

Arab coalition airstrikes hit ballistic missile, drone sites in Sanaa

Wed, 2021-12-15 01:45

RIYADH: Arab coalition airstrikes destroyed two caves used to store ballistic missiles and four secret drone facilities in the Yemeni capital Sanaa, the coalition announced early on Wednesday.

The attacks come after Saudi Arabian forces destroyed a ballistic missile launched by Houthi militia and targeting Khamis Mushayt, near Abha in the Kingdom's southwest, on Monday.

"Destroying capabilities and neutralizing the threat requires the operation to continue to achieve its goals," the Arab coalition said a statement on Al-Ekhbariya.

Bahrain and Kuwait have condemned Houthi militia attempts to attack civilians and civilian buildings in Saudi Arabia with a ballistic missile on Monday.

In separate statements, both countries labeled the missile attack as a "flagrant violation of international humanitarian law."

The coalition has stepped up operations targeting Houthi military sites after an increase in cross-border attacks in recent days aimed at Saudi Arabia.

The militia, which seized the Yemeni capital in 2014, has been fighting the internationally recognized government, which is supported by the Saudi-led Arab coalition.



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[Lebanon looks to keep COVID-19 cases down over the holidays](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-12-15 01:05

BEIRUT: The Lebanese Ministry of Health fears a surge in COVID-19 cases in the coming weeks, which would force Lebanon to face a repeat of last year's scenario.

Health Minister Dr. Firass Abiad said Tuesday: "Cases are on the rise. More patients are being admitted to hospitals every day.

"We have been working to ensure hospitals are ready to receive patients; the occupancy rate has risen to 76 percent, which is a cause for concern," Abiad added.

The Ministry of Health is racing to stop the new wave by holding open vaccination campaigns every weekend, or what is known as the "Pfizer marathons."

On Monday, the ministry reported 787 new COVID-19 cases and 12 deaths.

Abiad said that three cases with the omicron variant had been registered in Lebanon. "Omicron cases are expected to rise in Lebanon, like in other countries."

So far, 40 percent of those registered on the vaccination platform, or about 2.2 million people, have received the first vaccine shot, 34 percent (nearly 1.9 million) have received the second one, while only 11 percent have had the booster shot.

MP Assem Araj, a cardiologist who heads Parliament's health committee, stated that "after last year's holidays, we had between 1,600 and 1,900 daily cases.

"We do not want the same scenario this year. People are not adhering to precautionary measures, so we asked the Minister of Health and all concerned ministries, namely the ministries of tourism and interior, to be strict in applying preventive measures. We have a sufficient number of vaccines and the number of vaccinated people has reached 150,000 last week. This is a good number and we have to stay on this path because there is no excuse for not being vaccinated. We do not want history to repeat itself because we cannot face another outbreak and vaccines are available for everyone," Araj said.

The committee that follows up on COVID-19 preventative measures issued a decision to "impose a limit of 50 percent capacity at any venue." There are no indications of a lockdown yet.

Araj urged people to "abide by the precautionary measures during the holidays," pointing out that about 2,000 nurses have left the country, which means Lebanon is facing a severe shortage of medical staff.

Doctors fear that last year's scenario will be repeated more tragically amid the shortages in the medical sector.

The Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafes and Nightclubs in Lebanon announced that it is "aware of the recent increase in COVID-19 cases and the search for the best preventive methods is underway, especially during the upcoming holidays."

Although many Lebanese expats are returning home for the holidays, Pierre Al-Ashkar, the head of the Syndicate of Hotel Owners in Lebanon, described the atmosphere as "gloomy and not quite festive."

He said: "The tourism sector is in freefall. The main problem is that the Ministry of Health focuses on monitoring restaurants and hotels without monitoring homes, chalets, and private parties.

"If we tell customers that we cannot exceed a certain number of attendees,

they will automatically resort to holding a New Year's party, for example, at a chalet they rent. Yes, overcrowding in homes and chalets exists and is many times greater, and it's even less expensive than going out."



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Author:

Wed, 2021-12-15 00:55

ANKARA: As part of Turkey's normalization efforts with its former foes, its Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced on Dec. 13 during a speech in parliament that Turkey and Armenia had agreed to mutually appoint special envoys for starting to mend broken ties.

After more than three decades with a closed land border which obliged Armenia to use Georgian and Iranian borders to reach out to the world, charter

flights will now resume between Yerevan and Istanbul.

Richard Giragosian, director of the Regional Studies Center, Yerevan-based think tank, said this announcement – which is being seen as Turkey taking a first step in support of “normalization” with Armenia – follows several months of positive statements between Yerevan and Ankara.

Since the summer, the two countries have exchanged positive signals at the diplomatic front, with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan saying on Aug. 27 that it was considering reacting to positive public signals coming from Ankara by reciprocating with similar steps.

Two days later, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey can work to gradually normalize ties with Armenia.

