

Yemen violence increases as Houthis reject truce calls

Author:

Sat, 2021-07-31 21:43

ALEXANDRIA: Violence increased in Yemen during the weekend as the Houthis rejected calls to stop hostilities and comply with peace initiatives.

Dozens of combatants, including a government commander, were killed in the past 48 hours in fighting between troops and the Houthis in the provinces of Marib, Lahj, Shabwa and Al-Bayda with the Houthis scaling up their attacks on government-controlled areas.

The heaviest fighting was reported in Marib, where forces foiled the militia's attacks in areas outside the city of Marib and claimed limited gains in Al-Rahabah district.

Yemen's army on Saturday mourned the death of Brig. Abad Ahmed Al-Hulaisi Al-Muradi, who was killed while fighting the Houthis in contested areas south of Marib city.

The Houthi military escalation came as the US rebuked the group for attacking Marib and rejecting peace efforts to end the war.

Commenting on the visit of US special envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking to Saudi Arabia, the US Department of State said on Friday: "During this trip, Lenderking called for an end to the stalemated fighting in Marib and across Yemen, which have only increased the suffering of the Yemeni people. He expressed concern that the Houthis continue to refuse to engage meaningfully on a ceasefire and political talks."

Muin Shreim, acting UN special envoy for Yemen, who also concluded a brief visit to Riyadh on Friday, urged parties to stop military operations in Yemen and Saudi Arabia and resume talks under a UN-brokered peace plan. "This is key to reduce threats to civilians, alleviate the dire humanitarian situation and pave the way for a sustainable, comprehensive and just peace and for reconciliation and recovery in Yemen," Shreim said.

One expert said the Houthis had intensified their operations to seize control of new areas and improve their bargaining position.

"The Houthis responded to the UN and international initiatives and movement by expanding (militarily) in order to get more points of strength and impose facts on the grounds," Ali Al-Fakih, editor of Al-Masdar Online, told Arab News.

Diplomatic efforts to end the war had, he said, experienced a "feeling of disappointment" because the Houthis had rejected peace initiatives from the UN and Saudi Arabia, while also snubbing the former UN Yemen envoy, Martin Griffiths, the US envoy, and Omani mediators.

Yemeni political analyst Saleh Al-Baydani said the Houthis sought to assert full control of the northern half of the country, arguing that simultaneous military and international diplomatic pressure on the Houthis would force them into accepting a peace plan and stopping hostilities.

“Forcing the Houthis to comply with the option of peace can only be achieved through two parallel tracks,” he told Arab News. “The first is mounting military pressure on the ground and the second is applying real international pressures that go beyond condemnations and statements.”

The Houthis have also exploited the government’s focus on defending Marib city, its last major stronghold in the north, and leaving other provinces unprotected and vulnerable to the group’s attacks, according to analysts.

Al-Fakih said the Houthis intensified their activity in Lahj, Shabwa and Al-Bayda after failing to make a military breakthrough during their offensive on Marib city, adding that more aggressive and unified strikes against their military targets and drying up their financial sources would help to push them into accepting peace.

Najeeb Ghallab, the undersecretary at Yemen’s Information Ministry and a political analyst, said the group’s ideological leaders who believed they had “a mandate from heaven to rule Yemen, and those who enriched themselves during the war” would resist any move to end the war.

“The Houthi group is convinced that any path to peace in Yemen represents a threat to it. The war extends their rule of areas under their control,” Ghallab said.



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Yemen's Houthi militia reject US call to stop Marib offensive

[Deadly attack on Kurdish family sparks public anger](#)

Sat, 2021-07-31 21:19

ANKARA: Seven people from a Kurdish family, including three women, were shot dead by armed assailants in the central Anatolian province of Konya on Friday.

The attackers also set the house alight after the daytime massacre.

"We warned the authorities several times," the family's attorney Abdurrahman Karabulut tweeted on July 30.

They had been living in Konya for 24 years and were attacked by 60 ultranationalists in May, with four family members grievously wounded by knives, stones and sticks. They were told they would no longer be allowed to live in that district.

Following the May attack, 10 people were detained and seven of them were taken into custody. But many were released.

The Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği) has been following the case for months and was informed that the family members were being harassed. IHD chair Eren Keskin tweeted: "They murdered the family they previously attacked."

Authorities knew the family were at risk and failed to protect them, Human Rights Watch Turkey director Emma Sinclair-Webb said.

Violence against Kurds has sparked public anger over the past few months. The assaults are believed to be the result of political polarization in the country, where the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) has been threatened with closure and hundreds of its politicians have been slapped with a five-year ban.

During an armed assault on the HDP's office in the western province of Izmir in June, a female party staff member was killed.

Similar attacks against Kurds have seen an uptick recently with cases in the provinces of Afyon, Konya and the Turkish capital Ankara.

Far-right and pro-government media have been fueling conspiracy theories against the HDP with an increasingly hateful and racist discourse against Kurds.

Although witnesses said the attack was racially motivated, authorities rejected this allegation and said the investigation was ongoing and so far without any connection to their Kurdish origin.

Yaşar Dedeogullari, one of the victims, said back in May that the family was attacked because they were Kurds.

“We are nationalists, you are Kurds, we will get you out of here, this is what they have been saying for 12 years, we will not let Kurds live here,” he said.

In a joint statement, 48 bar associations across Turkey recently criticized the pro-government daily Yeni Safak for targeting the 15 bar associations that had condemned the attacks on Kurds.

A Yeni Safak headline read “Barons of Qandil” – a reference to the headquarters of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party in the northern Iraqi mountains.

“We received news of a terrible massacre from Konya. Since the subject is very sensitive, I did not want to talk before the details were clarified. Our delegation is currently in the region. Findings will be shared,” the leader of the main opposition Republican People’s Party tweeted.

“Our most valuable asset is the Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood. I know that our country faces several problems, but our hearts are together. I call out to the gangs who make the mistake of considering themselves as the deep state: We will definitely not allow your efforts to disrupt the brotherhood of our people!” he added.



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[From Morocco to Sudan, North Africa grapples with crippling new wave of COVID-19](#)

Sat, 2021-07-31 19:39

DUBAI: First identified in India, the highly transmissible coronavirus delta variant has since been detected in around 100 countries, prompting new waves of infections, travel restrictions and concerns over the effectiveness of vaccines.

One region that has been especially hard hit is North Africa, where the economic havoc caused by lockdowns has forced governments to reluctantly reopen borders and businesses despite the slow pace of inoculation.

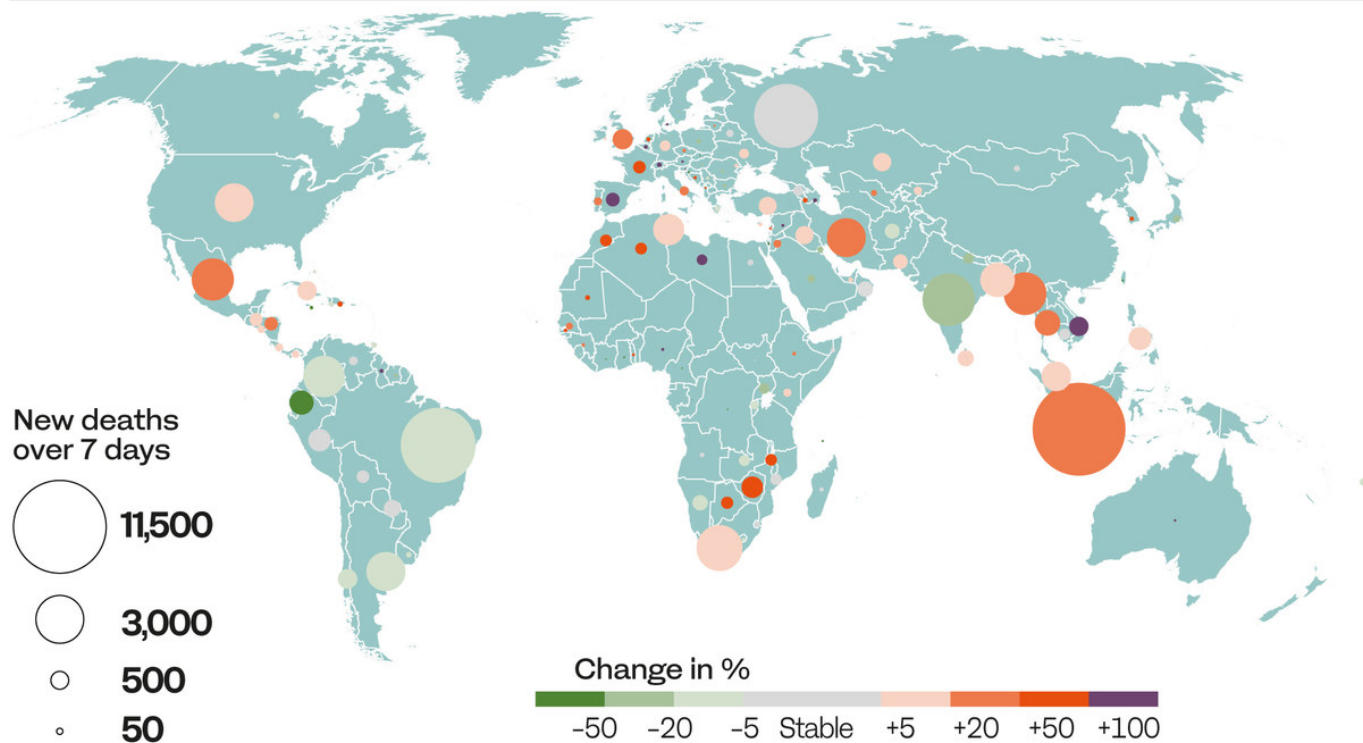
Tunisia, with a population of 11.69 million, has reported 582,638 infections

