

PKK LEADER READY FOR NEW TURKEY CEASEFIRE

QANDIL: The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) is ready for a new ceasefire with the Turkish authorities despite almost three months of deadly violence, one of its leaders told AFP in an interview at its stronghold in northern Iraq. The PKK, which since 1984 has waged an armed struggle for autonomy and greater rights for Kurds in Turkey, declared a ceasefire in March 2013. But it ripped up the truce in July this year, accusing the Turkish authorities of collaborating with Islamic State (IS) jihadists in Syria, allegations Ankara vehemently denies.

The Turkish authorities say over 140 members of the security forces have been killed in PKK attacks since and have hit back with a relentless bombing campaign against the group. "We are ourselves ready for a ceasefire from right now," Cemil Bayik told AFP in an interview in the group's stronghold of the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq. But Bayik—who along with Murat Karayilan is considered the PKK's top commander on the ground in the absence of its jailed chief Abdullah Ocalan—warned of a drastic PKK response if Turkey continued its military campaign.

"If the Turkish government continues with its logic of war, whether we want it or not, other cemeteries will fill up and the conflict will extend to all of Turkey, Syria and the Middle East," Bayik added. Dressed in the grey battle fatigues favored by Kurdish militants and with a picture of Ocalan pinned into his lapel, Bayik accused President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of being to blame for the violence.

"We don't want war. We have tried to go down the political and democratic path to move the dialogue forwards," said Bayik. "But Erdogan held up the process," Bayik complained. "He made us believe that there was a dialogue. But his aim was to delay it as he never believed in it." Bayik, 64, said he still had hope of a peaceful solution, saying time had shown that violence was no way out. "If it was possible to solve this problem through war, then it would have been solved long ago," he said.

'Self defense'

The upsurge in violence has raised fears of whether there can ever be a final peace deal to end Turkey's conflict with the PKK, which has claimed 40,000 lives. But Bayik denied that the PKK was to blame for the flare-up, saying it was only acting in "legitimate self defense".

"All the guerilla movement is doing is to protect itself, it has still not entered into a war," he said. "What we see are young people stepping into the fray to protect themselves and the people and democracy." The Turkish authorities, by contrast, accuse the PKK of being bloodthirsty "terrorists" who have killed scores of young police and soldiers simply because they are in uniform.

Official Turkish media say some 1,740 PKK members have been killed in the military's air strikes in southeast Turkey and northern Iraq. But Bayik rubbished the suggestion that the death toll was anything on this scale. "It's just lies. As of now, we have lost 70 martyrs."

Meanwhile, he said that the Kurdish movement had been boosted by its involvement in the fight against Islamic State (IS) jihadists in northern Syria, a campaign backed by Europe and the United States. But the rebels in northern Iraq still live undercover, suspecting Turkish drones are watching them from the sky and awaiting the next air raid. These remote mountains represent their base, with portraits of Ocalan everywhere and Kalashnikov-touting fighters checking traffic at the entry to every village. The PKK's resumption of its campaign of violence also came at a critical political moment in Turkey. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Erdogan lost its overall majority in June 7 elections largely due to the success of pro-Kurdish forces.

After it failed to form a coalition, Turkey is now facing snap polls on November 1. Bayik accused Erdogan of reigniting the conflict with the PKK in revenge for the loss of the AKP's majority in the elections. But he suggested that the PKK could be ready to declare a ceasefire ahead of the elections with the aim of helping the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) again score a strong result. — AFP



ISTANBUL: Selahattin Demirtas, leader of pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP), greets the crowd during an election campaign meeting. — AFP



MOREK: In this photo taken on Wednesday, Oct 7, 2015, Syrian army howitzers fire near the village. — AP

IS AT OUTSKIRTS OF ALEPPO DESPITE RUSSIA AIR STRIKES 'WARPLANES HIT 60 TERRORIST TARGETS'

BEIRUT: Islamic State group fighters advanced yesterday to the outskirts of Syria's second city Aleppo, despite 10 days of Russian air strikes that Moscow says are aimed at routing the jihadists. Moscow announced yesterday that its raids had killed several hundred IS fighters and hit more than 60 "terrorist targets" in Syria over the past 24 hours.

