

Work underway to clear land mines from Jesus baptism site

Author:

Mon, 2018-12-10 21:36

QASR AL-YAHUD, Palestinian Territories: Efforts to clear thousands of land mines and other ordnance around the site where many believe Jesus was baptized have reached a milestone and officials allowed a rare glimpse Sunday of abandoned churches there.

The church grounds around the site in the occupied West Bank have sat empty and decaying for around 50 years, though pilgrims have been able to visit a nearby restricted area at the traditional baptismal spot on the banks of the River Jordan.

Work at the site just north of the Dead Sea is being overseen by Israel's Defense Ministry, de-mining charity Halo Trust and Israeli firm 4CI.

According to the ministry, the project covers around 1 square kilometer (250 acres) as well as some 3,000 mines and other explosive remnants.

It is expected to cost 20 million shekels (\$5.3 million, €4.7 million).

The work began in March and would require another eight months to a year to complete, said Moshe Hilman of Israel's Defense Ministry.

Mines and other ordnance have been cleared from Ethiopian and Greek Orthodox monastery sites as well as a Franciscan chapel, organizers said.

Other grounds belonging to Russian, Syrian, Romanian and Coptic Orthodox churches are yet to be cleared.

The plan once complete is to return the plots to the various church denominations and allow visits. At the crumbling, brick-and-concrete Ethiopian monastery on Sunday, a fading fresco of Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist could still be seen inside.

Signs hung on the walls with notifications that the location had been cleared of explosives.

A collection of pieces of mortars and other explosive remnants sat alongside a nearby roadside as a demonstration of some of what had been found.

"The Halo Trust has reached a pivotal point in our work to clear the baptism site of land mines and other remnants of war," the charity's CEO James Cowan said in a statement.

He added that "we have completed clearance of the Ethiopian, Greek and Franciscan churches."

The majority of the mines were laid by Israeli forces after the country seized control of the West Bank in 1967 from Jordanian troops. Other unexploded ordnance from both Israel and Jordan has remained lodged in the ground, including around the churches, which were evacuated by Israel in the 1970s.

Israel's control of the West Bank has never been recognized by the international community, which considers the land occupied Palestinian territory.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Qasr Al-Yahud](#)

[Jesus](#)

[Jordan River](#)

[Ethiopian church](#)

[Church](#)

[land mines](#)

[orthodox](#)

[Palestine](#)

[Israel](#)

Israel urged to reverse confiscation of church land
Christian leaders urge Israeli PM to nix church lands bill

[UN envoy to Yemen says agreement on de-escalation in Taiz and Hodeidah 'not there yet'](#)

Mon, 2018-12-10 19:13

LONDON: United Nations Envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, said on Monday that agreement on the de-escalation in Taiz and Hodeidah are 'not there yet'. Speaking at a press conference in Stockholm, during the first round of the UN sponsored peace talks between the legitimate Yemeni government and the Iranian-backed Houthi militia, Griffiths told reporters that they will continue to discuss Hodeidah and Taiz, which he described as "two major population zones in Yemen caught in war."

The warring parties are in Sweden for weeklong talks expected to last until Dec. 13, the first since more than three months of negotiations collapsed in 2016.

"I'm hopeful that we can reach agreements on the de-escalation to reduce the fighting in both places. I'm hoping that we can. We're not there yet."

"If we are able to achieve progress on those two places and lift the threat

of war to the people in those two places, I think we'll have done a great service to Yemen," Griffiths said.

Initial drafts of the proposals on the rebel-held port city of Hodeidah and Taiz call for a mutual cease-fire between the two parties.

The Hodeidah draft stipulated that the Arab coalition supporting the legitimate Yemeni government would cease an offensive on the rebel-held city in exchange for a Houthi withdrawal.

The area would then be put under the control of a joint committee and supervised by the United Nations. The document does not propose the deployment of UN peacekeeping troops.

Griffiths said the UN had simplified the Hodeidah draft, which is still under study by the Yemeni delegations.

"We are always redrafting, so some of those documents that you've seen" have changed, Griffiths told reporters.

"We're working on simpler draft," he added. "The details of that are in deep discussion."

The two sides are also looking at a draft UN proposal on the southwestern city of Taiz, under the control of pro-government forces but besieged by the rebels.

The initial draft stipulated an unconditional cease-fire, a joint working group that includes the UN to monitor the cease-fire, and the reopening of all roads and Taiz airport for humanitarian operations.