and 19,336 deaths since the pandemic was declared in March 2020, making it one of the worst-hit nations in Africa, alongside Namibia, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia.

The collapse of the health system and severe economic hardship triggered mass protests that in turn have plunged the country into a political crisis.

COVID-19 DEATHS OVER ONE WEEK

Number of new deaths over 7 days compared to the previous week



Source: AFP tallies based on official tolls, as of July 29, 2021

ARAB NEWS

War-ravaged Libya has also witnessed an alarming surge of COVID-19 cases over the past month. Because of its two centers of political power with parallel institutions, its response and vaccination rollout have been disjointed and sluggish.

The country's National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) recorded 3,845 new COVID-19 cases on July 25 – at that time the highest daily rate since the onset of the pandemic.

Libya has recorded roughly 246,200 cases and 3,469 deaths, but the true figure is likely far higher given the country's acute shortage of tests and laboratory capacity.

"We are alarmed at the rapid spread of the virus in the country," Abdulkadir Musse, UNICEF Special Representative in Libya, said in a statement.



A Moroccan municipal worker disinfects outside a house in a closed street in the southern port city of Safi on June 9, 2020 after Moroccan authorities declared a total lockdown. (AFP/File Photo)

"The vaccination rate is very low, and the spread is fast. We must be quicker in our response. The most important thing we can do to stop the spread of COVID-19 and the variants, is ensure everyone who is eligible gets vaccinated.

"Countries with high coverage of two doses of vaccines have been able to drastically reduce the rate of hospitalization and deaths. We also need to follow and abide by preventive measures."

Also known by its scientific name B.1.617.2, the delta variant was first detected in the Indian state of Maharashtra in October 2020, but was only labeled a "variant of concern" (VOC) by the World Health Organization (WHO) on May 11 this year.

The strain, itself the product of multiple mutations, is thought to be 60 percent more infectious than the alpha (or Kent) variant, an earlier mutation that emerged in southern England in November 2020.

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Arab countries of North Africa have particularly felt the economic pain of

the coronavirus crisis. [Find out why here.](#)



In many countries, including the UK, delta has now become the dominant strain. Although it is thought to cause more severe symptoms than its ancestor variants, placing additional strain on health services, there is currently not enough data to suggest it is more deadly.

More encouraging is the data on the effectiveness of vaccines. A study by Public Health England found the Pfizer vaccine was 94 percent effective against hospitalization after one dose and 96 percent effective after two doses, while AstraZeneca was 71 percent effective after one dose and 92 percent effective after two.

