

DEADLY STRIKE ON YEMEN MSF CLINIC DRAWS CONDEMNATION

A 'WORRYING PATTERN' OF SUCH ATTACKS

DUBAI: A missile strike on a Doctors Without Borders clinic in Yemen killed at least four people Sunday, the group said, condemning what it called a "worrying pattern" of such attacks. The raid was the third of its kind in four months in the war-ravaged country, where a Saudi-led coalition has been battling Shiite Houthi rebels who have seized territory from the internationally-recognized government.

It also follows a US strike in Afghanistan on a facility run by the Paris-based medical humanitarian organization, known by its French acronym MSF, which killed 42 people. MSF could not specify whether the medical facility was hit in an air strike by the Saudi-led coalition or by a rocket fired from the ground.

Three MSF staff were among 10 people wounded in the Yemen strike, and two other members of staff were in "critical condition", MSF said in a statement. "The numbers of casualties could rise as there could still be people trapped

in the rubble," it said, adding that the missile hit the medical facility in the Razeh district of Saada province.

All staff and patients had been evacuated, with the patients being transferred to another MSF-supported hospital in Saada, it said. MSF director of operations Raquel Ayora denounced the strike and repeated that the organization constantly shares the coordinates of its facilities with those fighting in Yemen. "There is no way that anyone with the capacity to carry out an air strike or launch a rocket would not have known" that the clinic was a functioning health facility supported by MSF, Ayora said.

"We strongly condemn this incident that confirms a worrying pattern of attacks to essential medical services and express our strongest outrage as this will leave a very fragile population without healthcare for weeks," said Ayora. "Once more it is civilians that bear the brunt of this war," she added.

MSF hospitals hit

MSF last month accused the coalition of bombing its clinic in Taz, southwest Yemen, wounding nine people including two staff members. The coalition said it would investigate that claim although it has repeatedly insisted it does not attack civilians. And in October, air strikes hit another hospital run by MSF near Saada without causing any deaths.

MSF facilities have also been hit elsewhere, with the deadliest recent strike coming during a US air raid on the hospital in the Afghan city of Kunduz. Washington has said the October strike, which came as NATO-backed Afghan forces clashed with insurgents for control of the northern provincial capital, was "caused primarily by human error".

The EU led international condemnation of the latest strike, describing it as an "unacceptable attack". Saada is the heartland of the Shiite Houthi rebels that the coalition has been bombing since March in support of Yemen's beleaguered government.

More than 5,800 people have been killed in Yemen since the start of the bombing campaign, about half of them civilians, according to the United Nations. At least 27,000 people have been wounded and 80 percent of the population is in need of humanitarian aid, according to UN figures. The UN envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, arrived in Sanaa on Sunday to convince the rebels and their allies to attend a new round of peace talks.

He had met with Yemeni government officials temporarily based in Riyadh, before he headed to Sanaa. Foreign Minister Abdel Malak Al-Mekhlafi said the talks, initially scheduled to start on January 14 had been postponed until January 20 or 23. The government sat down with the rebels and their allies last month in Switzerland for six days of talks that ended without a major breakthrough. Also on Sunday, Yemeni intelligence colonel Ali Saleh Al-Nakhbi was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in second city Aden, a security official said. —AFP



SANAA: Yemeni protesters hold a banner during a protest in front of the United Nations (UN) office calling for an end to the military operations carried out by the Saudi-led coalition on Yemen. — AFP



ROMULUS: In this Thursday, Dec 17, 2015, file photo, Syrian refugee Refaii Hamo addresses the media during a news conference. — AP

SYRIAN REFUGEE AMONG FIRST LADY'S GUESTS FOR STATE OF UNION ADDRESS

WASHINGTON: A Syrian scientist stricken with cancer and seeking a new start for his family in Michigan will represent Syrian refugees as a guest of first lady Michelle Obama for the president's final State of the Union address.

President Barack Obama has committed to accepting an additional 10,000 Syrian refugees, but some Republican lawmakers and presidential candidates are critical of the expansion. Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz, for example, noted the recent arrest of two Iraqi refugees. During an interview with CNN that aired Sunday, Cruz emphasized that they came to the United States "using the same vetting that President Obama wants us to trust with Syrian refugees."

