

Libya to vote on new constitution before February

Author:

Associated Press

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Thu, 2018-12-06 (All day)

BANGHAZI: The chairman of Libya's elections commission said the beleaguered North African nation will hold a referendum on a new constitution before the end of February.

Thursday's announcement by Emad Al-Sayeh in the capital Tripoli signals Libya's first concrete step toward restoring unity and political stability after years of turmoil and violence that followed the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

It followed last month's adoption by a parliament in eastern Libya of an election law that would govern the referendum and future votes.

A 60-member panel drafted the constitution and submitted it to Parliament in August.

Al-Sayeh warned the referendum could be delayed if the election commission did not receive security guarantees and funds.

The commission's Tripoli offices were attacked by extremists in May, killing 14 people.



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Libyans protest against US air strike in southern Libya
Top Libyan leaders in Jordan to strengthen bilateral relations

UN peacekeepers confirm Israeli report of tunnel at Lebanon border

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Thu, 2018-12-06 13:05

JERUSALEM: UN peacekeepers in Lebanon have confirmed the existence of a tunnel discovered by the Israeli military close to the blue line separating the two countries, it said in a statement on Thursday.

The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is “engaged with the parties to pursue urgent follow-up action” and “will communicate its preliminary findings to the appropriate authorities in Lebanon”, it added.

Earlier on Thursday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took Israel-based diplomats to the border with Lebanon, showing them the site of a Hezbollah tunnel and calling for sanctions against the Shiite militant group.

“I told the ambassadors that they should condemn this aggression by Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, unequivocally, and of course also to intensify the sanctions against these elements,” he said in a Hebrew-language statement. Israel announced on Tuesday that it had discovered Hezbollah tunnels infiltrating its territory from Lebanon and launched an operation to destroy them.

On Wednesday, Netanyahu told UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres that he “expects the UN to strongly condemn the violation of Israel’s sovereignty,” according to his office’s Twitter account.

Netanyahu said Thursday that Hezbollah, like Hamas in the Gaza Strip, was acting on behalf of its patron Iran.

“Anyone who attacks us will have bloodshed on their own heads,” he said.

“Hezbollah knows that and Hamas knows it too.”

The military said it had located one such tunnel dug from a home in the Kfar Kila area of south Lebanon that crossed into Israeli territory and was working to “neutralize” it.



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A rearmed Hezbollah in Lebanon is top concern for Israel
Hezbollah-linked businessman jailed in Paris drug trial

[Pope Francis will visit the UAE in February: Vatican City](#)

Thu, 2018-12-06 14:12

ABU DHABI: Pope Francis will visit Abu Dhabi in the UAE in February, the Vatican said on Thursday, in his seventh trip to a predominantly Muslim nation to call for inter-religious peace.

The trip will take place from Feb. 3-5. The Vatican said the pope had accepted an invitation from Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and the Catholic community there. He will attend an inter-faith meeting.

Crown Prince Mohammed said in a tweet that the pope “is a symbol of peace, tolerance and the promotion of brotherhood. We look forward to a historic visit, through which we will seek dialogue on the peaceful coexistence among peoples.”

The UAE is delighted to welcome His Holiness Pope Francis on the upcoming visit to the UAE. He is a symbol of peace, tolerance and the promotion of brotherhood. We look forward to a historic visit, through which we will seek dialogue on the peaceful coexistence among peoples. pic.twitter.com/xdsmU18Hp0

– محمد بن زايد (@MohamedBinZayed) [December 6, 2018](#)

Pope Francis was quick in the months after his election in 2013 to make overtures to worshippers from other religions, inviting two old friends from Buenos Aires – a Rabbi and a Muslim professor – on a trip to the Middle East where he condemned religious hatred.

Francis has already visited Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Bangladesh and Azerbaijan, the Palestinian territories and used those trips to call for inter-religious dialogue and to condemn the notion of violence in the name of God.

“The theme of the visit is ‘Make Me a Channel of Your Peace’ – and that’s the Pope’s intention in going to the United Arab Emirates. How all people of goodwill can work for peace will be a major topic on this trip,” Vatican spokesman Greg Burke said.

The theme is taken from the opening words of the Prayer of Peace of Francis of Assisi, the saint whose name the pope took during his election ceremony.

“This visit, like the one to Egypt (in 2017), shows the fundamental importance the Holy Father gives to inter-religious dialogue. Pope Francis visiting the Arab world is a perfect example of the culture of encounter,” Burke said.

Bishop Paul Hinder of the Arabian Vicariate of Southern Arabia (UAE, Oman and Yemen) said: “I express my gratitude to the UAE government, which has made this visit possible. I urge the Christian community and our Catholic faithful that we respect and cooperate with the instructions of a special team, which is being put in place for the visit.

“The team will work closely with the government to ensure this visit goes smoothly and according to plan.

“The generosity of the UAE government has also been extended in making it possible to celebrate a Mass, which will be on February 5 at a public venue in Abu Dhabi. These are warm and kind gestures that we appreciate and acknowledge.”

The pope’s trip to the UAE will come ahead of a visit in March to Morocco.



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Pope lights candle to promote peace in SyriaExclusive: Pope Tawadros II warns against 'emptying' Middle East of Christians, sees hope in Saudi reforms

[Clashes in Idlib as opposition groups vie for control](#)

Wed, 2018-12-05 23:49

ANKARA, Turkey: Attacks by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) militants in Syria's northwestern Idlib province were an attempt by the Daesh-backed alliance to strengthen its grip on the region and frighten other factions into submission, analysts said.

HTS fighters targeted the Ankara-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) in two towns in Idlib in a series of attacks since Monday, provoking intense

clashes.

The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, a UK-based war monitor, reported shelling and rocket exchanges around the areas of Latamna and Al-Sarmani, north of the city of Homs.