The Yemeni government, which is backed by the Arab coalition, has been battling the Iran-backed Houthi militia for control of Yemen for nearly four years, pushing the impoverished country to the brink of famine.

He also said they are still working to find a common ground for the reopening of Sanaa airport.

During the talks, the two sides discussed a broad prisoner swap, which Griffiths said had proved the least contentious issue, adding that he hoped it "will be very very considerable in terms of the numbers that we hope to get released within a few weeks." He said the numbers of prisoners to be released by the warring parties will be announced soon.

The UN envoy said he expects to present a detailed plan for the next round of talks and hopes for an agreement from warring factions to hold the next round of talks early next year.

(With AFP)



Main category:
[Middle-East](#)

[Lebanon says it foiled plots to stage attacks in May](#)

Author:
Reuters

ID:
1544454643974398900
Mon, 2018-12-10 13:59

BEIRUT: Lebanon foiled a plot by militants based in Syria to carry out two attacks this year against places of worship and Lebanese army positions, Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk said on Monday. The attacks were planned from Syria's rebel-held Idlib province and were timed to coincide with Lebanon's general election that took place in May, he said in a televised news conference. Lebanon's Internal Security Forces monitored the plot and thwarted it, he said. The country remains safe for both residents and visitors, he added. Lebanese authorities say they have disrupted or foiled numerous attacks in recent years, including some linked to the conflict in neighboring Syria. From 2013-2016 militants struck Lebanon repeatedly with bomb attacks. Idlib province is part of the last remaining stronghold in Syria outside

government control and much of it is held by extremist rebel groups including the country's former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

Lebanon shares power among its religious sects and has maintained a "dissociation" policy of staying out of regional conflicts.

However, Lebanon's Iran-backed Shiite group Hezbollah has played a key military role in Syria supporting President Bashar Assad against mostly Sunni rebels seeking to oust him.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[Syria](#)

[Attacks](#)

[Militants](#)

[Iran can expand range of ballistic missiles: Guards commander](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1544439660233417900

Mon, 2018-12-10 10:56

GENEVA: Iran has the ability to build ballistic missiles with a broader range, a senior commander of the elite Revolutionary Guards said on Monday, according to the semi-official Fars News agency.

Iran's missiles currently cover a range of 2000 kilometers (1,240 miles) and many "enemy bases" are within 800 kilometers of the Islamic Republic, Amirali Hajjizadeh, head of the Revolutionary Guards' airspace division, was cited as saying.

US President Donald Trump pulled out of an international agreement on Iran's nuclear program in May and reimposed sanctions on Tehran. He said the deal was flawed because it did not include curbs on Iran's development of ballistic missiles or its support for proxies in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq.

"We have the ability to build missiles with a broader range," Hajjizadeh said, according to Fars News. He added, "We don't have limitations from a technical perspective or by conventions with regard to missile range."

The Iranian government has ruled out negotiations with Washington over its military capabilities, particularly its missile program run by the Guards. Last month, Hajjizadeh said that US bases in Afghanistan, the UAE and Qatar, and US aircraft carriers in the Gulf were within range of Iranian missiles. In October, the Revolutionary Guards fired missiles at Daesh militants in Syria after the extremist group took responsibility for an attack at a military parade in Iran that killed 25 people, nearly half of them members of the Guards.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iran](#)

[ballistic missiles](#)
[Iran Revolutionary Guards](#)

Iran arrests 10 suspects in suicide bombing that killed two Rouhani forecasts 'deluge' of drugs, refugees, attacks if sanctions hurt Iran

[US-backed Syrian fighters push into Daesh-held town](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1544436947763270900

Mon, 2018-12-10 (All day)

BEIRUT: US-backed Syrian fighters have pushed deeper into the Daesh group's last remaining stronghold, capturing a hospital.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces entered the eastern Syrian town of Hajjin last week and intense fighting has been ongoing since.

SDF spokesman Mustafa Bali says it took full control of the hospital early Monday.

Omar Abu Layla, of the activist-run DeirEzzor 24 monitoring group, confirmed the hospital on the edge of town was retaken by the SDF.

SDF fighters launched an offensive to capture Hajjin and nearby villages on Sept. 10. They have made little progress since then, but last week intensified their attacks under the cover of airstrikes by the US-led coalition.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[HAJJIN](#)

[Daesh](#)

Syria media says no attack on airport after reported air defense fireUS-led coalition strikes kill 9 civilians in east Syria