

DJIBOUTI'S STRATEGIC POSITION DRAWS WORLD'S ARMIES

ARTRA, Djibouti: A French warship ploughs through the sparkling waters between Africa and Arabia on a joint training drill with the US that highlights Djibouti's growing strategic role for the world's militaries. On the sun-blasted rocky shores of the tiny Horn of Africa nation, some 500 French troops march alongside 50 US Marines near the town of Arta, wearing full kit in the baking heat. The training, designed to help the two allies work better together, also reflects growing international interest in the former French colony - bordering Somalia, and just opposite Yemen.

Home to only around 800,000 people, Djibouti is now crowded with the military bases of several world powers. Its port guards the entrance to the Red Sea and Suez Canal on one of the world's busiest shipping routes. "This is certainly

the reason why in addition to the French there are today many international forces wanting to establish a presence in Djibouti," said General Philippe Montocchio, the commander of French forces in the country. "There are of course the Americans, the Japanese, the Italians, now the Chinese, and certainly in the near future, the Saudis."

It emerged four months ago that China has signed an agreement with Djibouti for the installation by the end of 2017 of a "naval logistics" base to accommodate up to 10,000 soldiers and serve to secure Beijing's considerable and growing interests in the wider region. The hub will constitute China's first permanent overseas military deployment.

Terror-Fighting HQ
Djibouti is already home to Camp

Lemonnier, the United States' only permanent base in Africa. It is used for covert, anti-terror and other operations in Yemen, as well as the US fight against the Islamist Shebab in Somalia and against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Washington pays some \$60 million a year to Djibouti for the base. US Major Paul L. Croom, a liaison officer between the French and US militaries, said the joint drills in Djibouti "just makes sense" as the allies share key security interests in the region, including combating the jihadist threat in Africa.

"Our operability - between the French military and US military - is as important as it's ever been right now, and is only gaining in importance," Croom said. "Everybody knows that a lot of that threat emanates from areas in which the United States and France

have mutual interests." European and other international navies use Djibouti's port as a base in the fight against piracy from neighboring Somalia. These are important - and sometimes dangerous - waters.

With international navies at sea, Somali pirate attacks have dropped off: 176 attacks were recorded in 2011, and none in 2015, according to the EU naval force. And just 30 km across the Gulf of Aden lies war-torn Yemen, devastated by a civil war that has pitched Shiite Houthi rebels - backed by Iran - against an internationally recognized government backed by Saudi-led air strikes.

Islamist groups, including Al-Qaeda's Yemen-based branch, one of the jihadist network's most dangerous franchises, as well as Islamic State forces, have also joined the battle for power in Yemen.

"Djibouti is located exactly at the epicentre of all this jihadist movement in the Horn of Africa and the southern part of the Middle East," Montocchio said.

China, beyond its new naval base, is bankrolling major infrastructure projects in Djibouti, including transport links for key markets in neighboring landlocked Ethiopia. "Everybody was surprised: Why China? For Djibouti, there's no question," said Djibouti's Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Youssouf. "China's presence, naval or military, is part of the same logic of countries that have the ability to contribute to peace and security in a region which is very troubled." But China's entry into this "Great Game" is a risky bet for Djibouti - it may well unsettle relations with traditional allies, especially the United States. —AFP



BASRA: Iraqi security forces inspect the scene of a suicide car bomb attack in Iraq's second-largest city yesterday. — AP

IS BOMBINGS, MORTAR FIRE, CLASHES KILL 29 IN IRAQ

BAGHDAD: Suicide bombings claimed by the Islamic State group, clashes and mortar fire killed at least 29 people in Iraq yesterday, security and medical officials said. The violence, which hit four different provinces, also wounded more than 70 people, the sources said. The deadliest attack took place in the southern province of Dhi Qar when a suicide bomber blew himself up inside a restaurant that is frequented by Shiite paramilitary militia fighters, killing at least 14 people. Another 27 people were wounded in the attack that targeted a famous restaurant on the main highway that links Baghdad with the southern provinces, a police officer said. Dhi Qar is located about 320 km southeast of the capital.

