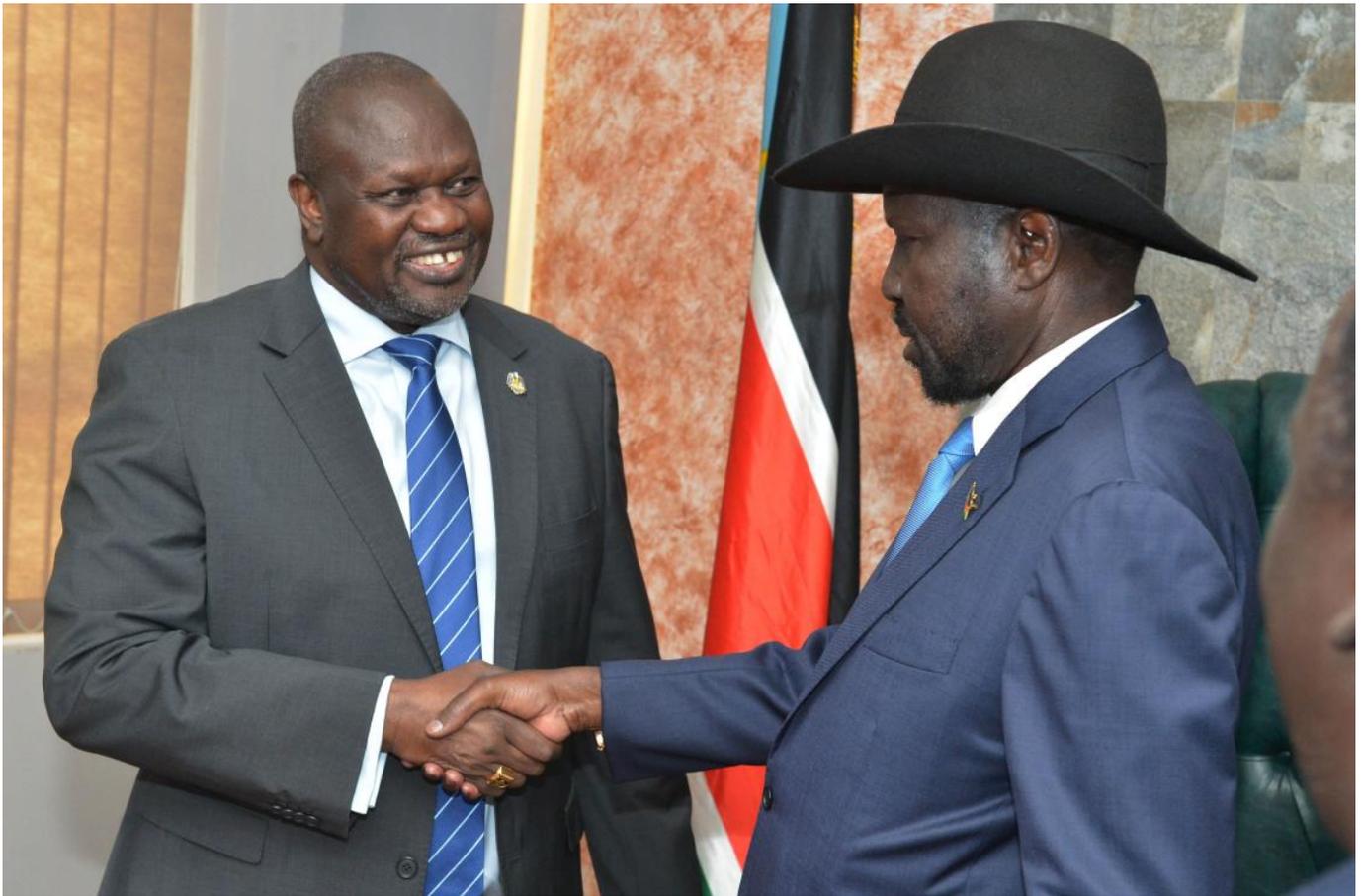
The talks will potentially deal with issues of how any cessation of hostilities to be entered will be monitored, and set out modalities of providing humanitarian access to all parts of Darfur and Blue Nile, he said. Darfur's war pits local rebel groups drawn largely from African farming tribes complaining about neglect against government forces in a conflict that

has displaced about 2.5 million people.

