

Chad to halve its troops fighting Sahel militants

Mon, 2021-08-23 01:30

N'DJAMENA: Chad has decided to recall half of its 1,200 troops battling militants in the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, a spokesperson for the Chadian authorities said.

Chad deployed the soldiers in February to support a France-backed regional fight with insurgents linked to Al-Qaeda and Daesh who have destabilized swathes of territory in West Africa's Sahel region in recent years.

The decision to withdraw 600 of these soldiers was taken with the agreement of Chad's Sahel allies, Gen. Azem Bermandoa Agouna said, speaking on behalf of the Transitional Military Council in Chad. The recalled Chadian troops would be redeployed elsewhere, Agouna said.

The authorities in Chad have faced a separate conflict this year with insurgents in the north.

France has also said it plans to reduce its presence in the Sahel to around half the current level of some 5,100 soldiers, although it has given no time frame.

BACKGROUND

Chad deployed the soldiers in February to support a France-backed regional fight with insurgents linked to Al-Qaeda and Daesh who have destabilized swathes of territory in West Africa's Sahel region in recent years.

The former colonial power has hailed some successes against the militants in recent months, but the situation is extremely fragile with hundreds of civilians killed in attacks.

Mahamat Idriss Deby, who leads the Transitional Military Council, has run Chad since his father, the former president, was killed while visiting the front line in April.

Earlier in August, Deby invited the rebels to participate in a national dialogue.

A military source said the 600 troops would be sent to Chad's northern border with Libya and Sudan to disarm rebels seeking to return to take part in these talks, which are scheduled for the end of the year.

On Saturday, Deby said the talks would not succeed unless all stakeholders were represented.



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[Suicide attacker targets checkpoint at Libyan desert town](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-08-23 01:37

BENGAZI: A suicide bomber attacked a checkpoint into the Libyan town of Zella on Sunday, killing himself but causing no other casualties, a spokesman for the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA), which controls that area, said.

Libya has endured a decade of violence and chaos since the 2011 uprising against Muammar Qaddafi, but there have been only sporadic attacks by militant groups in recent years, mostly in remote desert areas.

Zella is a small oasis town in the desert south of Sirte located near an

oilfield of the same name.

LNA spokesman Ahmed Mismari said the attacks bore the hallmark of Daesh.

In a separate development, authorities said mains water was being restored to western Libya after a week-long cut prompted by sabotage threats from loyalists of a jailed Qaddafi-era official.

"The wells and pumps are being switched back on to gradually restore supply," the authority said on its Facebook page on Saturday. "The crisis is over."

FASTFACT

Zella is a small oasis town in the Libyan desert south of Sirte located near an oilfield of the same name.

The announcement brought welcome relief to Libyans forced to cope without water as a summer heat wave gripped North Africa.

The water authority is responsible for a huge network of pipelines, dubbed the Great Man-Made River, which was one of the major projects of Qaddafi during his four decades in power.

It brings water from underground aquifers deep in the Sahara desert to settlements on the Mediterranean coast.

Last weekend, the water authority shut down the pipeline network in a bid to contain any damage, after loyalists of Qaddafi's brother-in-law Abdullah Al-Senussi threatened to sabotage it unless he were released.

Senussi was sentenced to death in 2015 for his role in the attempted suppression of the 2011 uprising that toppled Qaddafi.

He remains in prison in Tripoli.



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Libya in peace push amid flurry of diplomacy in CairoUS envoy meets Libyan commander to push for elections

[Israel launches COVID-19 antibody tests for children as young as 3](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-08-23 01:10

TEL AVIV: Israel has launched antibody testing for children aged as young as three, seeking information on the number of unvaccinated youths who have developed protection against coronavirus ahead of the new school year. Despite surging daily infections caused by the highly transmissible Delta variant, Israel's government insists it wants to avoid the hardships and developmental setbacks caused by school closures.

Israel has already begun vaccinating children aged 12 and above.

The national serological survey is focused on pupils between the ages of three and 12 who are not yet eligible for the jab, nearly 1.5 million children.

It is aimed at discovering how many children developed strong antibody protection against coronavirus after having an unrecorded or latent case, according to the education ministry.

Those children with sufficient antibodies will not be forced to quarantine when exposed to a COVID-19 patient, a move aimed at limiting schoolyear disruptions.

In a statement on Sunday from the Jerusalem municipality announcing Israel's "largest serological operation," Mayor Moshe Leon urged parents to bring their children for the free 15-minute test done by finger pin-prick.