At around the same time, a suicide car bomber set off his explosives-laden car in a commercial area in the oil-rich city of Basra, killing at least five people and wounding 10 others, another police officer said. Pieces of flesh and debris littered the bloodstained pavement as thick black smoke billowed from the area. The attack also damaged up to 30 cars. The Islamic State group, "after the losses it suffered in western areas, is seeking to move the battle to the southern areas," where many of the forces fighting the jihadists are from, Basra Governor Majid Al-Nasrawi told journalists.

IS overran large areas north and west of Baghdad in 2014, but Iraqi forces backed by US-led air strikes and training have since regained significant ground, most recently in the western province of Anbar. AFP journalists saw three burned bodies at the scene of

the Basra attack - two still inside vehicles, and a third on a stretcher. The blast set vehicles alight and damaged buildings in the area, one of the journalists said.

Another suicide bomber struck a joint police and army checkpoint in north Baghdad, while a third attacked pro-government paramilitaries in Mishahada, north of the capital, and a fourth hit militiamen in a restaurant south of the city of Nasiriyah. IS issued statements claiming responsibility for the blasts. The group frequently carries out suicide bombings in Iraq targeting security forces and civilians. IS also launched an attack in the Baghdad area in Anbar province, west of Baghdad, sparking clashes in which five members of pro-government forces were killed and at least seven wounded.

And mortar fire struck houses in Abu Ghraib, west of Baghdad, killing two people and wounding at least seven. Like the Basra governor, a US army officer said that as IS loses territory, it is increasingly turning to bombings in a bid to stay relevant. The group is "losing its prominence on the battlefield, and so what we've kinda seen recently is a lot more what we call high profile attacks," Captain Chance McCraw told journalists in Baghdad. The jihadists are seeking "to still stay relevant in the media, because that's how they get their message out," McCraw said. A suicide bomber blew himself up following a football tournament south of Baghdad last month, killing more than 30 people. And more than 45 people died in a suicide truck bombing at a checkpoint earlier in March. —Agencies

ERDOGAN REJECTS 'LESSONS IN DEMOCRACY' FROM WEST

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday lashed out at the West for giving Turkey "lessons in democracy," rejecting mounting US and EU criticism over an alleged clampdown on press freedoms under his rule. "Those who attempt to give us lessons in democracy and human rights must first contemplate their own shame," Erdogan told a meeting of the Turkish Red Crescent in Ankara. US President Barack Obama warned last week that Turkey's approach towards the media was taking it "down a path that would be very troubling."

Erdogan's comments came as local media reported the fresh arrest of five opposition journalists yesterday, without giving details on who they were. Turkey's government has been accused of increasing authoritarianism and muzzling critical media as well as lawmakers, academics, lawyers and NGOs. Two journalists from the leading opposition daily Cumhuriyet face life in prison after being charged with revealing state secrets over a story accusing the government of seeking to illicitly deliver arms to rebels in Syria.

Erdogan met with Obama in Washington last week, and defended press freedom in Turkey, saying some publications had branded him a "thief" and a "killer" without being shut down. "Such insults and threats are not permitted in the West," he claimed. Erdogan yesterday again slammed the Constitutional Court for allowing the two journalists to be released during their trial. The reporters had spent three months in detention until the decision was handed down in February. He said that the Constitutional Court had "betrayed its very existence" with the ruling.

Yesterday, a Turkish court issued arrest warrants for several opposition journalists, five of whom were detained, local media reported. They are accused of violating legal confidentiality by reporting on a corruption scandal which engulfed Erdogan's inner circle in 2013/14 and was centred on the illicit trading of gold with Iran. The reporters are also

accused of belonging to a "terrorist group" - the usual official parlance for the grouping run by Erdogan's arch foe Fethullah Gulen who is accused of being behind the graft claims.

'Wild Man of the Bosphorus'

The fresh crackdown comes after Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu told German Chancellor Angela Merkel that he was unhappy about the raft of stories criticizing Erdogan in German media in recent weeks. In a telephone call Davutoglu complained such stories "were incompatible with freedom of the press" and said there should be an end to the publication of such "unacceptable" material, he office said.