Speaking during a meeting of Commonwealth of Independent States country leaders on Oct. 15, Pashinyan confirmed that normalizing ties with Turkey would contribute to establishing a lasting regional peace and implementing the agreements reached last year on the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.

Relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been tense for three decades over the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, a territory that is occupied by the Armenian military but is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.

Last year’s 44-day war over the key territory changed the regional calculus with the defeat of Armenia, which handed back the occupied territories to Azerbaijan. With this move, the main reason for Ankara to close its borders with Armenia became irrelevant.

Turkey is expected to take normalization steps with Armenia in coordination with Azerbaijan. But the extent to which Russia will be involved in the process or play a spoiler role is still unclear.

“This is significant for several reasons,” Giragosian told Arab News, adding: “First, the process of normalization, which lays the basis for eventual reconciliation, is part of a broader post-war effort to restore regional trade and transport in the South Caucasus region.”

The two countries had signed landmark peace accords – known as the “Zurich protocols” – in a bid to establish diplomatic ties and re-open the joint border in 2009, but they were never ratified, as their relations remained tense as Turkey conditioned the agreement on the withdrawal of Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Giragosian thinks that a return to diplomatic engagement between Turkey and Armenia offers a rare success in Turkish foreign policy and a positive development after months of political instability and economic crisis in Turkey.

“And this is also a component of a more ambitious Turkish effort of rapprochement with Israel, the UAE and others,” he added.

As Turkey feels excluded by Moscow in the post-war regional arrangements as it was sidelined in the Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan working group on reopening transportation links, these normalization talks will offer a chance for Turkey to have a say at the table, experts also noted.

According to Nigar Goksel, Turkey director of the International Crisis Group, Turkey and Armenia deciding to appoint special representatives is an important positive first step in what is likely to be an incremental normalization process.

“Ankara will be navigating delicately to ensure that Baku is on board at every step along the way as it progresses dialogue with Yerevan,” she told Arab News.

But Goksel thinks that Russia will also be involved in the process.

During a press briefing on Nov. 25, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that Moscow was prepared to mediate efforts to repair relations between Armenia and Turkey.

“Turkey will want to ensure regional stakeholders do not have an incentive to act as spoilers. As such I think regional transport and economic integration will be a central focus, because it is in the interests of all sides. Regional integration is likely to be the basis upon which people-to-people reconciliation will be built up in the longer term,” Goksel said.

The agreement that ended the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 included the “unblocking of regional economic and transport links” in the region, triggering debates over the prospects of opening regional transport links.

Although a welcome move, Giragosian thinks that this is merely a first step toward the minimum of relations between neighbors: The reopening of the closed border and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia.

“Nevertheless, this does reflect a new environment more conducive to de-escalation and post-war stability, as well as the start of a return to diplomacy after unprecedented Turkish military support for Azerbaijan’s war for Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020,” he said.



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[Iran must end its 'lethal' support to Houthis, US envoy tells UN](#)

Wed, 2021-12-15 00:14

NEW YORK: Yemeni staff employed by the US embassy in Sanaa are still being harassed and detained by the Houthis, the American ambassador to the UN told the Security Council on Tuesday.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield added that the militia also continues to ignore repeated calls by the international community to end its offensive in Marib, and has intensified its cross-border attacks on targets in Saudi Arabia.

These "provocative and dangerous actions (underscore) the need for Iran to end its lethal support to the Houthis, which contravenes this body's resolutions and enables the Houthis' reckless attacks," she said.

Thomas-Greenfield was speaking at a regular Security Council meeting on the situation in Yemen, during which members were briefed by Hans Grundberg, the UN's special envoy to the country. He expressed alarm about the ongoing Marib offensive, and violence he said has "escalated considerably" with the "risk that this could open a new chapter of the Yemen war that is even more fragmented and bloody."

The offensive is endangering thousands of people, Thomas-Greenfield said, and could cause the displacement of half a million civilians. "The Houthis must stop this offensive immediately," she reiterated.

On Dec. 9, a Houthi missile hit a camp for the internally displaced managed by the International Organization for Migration. Five children were among the injured.

"This is unacceptable," said Thomas-Greenfield. "We condemn in the strongest terms this and similar, all-too-frequent attacks against civilians."

The American envoy also condemned "the intensification of Houthi cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia in recent months, including three ballistic missiles launched at Riyadh just last week."

She added: "The Houthis have conducted well over 350 such attacks this year – a staggering number and a shocking increase from last year's total."

"Each of these Houthi attacks, on its own, is unacceptable. Together, they send a chilling and unmistakable signal about Houthi unwillingness to participate in a peaceful political process or in a future government that upholds the rule of law."

Turning to the seizure of the US embassy in Sanaa, Thomas-Greenfield called on the Houthis to release unharmed all remaining workers from the site who are still detained, immediately vacate the compound, return seized property and "cease their threats against their own fellow citizens, simply for being employed by us."