The survey is being conducted jointly by the health and education ministries and by the army's Home Front command, which told AFP on Sunday that its antibody testing operation had begun.

BACKGROUND

Israel was one of the first countries to launch a vaccination drive via an agreement with Pfizer to obtain millions of paid vaccine doses in exchange for sharing data on their effectiveness.

A pilot program conducted last week focused in mainly ultra-Orthodox Jewish

communities found that roughly a fifth of children had developed antibodies, army radio reported on Sunday.

Education Ministry director general Yigal Slovik said in a statement last month that last year's school closures caused "emotional and social damage" to students.

"The lockdowns and remote learning caused a 44 percent increase in referrals for suicidal risk diagnosis," among other impacts, he said.

Israel was one of the first countries to launch a vaccination drive in mid-December via an agreement with Pfizer to obtain millions of paid vaccine doses in exchange for sharing data on their effectiveness.

The inoculation campaign was hailed as a success story that helped drastically reduce infections, but Israel is again registering thousands of daily cases.

As it launches the serological survey, Israel is also pushing forward with vaccinations, offering a third, or booster, shot to everyone over 40 while urging the unvaccinated to get the jab.

More than 5.4 million of Israel's roughly 9.3 million people have received two doses of the vaccine, while 1.2 million have had a third jab.

Israel has recorded nearly 980,000 coronavirus infections since the pandemic started early last year, and over 6,700 deaths.



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Israel warplanes strike Gaza after border clashes
Lebanon complains to UN over Israeli airspace violations

[Iran president urges Japan to release billions in blocked funds amid US sanctions](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-08-23 00:58

DUBAI: Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi called on Japan to release Iranian funds frozen in the country because of US sanctions, Iranian state TV reported after the president met on Sunday with the visiting Japanese foreign minister.

Iran has been unable to obtain tens of billions of dollars of its assets mainly from exports of oil and gas in foreign banks, including \$3 billion of its funds in Japan, due to US sanctions on its banking and energy sectors. The sanctions were reimposed in 2018 after Washington abandoned Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with six world powers.

"The improvement of ties with Japan is of great importance for Iran ... Any delay in unblocking Iranian assets in Japanese banks is not justified," Raisi said in his meeting with Toshimitsu Motegi, who arrived in Tehran late on Sunday for a two-day visit.

Iran and six powers have been in talks since April to reinstate the nuclear pact, under which Tehran agreed to curb its nuclear program to make it harder to obtain fissile material for a weapon, in return for relief from sanctions. Tehran denies seeking nuclear weapons.

However, Iranian and Western officials have said significant gaps remain to reinstating the pact.

A sixth round of indirect talks between Tehran and Washington in Vienna adjourned on June 20, two days after hard-line cleric Raisi won the presidential election in Iran.

Iran and six powers have yet to announce when they will resume the negotiations.

Raisi, who has presented his Cabinet to parliament for a vote of confidence, is expected to adopt a "hard line" approach in the Vienna talks, according to people familiar with the matter.

Raisi, like Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has backed the nuclear talks in Vienna. "Iran has no problem with the principle of negotiation ... What is the justification for keeping the US sanctions against Iran in place?" Iran's state media quoted Raisi as telling Japan's Motegi as saying.

In 2019, Iran's Khamenei refused to reply to a message Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe had brought to Tehran from then-US President Donald Trump, as a peacemaking visit was overshadowed by attacks on tankers in the Gulf of Oman. One of the tankers was Japanese.



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Three members of pro-Iran group killed by Daesh in Iraq
Three members of pro-Iran group killed by Daesh in Iraq

[Warring Yemeni factions urged to 'silence the guns' and fulfill Hodeidah Agreement](#)

Mon, 2021-08-23 00:44

ALEXANDRIA: Yemen's warring factions have been urged by a top UN official to "silence the guns" and adhere to their previous obligations to fully implement the Hodeidah Agreement.

The head of the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement and chair of the Redeployment Coordination Committee, Abhijit Guha, said the agreement had greatly reduced violence and civilian casualties in Hodeidah during the last three years, despite daily reports about sporadic fighting and shelling between government forces and the Houthis.

"The most important message I have is to urge the parties to the conflict to

redouble their efforts to implement their commitments under the Hodeidah Agreement in good faith,” he told Arab News.