German weekly Der Spiegel ran a cover story deeply critical of Erdogan in its latest issue, with a caricature of the Turkish president - whom the magazine called "the wild man of the Bosphorus" - shaking his fist. He looms large over a tiny Merkel, holding an EU briefcase with her head in her hand, while a paper airplane cut out of a newspaper pokes him in the backside. The headline on the story read: "The fearsome friend: President Erdogan's crusade against freedom and democracy."

It is not the first time Germany has irked Ankara with its coverage of Erdogan. Last month Turkey summoned Germany's ambassador to protest a two-minute song lampooning Erdogan that was broadcast on German television. The TV show responded by re-broadcasting the tune "Erdowie, Erdowo, Erdogan" that ridicules the president, and adding Turkish subtitles. The satirical song charges, among other things, that "a journalist who writes something that Erdogan doesn't like/Will be in jail by tomorrow". The row comes as the EU is accused of selling out its principles by offering Turkey visa-free travel and a fast-racked EU membership process, in exchange for help on the migrant crisis. — AFP

BIBI SAYS HE IS WAITING FOR A VISIT FROM ABBAS

SPYMASTER SLAMS NETANYAHU FROM THE GRAVE

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday said he was waiting for a visit from Mahmoud Abbas, after the Palestinian president said he had already proposed such a meeting. "A few days ago, on Israeli television, I heard president Abbas say that if I invite him to meet, he'll come," Netanyahu told reporters at a meeting with visiting Czech Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek. "I'm inviting him again," he said in English. "I've cleared my schedule this week. Any day he can come, I'll be here."

In an interview with commercial TV station Channel 2 on Thursday, Abbas said that he was ready to meet Netanyahu "any time". "And I suggested, by the way, for him to meet," he said in English. Asked what was Netanyahu's response to the offer he refused to answer. "He will tell you," the Palestinian leader said. US-backed peace talks between the Palestinians and Israel collapsed in April 2014 after nine months amid bitter recriminations and mutual blame.

The two men shook hands at a climate summit in Paris in November, but held no significant talks. The last substantial and public meeting between them is thought to date back to 2010, though there have been unconfirmed reports of secret meetings since then. Netanyahu yesterday said that if the two met he would discuss a wave of violence which has left 200 Palestinians and 28 Israelis dead since October. "We have a lot of things to discuss, but the first item is ending the Palestinian campaign of incitement to murder Israelis," he said.

Most of the Palestinians killed were carrying out knife, gun or car-ramming attacks, according to Israeli authorities. But Israeli forces have been also accused of using excessive force in some cases, charges which they have firmly denied. Palestinians and many analysts say frustration with Israel's occupation and settlement building along with the lack of any progress on peace efforts have fed the unrest.

"Lack of hope. Lack of trust," Abbas, who has called for peaceful resistance, said in last week's interview as reasons for why the knife attacks have continued. He said that if Netanyahu were to engage in serious peace talks Palestinian attacks would cease. "If he tells me that he believes in the two-state solution and we sit around the table to talk about a two-state solution, this will give my people hope," he said. "And nobody will dare to go and stab or shoot or do anything here or there."

Personal Interests

Meanwhile, a former head of Israeli spy agency Mossad harshly criticized Netanyahu in a posthumous interview published yesterday, accusing him of putting personal interests above national concerns. Meir Dagan, who died aged 71 on March 17, led the Mossad from 2002 through 2010, notably working to thwart Iran's nuclear program while also opposing a military strike against it. He held a series of conversations with a journalist from Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth before his death that were withheld until yesterday.

"I knew a lot of prime ministers," he said. "None of them were saintly types. But they had one shared trait: When they reached the point in which their personal interest intersected with the national interest, the national interest always prevailed. There are only two I can't say that about - Bibi and Barak." Bibi is Netanyahu's nickname, while Barak refers to former prime minister and defense minister Ehud Barak.