This is all good for countries with high rates of vaccination such as the UK. But for countries in the developing world, including the Arab states of North Africa, the slow rollout of vaccines means there is limited protection against the virus.

Delta is taking a terrible toll in these countries, leaving hospitals overburdened and mortuaries short of space.

Africa as a whole recently recorded a 43 percent week-on-week rise in COVID-19 deaths. Hospital admissions have increased rapidly and countries face shortages of oxygen and ICU beds.



A mask-clad worker measures the body temperature of incoming Muslim worshippers arriving for prayers at the Hasan II mosque, one of the largest in the African continent, in Morocco's Casablanca. (AFP/File Photo)

According to the WHO, the continent has vaccinated around 52 million people since the start of the rollout in March and only 18 million are fully vaccinated, representing 1.5 percent of the continent's population compared with more than 50 percent in some high-income countries.

South Africa, with its population of almost 60 million, has recorded 2,422,151 cases and 71,431 deaths since the pandemic began. Based on deaths per head of the population, Tunisia tops the region.

However, the picture is not uniform across the region. To date, 1.63 percent of Egyptians and 1.68 percent of Algerians have been fully vaccinated, compared with 27.68 percent of Moroccans, and 8.24 percent of Tunisians. Just 0.43 percent of Sudanese have received two doses, while data for Libya is unavailable.

"Different countries have different epidemiological situations, so we can't generalize all of North Africa," Abdinasir Abubakar, head of the Infectious Hazard Management Unit at the WHO regional office in Cairo, told Arab News.

Some countries have "really invested so much in vaccination and this is paying off," while other countries have focused on enforcing public-health measures to slow the spread of the virus, he said.

"I think Morocco has really made a great investment and progress on

administering more people with the vaccine compared to a number of other countries. And the cases you see are actually very minimal compared to previous waves, so I wouldn't worry much about Morocco," Abubakar said.



People queue as they arrive outside a make-shift COVID-19 coronavirus vaccination and testing centre erected at the Martyrs' Square of Libya's capital Tripoli on July 24, 2021. (AFP)

Nevertheless, cases in Morocco have been steadily increasing since mid-May, prompting the government to announce an extension of its state of emergency until Aug. 10.

Having already inoculated older age groups, Moroccan health authorities are now offering vaccines to people over the age of 30. But compliance with social-distancing and other hygiene regulations appears to be slipping.

"In Casablanca, I saw many people wearing masks but without adhering to other physical and social-distancing measures," said Um Ahmad, who recently returned to Dubai following a family visit.

"I saw crowds on the streets and in markets as usual. And when I visited Fez, I saw people living normally with no precautionary actions whatsoever. I even asked my relative 'are we on a different planet?'"



A Tunisian woman infected by the COVID-19 coronavirus receives oxygen at the Ibn al-Jazzar hospital in the east-central city of Kairouan. (AFP/File Photo)

In Algeria, which decided to close its borders to curb the spread of the delta variant, there is another more pressing problem – a shortage of oxygen in its hospitals to treat the seriously ill, forcing the government to establish a special unit to supervise the distribution of oxygen cylinders.

Egypt has reported a recent decline in the number of COVID-19 cases, with officials recording less than 70 new infections and less than 10 deaths per day. The country has even started sending its surplus medical kits to Tunisia.

But here too, public compliance with social-distancing measures leaves much to be desired. Eman Amir, an Egyptian working in Dubai who traveled to Cairo in May to visit her ailing mother, said she was shocked by the public's relaxed attitude toward virus containment.

“Those who don't care whether they die of coronavirus are those who feel they have little to lose given their already precarious existence,” she told Arab News, referring to contract and informal-sector workers most affected by pandemic restrictions.

In neighboring Sudan, cases are surging, particularly in the eastern city of Port Sudan, capital of the Red Sea State.



Abdinasir Abubakar, head of Infectious Hazard Management Unit, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. (Supplied)

Dr. Ahmed Dreyer, the state's director of the Emergency and Epidemic Control Department, has urged authorities to impose a three-week lockdown – known in policy circles as a circuit breaker – to help contain the spread of the delta variant.