The fighting in Darfur has subsided over the past four years where the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and two factions of the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) are active, but skirmishes persist.

SPLA-N rebels are active in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, two southern regions in Sudan, have largely committed to a cease-fire over the past two years. They have been fighting Khartoum's rule since ending up on the Sudanese side of the border when South Sudan seceded in 2011.

South Kordofan and Blue Nile are home to large communities who sided with the south during decades of civil war with Khartoum. Many say they have been marginalized by the Khartoum government since South Sudan declared independence in July under a 2005 peace deal.



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Sudan's new leader to visit South Sudan

[UN: Reconstruction of landmark Mosul](#)

mosque to begin in 2020

Author:

By THOMAS ADAMSON | AP

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Wed, 2019-09-11 14:54

PARIS: The United Nations' cultural agency UNESCO announced Wednesday that a landmark reconstruction of Iraq's Al-Nouri mosque in Mosul, which was blown up by the Daesh group in 2017, will start at the beginning of next year. The timeline of the restoration plan of the 12th-century monument, famed for its leaning minaret, was hammered out during a meeting in Paris between UNESCO Director General Audrey Azoulay and several Iraqi officials, including Iraqi Culture Minister Abdulamir Al-Dafar Hamdani, and Mosul's regional governor, Mansour Al-Mareed.

First launched in 2018, the mosque restoration plan will be the most eye-catching part of a \$100 million UNESCO-led heritage reconstruction of Mosul. "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" is the largest restoration plan in Iraqi history, and comes two years after the old city's destruction at the hands of extremists.

"Today we agreed on a calendar, a precise calendar and plan of action to be mobilized on the ground in Iraq. ... The ongoing phase of structural consolidation and the critical phase of site-clearing and mine-clearing (has) to be achieved from now to the end of the year," Azoulay told reporters.

"We've also agreed on a timetable that would see the reconstruction start in the first semester of 2020 for the mosque," she added.

IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared an Islamic caliphate from the Al-Nouri mosque in the summer of 2014, only for IS extremists to blow it up in June 2017 as Iraqi forces closed in.

Two years after IS was evicted, Mosul is a city still very much in ruins with no meaningful international effort to rebuild – one that is still struggling with basic services like electricity, water and health care. The UN's development program is working to restore private houses in the historic Old City. Most of its residents still reside in camps.

The UNESCO initiative goes far beyond the mere restoration of the mosque, and will see the cash be used to rebuild churches, schools and a street in Mosul's Old City, which was famous for its bookshops.

The United Arab Emirates is providing \$50.4 million to finance the project, focusing on the restoration of the mosque, with the European Union providing \$24 million.

The decision to select Mosul, as opposed to other Iraqi cities, for a revamp owes to its particular history as a melting pot city.

"We've chosen Mosul as a symbol because Mosul was before the conflict a city of diversity, a city of tolerance – more than tolerance – a city where people lived together and knew each other beyond communities, beyond religious belongings," Azoulay said.

She stressed that she's asked that some of the \$100 million go toward the rebuilding of a synagogue and Christian religious sites.



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Long after guns fall silent, Mosul residents suffer hearing loss

[**UAE police thwart attempt to smuggle 18 people under lorry floor**](#)

Wed, 2019-09-11 18:16

DUBAI: Abu Dhabi police foiled a recent attempt to smuggle 18 workers, including women, in the bed of a lorry across the Khatam Al-Shakla border in Al Ain, according to a statement released by the force on Tuesday.

The people, who were found in a cramped, hollowed-out section of the truck floor, were attempting to enter the UAE through the Buraimi and Al-Ain border checkpoint.

The police said they had acted upon a tip-off of “an attempted infiltration at the checkpoint” with the help of Abu Dhabi Customs.

In a statement, Abu Dhabi police praised the cooperation of its partners and their efforts, warning against threatening the country’s security and stability.







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