Netanyahu and then defense minister Barak were reported to have given the order in 2010 for the military to prepare a strike against Iran, which was never carried out. Dagan strongly opposed such a strike, a position shared by the military's then-chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi. "Bibi is the worst manager I know," said the former spymaster who suffered from liver cancer and underwent a transplant. "The worst thing is that he's got a certain trait that's kind of like Ehud Barak - the two of them believe that they're the greatest geniuses in the world and that no one gets what it is that they really want." On his opposition to a military strike against Iran, Dagan said that "the working assumption, as if it would be possible to fully stop the Iranian nuclear program by means of a military strike, is incorrect." "That military capacity doesn't exist," said Dagan. "The only thing that can be accomplished is to suspend, and that would be for a defined period of time." Under Dagan's leadership, the Mossad is believed to have assassinated Iranian nuclear scientists, caused explosions at nuclear facilities and used computer viruses to damage uranium centrifuges. The Mossad has never confirmed such operations. Further details of the interviews with Dagan are to be published on Friday, the newspaper said. — Agencies



JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (right) gestures as he speaks during a meeting with Czech Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek at the prime minister's office yesterday. —AFP

TO FLEE LEBANON TRASH, FAMILY HEADS TO SYRIA

NAAMEH, Lebanon: Imagine living near a trash dump so putrid that you would rather move to war-torn Syria. That's what Fayyad Ayyash, his wife Riham and their four young daughters plan to do next week, leaving behind their home in Lebanon for neighboring Syria. Their modest two-storey house in the town of Naameh, about 20 km south of the Lebanese capital, directly overlooks the infamous and odorous landfill by the same name.

"We're going next week. In Syria, there's a possibility I might die. Here, we'll definitely die," Fayyad tells AFP. From his grassy backyard, dozens of large trucks carrying tonnes of waste can be seen - and smelled - lining up to add their load to the "trash mountain". The July 2015 closure of the notorious landfill lies at the heart of Lebanon's trash crisis, which has seen rivers of trash spread across the Mediterranean country, triggering protests nationwide.

Then last month, the government made a controversial decision to reopen it - and this was the last straw for residents like Fayyad. Pulling out a bright blue inhaler, he says his family has been suffering from respiratory problems for months because of the dump. His daughters, whose ages range from just under two to 10 years, all have trouble eating and sleeping. "It's always worse at night than during the day. The whole area is swarming with the same smell and the same sickness," he says. Fayyad says it's become so bad, he's decided to flee across the border to the town of Libean in southern Syria, a country where a conflict has been raging since 2011.

Costly Medical Bills

The Naameh landfill opened in 1997 and was meant to be a temporary dump, but an alternative site was never opened. For 20 years, the waste generated in Beirut and

Mount Lebanon - the country's most populous areas - was dumped in Naameh. The verdant valley swelled into a trash mountain of more than 15 million tonnes. Furious residents forced the closure of the site in July 2015, saying it was leading to high cancer rates, skin diseases and breathing problems.

Uncollected rubbish began piling up around Beirut and its suburbs, emitting a horrible stench that sparked protests in downtown Beirut demanding a long-term solution. After months of political wrangling, Lebanon's cabinet announced a four-year plan to end the waste crisis - and its first step was reopening Naameh for two months. "When the dump reopened, my baby immediately started throwing up again," Fayyad says.

Fayyad and his Syrian wife, Riham, are both Druze, an offshoot of Islam. Riham estimates that she spends about \$1,000 per month on doctor's visits, inhalers, and other medication for her children. Pointing to her bare finger, she says she had to sell her wedding ring to cover the costs. "I wish my kids would eat food as much as they take medicine," she says. Riham's family hails from Libean, in Syria's southern Sweida province. That's where she will travel to next week, in the hope that the open plains there will be good for her children.

Suitcase 'Packed and Ready'

Sweida, the heartland of Syria's Druze minority, has come under attack by jihadists of the Islamic State group but has seen less fighting than other parts of the country. "No, it isn't safe, but I'm forced to leave... I have a suitcase packed and ready on top of the closet," Riham says. Farouk Merhebi from the American University of Beirut says the smell has probably made life incredibly uncomfortable for hundreds living within a one-kilometre radius of the dump. — AFP



NAAMEH, Lebanon: A Lebanese couple point from their balcony in the village of Baawarta at trucks unloading garbage at the Naameh landfill, south of Beirut, on March 30, 2016. —AFP