Deputy head of the Russian General Staff Lieutenant Igor Makushev told reporters that "Su-34M and SU-24SM warplanes hit 60 terrorist targets". He said Russia had bombed a command post in IS stronghold Raqa, killing two senior field commanders and some 200 fighters, according to intercepted radio communications. Strikes on Aleppo killed "some 100 militants", and other raids struck command posts and training camps in Latakia, Hama and Idlib.

Western governments say the vast majority of Russian strikes have targeted rebel groups other than IS in an attempt to defend President Bashar Al-Assad's rule. And despite the Russian raids, IS militants have reached their closest position yet to Aleppo in northern Syria, a monitoring group reported. "Dozens of combatants were killed on both sides" as IS drove out rebels from nearby localities as well as a military base, said Rami Abdel Rahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The jihadists are now just over 10 kilometers from the northern edges of Aleppo city and three kilometers from pro-regime forces positioned at the Sheikh Najjar industrial zone. "IS has never been so close to the city of Aleppo, and this is its biggest advance towards" the country's pre-war commercial capital, Abdel Rahman said.

Iranian general killed

Control of Aleppo is divided between rebel groups in the east and government forces, bolstered by pro-regime militias, in the west. IS has not had a presence in the city, but the jihadist group yesterday boasted it had "reached the gates of Aleppo".

"IS announced several times that it would launch an offensive on Aleppo without doing it. They were waiting for the right moment and took advance of Russian strikes on other rebels to advance," said jihadism analyst Romain Caillat. Thomas Pierret, an expert on Islam in Syria, said the US-led coalition bombing IS in Syria was "not very active" in Aleppo, and that Russia's strikes there had hit mostly rebels, allowing IS to push forward.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards announced one of its senior commanders was killed by IS in the Aleppo area on Thursday, without giving the exact circumstances. A Guards statement said General Hossein Hamedani had played an "important role... reinforcing the front of Islamic resistance against the terrorists" but was killed "during an advisory mission".

The Observatory said Hamedani was the highest-ranking Iranian casualty of the Syrian conflict. It said he was killed near Kweyris, a military airport in Aleppo province under siege by IS. Shiite-dominated Iran is a staunch ally of Assad, sending Guards forces and military advisers to aid him against Sunni rebels seeking his overthrow. Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah has done much of the fighting to prop up Assad's army, though the commander of the Revolutionary Guards foreign wing, Qassem Soleimani, is said

to be heavily involved in strategic planning.

Moscow denies missile crash

French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said yesterday that "80 to 90 percent" of Russian strikes in Syria were aimed at propping up Assad. He was speaking after French warplanes carried out new strikes overnight on IS targets in Syria, where Paris launched its first raids on September 27.

According to the Observatory, 16 IS jihadists including three child soldiers were killed in the raids which hit "a training camp" on the southern edges of Raqa city. The Russian air war has provided cover for Assad's ground troops, who have lost swathes of the country to jihadists and rebel groups since 2011.

The campaign has been critical for the regime's fight in Sahl Al-Ghab, a strategic plain in Hama province bordering both the regime's coastal bastion of Latakia and the rebel stronghold of Idlib province. Syria's army announced a "vast offensive" on Thursday, advancing near Sahl Al-Ghab from both the Hama and Latakia fronts with Russian air support. Moscow denied a US claim that four Syria-bound Russian cruise missiles fired from the Caspian Sea had crashed in Iran on Wednesday.

"Any professional knows that during these operations we always fix the target before and after impact. All our cruise missiles hit their target," spokesman General Igor Konashenkov said. Iran declined to confirm the claim by a US official, who did not provide details about where the missiles might have come down or if they caused any damage. — AFP