The UN Security Council approved establishing the UNMHA and RCC in Jan. 2019. It came a month after the warring parties had signed the Stockholm Agreement. This deal has three components – the Prisoner Exchange Agreement, the Taiz Agreement and the Hodeidah Agreement.



UNMHA Head of Mission Lt. Gen. Abhijit Guha during a meeting of the Redeployment Coordination Committee in December 2019. (UNMHA)

UNMHA was assigned to monitor a Hodeidah-wide truce, the redeployment of forces from flashpoints in the city of Hodeidah and seaports, the demining process, and report to the UN Security Council about progress on the ground.

BACKGROUND

UNMHA was assigned to monitor a Hodeidah-wide truce, the redeployment of forces from flashpoints in the city of Hodeidah and seaports, the demining process, and report to the UN Security Council about progress on the ground.

It is pressing the Yemeni parties to implement the Hodeidah Agreement. Ceasefire violations had dropped and Hodeidah seaports had seen a boom in ship movement over the last three years, Guha said.

“Ceasefire violations are down overall and economic activities, including in the ports, have increased overall since the signing of the agreement.”

The mission’s figures show that the average monthly civilian deaths in 2018 numbered 77 and the average monthly injuries numbered 93.

This year, those monthly averages were seven and 16.

The number of violent incidents peaked at 3,469 in March 2019, while there were just 92 violent incidents in the last month on record in July 2021.

Under the Stockholm Agreement, the Yemeni government, whose forces reached the edges of Hodeidah in late 2018, stopped its offensive as the Houthis agreed to pull out of the city's main seaports and deposit state revenues into the central bank's branch in the city.

The government accused the Houthis of violating the agreement by handing over security at the city's seaports to allied forces and looting billions of riyals from the central bank's branch.



UNMHA Head of Mission Lt. Gen. Abhijit Guha during a meeting of the Redeployment Coordination Committee in December 2019. (UNMHA)

Guha, who avoided naming violators, agreed that the redeployment of forces was not fully implemented.

“Under this agreement, it was envisaged that redeployment would occur in multiple phases. Unfortunately, these phases have faced obstacles, which has hampered progress on implementation. As for who is in charge of the three Hodeidah ports, this is not a question for the mission as it does not control these ports. The redeployment of forces as stipulated by the agreement remains outstanding, which is the most important obstacle to delivering on the pledges made in Stockholm.”

Another obstacle to the implementation of the agreement occurred last year, when the government boycotted the redeployment committee after a Houthi sniper gunned down a government liaison officer.

The UN official described the shooting as “an unfortunate incident” that

disrupted the agreement from being executed.

“Since the suspension, the mission has been actively seeking to bring the parties back together to revive the joint mechanisms and support them to fulfill the terms as outlined in the Hodeidah Agreement.”

The government has repeatedly demanded that UNMHA move its main office from the Houthi-controlled parts of Hodeidah city to a neutral area, noting that the Houthis had “taken the mission hostage” thereby restricting its movements.

Guha said that the mission’s current location was not permanent.

“Since its deployment, the mission’s locations have been temporary. We have held discussions with both sides to find an operationally suitable location that gives access to both, as has been stressed by the (UN) Security Council in its last resolution.”

When the Houthis resumed their offensive on the central city of Marib, the government came under huge public pressure to reactivate its halted operation on Hodeidah city to relieve pressure on its forces in Marib.

Guha advised the warring parties to avoid escalation and to consider alleviating people’s suffering, arguing that the Hodeidah Agreement had averted a major humanitarian disaster that could have struck the whole of Yemen had the government pressed ahead with the offensive on the city as most of the country’s humanitarian assistance and goods came through Hodeidah.

“Minimizing the trauma of the civilian population should remain the guiding principle of all parties. As detailed earlier, the Hodeidah Agreement has had a significant real-world impact, decreasing civilian impact, reducing violence in the governorate, and ensuring continued operationalization of Hodeidah’s ports to enable the delivery of humanitarian aid.”

Guha demanded the government and the Houthis comply with peace efforts, stop fighting and pave the way for a political settlement to end the war.

“It is vital that both parties resume dialogue, silence the guns and look to a political solution that can create conditions for a prosperous and peaceful future for all people of Yemen. Civilian casualties must stop and the welfare of the Yemeni people be put first. Now is the time for peace.”



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US envoy to Yemen Lenderking calls on donor countries to 'step up' pledges
Yemeni army liberates new areas in Al-Jouf from Houthi control