Operations ceased at the embassy in 2015 and American staff were withdrawn but Yemeni workers remained, providing security and caretaker services. Dozens of them were detained when the Houthis breached the compound in mid-November.

Thomas-Greenfield also issued another warning about the danger posed by the Safer, an oil tanker that has been moored in the Red Sea off the coast of Yemen since 2015 and is estimated to contain about 1.14 million barrels of oil.

Its condition has deteriorated significantly and it "remains an environmental, humanitarian, and economic threat of vast proportions," said Thomas-Greenfield.

"The Houthis bear responsibility for this situation, and the United States supports discussion of any solution that can safely and urgently address it," she added.

Calling on all parties to engage with Grundberg in his efforts to create a framework for an inclusive political process in Yemen, she warned that if the conflict continues, “Yemen’s economy will deteriorate further, and with it the livelihoods of millions of Yemenis. Lives will continue to be endangered, and generations of Yemenis will bear its scars.”

However, she added: “While the Houthis continue their escalatory actions, we welcome the efforts of other parties to improve conditions in Yemen, including the UN initiative to scale up its approach for addressing the drivers of food insecurity throughout Yemen.”

Thomas-Greenfield said that the US, like the UK, is “encouraged” by the appointment on Dec. 6 of a new governor of the Central Bank of Yemen, along with a new chairman of the board and other new board members.

“We hope these appointments serve as a step forward in addressing the economic instability that is deepening humanitarian suffering and will push forward needed reforms,” she added.

“True progress cannot be sustained, however, without additional resources. We hope countries can seize this moment to support Yemen’s economy and bring urgently needed relief to its people. The special envoy’s strong appeal for action has been heard loudly and clearly by this Council.”

She concluded: “In the face of Houthi provocations, harassment and violence against their own people, I want the Houthis to know that the United States will never give up on the people of Yemen.”



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Tue, 2021-12-14 22:16

TUNIS: Tunisia said Tuesday it had received a loan from its neighbor Algeria, the day before a visit by Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune.

The official journal said that President Kais Saied had signed off a deal reached on December 9 for "a loan worth \$300 million," around 266 million euros.

Tunisia's public finances have been battered by a decade of political instability, low investment and structural problems, with debts approaching 100 percent of GDP and unemployment at 18 percent.

Saied on July 25 sacked the government and seized an array of powers, but has not laid out a plan to rescue the country's dire economy, despite announcing plans on Monday night for constitutional reforms and new elections in 2022.

Tunisia's economy has grown at just 0.6 percent a year since its 2011 revolution, while inflation has surged at six percent a year.

An unwelcoming business environment has discouraged investors.

The COVID-19 pandemic made the situation in the North African country far worse, slashing jobs in the vital tourism sector, high commodity prices have hurt reserves, and a drought has battered farmers.

Tunis has received economic aid from the European Union and is seeking its fourth aid program in 10 years from the International Monetary Fund, aiming to receive a loan of nearly \$4 billion before the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Saied's opponents on Tuesday slammed his decision to extend a months-long suspension of parliament, accusing him of dealing another blow to the country's nascent democracy.

The former law professor announced an 11-week "popular consultation" to produce "draft constitutional and other reforms" ahead of a referendum next July 25.

That will mark one year since his power grab, which came as the North African

country wallowed in political and economic crises compounded by the coronavirus pandemic.

Saied had in October moved to rule by decree, escalating fears for the only democracy to have emerged from the 2011 Arab uprisings.

He said on Monday that parliament would remain suspended until new elections on December 17 next year, the anniversary of the start of the revolution that chased dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power.

That further isolated his nemesis, the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, which has played a central role in Tunisian politics since Ben Ali's fall. Many Tunisians, tired of a system seen as dysfunctional and corrupt, welcomed Saied's moves, but he has also faced growing opposition in the form of demonstrations at home and pressure from abroad.

The envoys of the G7 powers plus the European Union had urged Tunisia on Friday to set a timeline for a return to democratic institutions.

Political analyst Slaheddine Jourchi said Saied was "determined to push through his political project to the end."

Opponents have accused Saied of seeking to extend his one-man rule and unilaterally rebuild the political system.

Noureddine Taboubi, head of the powerful UGTT trades union, criticized the lack of a vision for tackling the country's pressing social and economic woes.

In a speech to union members, he said the union had supported Saied's July 25 moves but that "we didn't give (him) a blank cheque."

Yet some in Tunis welcomed Saied's latest move.

Nizar ben Ahmida, a 37-year-old teacher, stressed the importance of announcing a timeline.

Tunis resident Nidhal said the election date was too far away.

Saied said a consultation on constitutional reforms would be launched on January 1, via custom-built electronic platforms.

These proposals would then be examined by a committee of experts appointed by the president, before being put to referendum.

But former Ennahdha MP Samir Dilou said the idea would "make Tunisia an object of ridicule."

"The street isn't reassured. The economic situation is what concerns the Tunisian public," said Jourchi.



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