Hana, a young Sudanese woman who lives with her family in Dubai, says many people back home are still not convinced the coronavirus even exists – the product, it would seem, of widespread misinformation.

“People have enough problems to worry about,” Hana said. “They don't want to add to them and worry about the pandemic.

“They try to lead normal lives, by earning their livelihood and putting bread on the table.”

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Arab countries of North Africa feel coronavirus' economic pain

[Egypt officials say Daesh militants attack kills 5 troops in Sinai](#)

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By ASHRAF SWEILAM | AP

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Sat, 2021-07-31 16:48

CAIRO: Daesh militants ambushed a checkpoint in the restive northern part of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula on Saturday, killing at least five troops from the security forces, officials said.

At least six other troops were wounded in the attack in the town of Sheikh Zuweid and taken to a military hospital in the Mediterranean city of El-Arish, they said.

Security personnel killed three militants in the firefight, and the area was reinforced, the officials added, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

Egypt has been battling militants in the northern part of Sinai Peninsula for years. Violence and instability there intensified after the 2013 military ouster of Muhammad Mursi, an elected but divisive Islamist president, amid nationwide protests against his brief rule.

The militants carried out numerous attacks, mainly targeting security forces, minority Christians and those who they accuse of collaborating with the military and police.

The pace of Daesh attacks in Sinai's main theater and elsewhere has slowed to a trickle since February 2018, when the military launched a massive operation in Sinai as well as parts of the Nile Delta and deserts along the country's western border with Libya.

The fight against militants in Sinai has largely taken place hidden from the public eye, with journalists, non-residents and outside observers barred from the area. The conflict has also been kept at a distance from tourist resorts at the southern end of the peninsula.



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Daesh Briton recruited dozens of fighters in London

[US official lands in Sudan to support democratic transition](#)

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By SAMY MAGDY | AP

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Sat, 2021-07-31 14:43

CAIRO: The US official who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book on genocide landed Saturday in Khartoum, aiming to support Sudan's fragile transition to democracy before traveling to Ethiopia to press the government there to allow humanitarian aid to the war-torn Tigray region.

Samantha Power, administrator of the US Agency for International Development, is set to meet with top Sudanese officials including Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, head of the ruling sovereign council, and Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, the civilian face of Sudan's transitional government.

She will also travel to Sudan's western region of Darfur where she said she investigated atrocities in the its civil war in the 2000s.

"I first visited Sudan in 2004— investigating a genocide in Darfur perpetrated by a regime whose grip on power seemed unshakeable. I couldn't imagine Sudan would one day be an inspiring example to the world that no leader is ever permanently immune from the will of their people," Power wrote on Twitter upon her arrival in Khartoum.

Power's visit to Khartoum is meant to "strengthen the US Government's partnership with Sudan's transitional leaders and citizens, explore how to expand USAID's support for Sudan's transition to a civilian-led democracy," USAID said.

Sudan is now on a fragile path to democracy and is ruled by a military-civilian government after a popular uprising led to the military's ouster of longtime autocrat Omar Al-Bashir in 2019. The Khartoum government, which seeks better ties with the US and the West after nearly three decades of international isolation, faces towering economic and security challenges that threaten to derail its transition into chaos.

The US official would also meet with Ethiopian refugees in Sudan who recently fled the conflict and atrocities in the Tigray region which borders Sudan. Since the Tigray war began in November, tens of thousands of Ethiopians have

crossed into Sudan, adding to the country's economic and security challenges. Power's five-day trip will also take her to Ethiopia as part of international efforts to prevent a looming famine in Tigray, a region of some 6 million people that has been devastated by the months-long war.

Power will meet with Ethiopian officials "to press for unimpeded humanitarian access to prevent famine in Tigray and meet urgent needs in other conflict-affected regions of the country," USAID said.

The world's worst hunger crisis in a decade is unfolding in Tigray, where the US says up to 900,000 people now face famine conditions and international food security experts say the crucial planting season "has largely been missed" because of the war.

Ethiopia's government has blamed the aid blockade on the resurgent Tigray forces who have retaken much of the region and crossed into the neighboring Amhara and Afar regions, but a senior official with the US Agency for International Development this week told the AP that is "100 percent not the case."



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