Refaai Hamo, his son and three daughters landed at Detroit Metropolitan Airport in December, anxious to rebuild their lives. Hamo fled to Turkey from Syria after a missile attack killed his wife and one other daughter. He was profiled on the popular photo blog Humans of New York as "The Scientist." The White House said Sunday that Hamo will be among about two dozen guests invited to sit near the first lady on Tuesday. The guests include several veterans and service members, including one of the three Americans who thwarted an attack aboard a Paris-bound train.

Those on the guest list will highlight

issues that Obama has attempted to prioritize during his tenure, such as expanded health insurance coverage, and issues that he hopes to work on during his final year, such as criminal justice. The guest list includes a California man whose partner was killed in the San Bernardino attack, the first female Army Reserve officer to graduate from the Army's elite Ranger School and a plaintiff in the landmark Supreme Court case that found same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry. One seat will be empty, to represent the victims of gun violence.

Obama read about Hamo's story last month. His cancer had gone untreated because he lacked health insurance. More than \$450,000 for the family was raised through an online fundraising campaign actor Ed Norton had set up for them. The White House described Hamo as living the kind of life in Syria that is associated with the American dream. He married his college sweetheart, and they built a life together before a missile tore through the complex he helped design and where his family lived.

Obama told Hamo through a Facebook posting that, "Yes, you can still make a difference in the world, and we're proud that you'll pursue your dreams here. Welcome to your new home. You're part of what makes America great." —AP

PALESTINIAN ON HUNGER STRIKE IN ISRAEL IN CRITICAL CONDITION

RAMALLAH: The condition of a Palestinian journalist on a 48-day hunger strike in an Israeli jail is deteriorating, the man's wife and a Palestinian official said yesterday. Mohammed Al-Qeq is protesting his six-month sentence without trial or charge, under a measure called administrative detention. Israel's internal security agency Shin Bet said Al-Qeq was arrested in connection with his alleged involvement in "terror activities" linked to the Islamic militant group Hamas.

"Al-Qeq is in critical condition after 48 days in hunger strike and his life is at risk," said Issa Qaraqa, the Palestinian minister of prisoner affairs. Al-Qeq is being monitored in an Israeli hospital, according to Israel's prison service,

which would not comment on his condition. His wife, Faihaa Al-Qeq, said Israel "accused him of incitement."

Al-Qeq, 33, works as a correspondent for the Saudi channel Al-Majd and also appears as an analyst on channels linked to Hamas. Israel has arrested him in the past for his activities with Hamas' student organization. He was arrested Nov 21. Palestinian prisoners have used hunger strikes before to draw attention to their detention without trial or charges. Al-Qeq is the first journalist to do so.

Fearing that a fasting detainee's death could spark violence, Israel has at times acceded to hunger strikers' demands by agreeing to release

them at the end of their terms of detention. Israel sometimes extends the administrative detention of suspects.

A contentious law passed last year allows Israel to force-feed a hunger striker if his life is in danger, even if the prisoner refuses. Israel's medical establishment has protested the law, and there are no known instances of a prisoner being force-fed. Also yesterday, the Israeli military said forces shot and wounded a knife-wielding Palestinian who the military said attempted to stab a soldier in the West Bank, the latest in a four month-long wave of Israeli-Palestinian violence that is roiling the region. The Palestinian's condition was not immediately known. — AP

12 CHILDREN KILLED AFTER RUSSIA STRIKE HITS SCHOOL

BEIRUT: At least 12 children and three adults were killed in a Russian air strike that hit a school in Syria's Aleppo province yesterday, a monitor said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the three adults included a teacher, and that the strike in the town of Anjara also injured at least 20 people, all of them children and teachers.

The monitor said there had been heavy air strikes and clashes between government and rebel forces since Sunday in the Northern Province, which is controlled by a mixture of moderate and Islamist rebels. Photos distributed by media activists in Aleppo province showed a classroom full of rubble with the wooden tops of desks blown off their metal frames.