Areas around Aleppo were also targeted. An NLF military vehicle was badly damaged by shellfire in Al-Atarib, in western Aleppo.

Schools in the opposition-controlled enclave were closed because of the fighting.

FASTFACTS

Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) militants targeted the Ankara-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) in two towns in Idlib in a series of attacks.

The HTS alliance is the dominant force in Idlib.

NLF is made up of 11 rebel groups and fighters from the Free Syrian Army.

The HTS alliance is the dominant force in Idlib, Syria's last opposition stronghold, which is covered by a deal backed by Turkey and Russia to prevent a regime assault. NLF is made up of 11 rebel groups and fighters from the Free Syrian Army.

In the latest clashes, rebels surrounded five villages, all close to the main Aleppo-Latakia highway.

Control of the M4 and M5 highways between Aleppo and Latakia offers HTS militants a financial lifeline, observers said.

According to an agreement brokered on Sept. 17 by Moscow and Ankara, the highways will be open to free trade by the end of 2018.

Experts said that with the standoff over Idlib far from resolved, HTS militants were also seeking to increase their bargaining power with Russia and Turkey as the fragile truce crumbles.

Two deadlines for implementation of the Idlib demilitarization deal in early October passed without the withdrawal of an estimated 10,000 militants in the region.

The withdrawal was designed to allow the creation of a demilitarized zone to be jointly patrolled by Russian and Turkish forces.

"HTS presents a headache for Turkey primarily because the Turkish government took responsibility for clearing the demilitarized zone in Idlib," Timur

Akhmetov, a researcher at the Russian International Affairs Council, told Arab News.

According to Akhmetov, Russia has acknowledged that Turkey is "doing its best," but has made it clear the present situation cannot be maintained forever.

"Clashes between HTS and the Ankara-backed NLF can be viewed by Russia as a part of Turkish efforts to change the balance of power in Idlib. For Russia it is a positive trend since HTS, the most powerful faction in the region, is increasingly challenged by Turkey," he said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently held talks with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the setting up of a new quadrilateral summit on Syria, with Germany and France brought into the settlement process.

Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, told Arab News that the latest clashes were also related to a power struggle between HTS and NLF over a local council.

According to Saban, HTS gained popularity by not only being the strongest but also the most brutal faction in Idlib.

"A significant part of the latest clashes is related to maintaining control over the infrastructure, because most of the factions depend on this for income and lack external channels to ensure survival," he said.

Local income sources include people smuggling with fees of up to \$500 per person.

"HTS has several checkpoints on the smuggling zones, which are a major income source for them. They have links with the smuggling networks," Saban said.



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Syria talks on fragile Idlib truce begin in Kazakhstan
Ankara urged to clear Idlib of extremists to uphold truce

[Lebanon says Israel offered no proof of border tunnels](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

ID:

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Wed, 2018-12-05 (All day)

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Parliament speaker said Wednesday that Israel has presented no evidence to prove its claims that a network of attack tunnels has been built by Hezbollah across the countries' shared borders, as Israel's prime minister pressed for international condemnation of the militant group. The UN peacekeeping mission meanwhile said Wednesday it will send a team to Israel to "ascertain facts," calling for full access to all locations along

the border.

The Israeli military Tuesday launched an open-ended operation to destroy what it said was a network of tunnels built by Hezbollah aimed at infiltrating northern Israel.

Israeli forces did not enter Lebanese territory. They were seen operating in what looked like a construction site, with trucks bringing in equipment and drills and bulldozers digging in the open territory and farmlands inside northern Israel. Hezbollah had no immediate comment on the claims or the Israeli activities across the border.

On Wednesday, Nabih Berri, Lebanon's parliament speaker and ally of Hezbollah, said Israel offered no "coordinates or information" about the tunnels during the regular weekly meeting held at the UN position in southern Lebanon. His comments were carried by the National News Agency.

In a statement, the Lebanese army called Israeli reports of tunnels across the border "allegations." It called on Israel to present specific coordinates and information about the location of such tunnels. The army urged Israel not to carry out any work inside Lebanese territory.

The Israeli army released photographs, video footage and an illustrative map Tuesday of what it says is the first of several tunnels snaking into Israeli territory that it soon plans to destroy.

The UN mission, known as UNIFIL, said its regular weekly meeting with the Lebanese and Israeli armies discussed Israel's "activities" searching for suspected tunnels. The Israeli army said it used the meeting to express its objection to "the severe violation of Israeli sovereignty."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, meanwhile, said he spoke with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres by phone Wednesday, telling him that he expects the UN to condemn the violation of Israeli sovereignty. Netanyahu also said he hopes the international community imposes increased sanctions on Hezbollah in response to Israel's exposure of the tunnels.

Ali Bazzi, a lawmaker from Berri's parliamentary bloc, said Israel had no evidence to its claims, calling them a "distraction" and an attempt by Netanyahu to "evade" possible new indictment at home for corruption charges. This week, Israeli police recommended filing charges against the prime minister. A final decision will be made by the attorney general in the coming months.

Under the UN resolution that ended the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, Hezbollah is barred from operating in southern Lebanon. Israel has long accused it of violating the resolution. Lebanon says Israel, too, regularly violated its air, sea and land spaces.

"I emphasize the critical role of our liaison and coordination mechanisms in mitigating tensions through continuous communication, at the heart of which is the Tripartite forum," said head of UNIFIL mission Maj. Gen. Stefano Del Col.

He appealed to both sides in using the mechanisms to "avoid misunderstandings and ensure that security and stability" along the border is maintained and reinforced.

The Israeli operation is expected to last for weeks, or even months. The Israeli military said it had protectively increased forces along the border and warned Hezbollah to keep its distance from the tunnels.



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