The Britain-based Observatory also reported that three children were killed by rebel rocket fire on a government-held district in Aleppo city. Control of the city has been divided between government forces in the west and rebel fighters in the east

since shortly after fighting began there in mid-2012. Government forces regularly carry out air raids on the east, while rebels fire rockets into the west. The situation is largely reversed in the countryside surrounding the city, with rebels controlling much of the area west of Aleppo, and the government present to the east.

Russia, a staunch ally of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime, began air strikes in support of the central government in late September. It says it is targeting the Islamic State group and other "terrorists," but a third of those killed in its strikes have been civilians, according to the Observatory.

The monitor said in late December that Russian air strikes had killed more than 2,300 people since they began on September 30, among them 792 civilians. Moscow has slammed as "absurd" allegations that its strikes have killed civilians. More than 260,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict began in March 2011 with anti-government protests. —AFP

IRAQI TURKMENS ALARMED BY DEEP KURDISH TRENCH

BAGHDAD: Iraqi Turkmen leaders yesterday accused the country's Kurds of exploiting the war on jihadists to dig a trench that would strengthen their grip on expanded territory. Officials from the Turkmen minority said the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was digging the trench roughly following conflict lines between the Islamic State group and Kurdish forces across northern Iraq.

Kurdish officials insisted the trench was not a political act but rather a purely defensive measure aimed at preventing attacks by IS suicide car bombers. "We see this move to dig a trench as suspicious," Arshad al-Salehi, the head of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, told AFP. "It starts in Rabia... and ends in Khanaqin," he said.

Rabia is a northwestern town on the Syrian border and Khanaqin lies 400 kilometers to the southeast, near the Iranian border. The Turkmen are one of Iraq's largest ethnic minorities and many of their hubs are in disputed areas, which are just beyond the KRG borders but claimed by the Kurds. The Kurdish peshmerga took over many of those areas on the back of the June 2014 IS offensive that saw the Iraqi federal security forces collapse completely. Salehi said he wanted Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi to clarify his position on the trench and said he would bring up the issue in parliament. "We see it as the beginning of the division of Iraq. It gives reality on the ground to a redrawn geopol-

itical map," he said. Jassem Mohammed Jaafar, a Turkmen MP, also accused the Kurds of using the war against IS as a pretext to further the expansion, and ultimately the secession, of their region.

'Fait accompli'

"It is against international conventions, it violates the rights of the people who end up on one or the other side of it," he said. "There is little doubt that this trench is part of a project to divide Iraq," Jaafar said. The KRG acknowledged it had recently stepped up the fortification of its frontline with IS but it denied any political motive.

"The purpose of the trench is to build a defensive system against vehicles used by Daesh (IS) terrorists who blow up car bombs," peshmerga spokesman Jabar Yawar said. "It is two meters deep and three wide. It is not everywhere, some areas don't need it. It is the military leadership that makes this decision," he said. Turkmen officials said their information showed that the planned path of the trench would include the town of Tuz Khurmatu in the Kurdistan region and leave that of Amerli out.

The trench has not been dug there yet but work has begun in areas around the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and in the Jalawla region near the Iranian border, they said. Mehdi Saadoun, an activist from the Turkmen Rescue Foundation, said the trench was being used to further Kurdish nationalist ambitions. — AFP



ASSALUYEH: A handout picture provided by the office of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani shows him attending the opening of the phase 15-16 of the South Pars gas field facilities in the southern Iranian port town. — AFP

ROUHANI PROMISES A 'YEAR OF PROSPERITY'

TEHRAN: President Hassan Rouhani pledged yesterday that Iran was about to enter "a year of economic prosperity", with sanctions lifted, and said his government had delivered on its promises. His comments referred to last July's nuclear deal with world powers that is finally expected to be implemented soon, possibly within days.

Speaking near Bushehr, a southern port city on the Gulf, Rouhani, a moderate cleric, also drew attention to elections on February 26 in which his allies are looking to make gains in parliament. "I promise the nation of Iran that next year, with sanctions behind us and by young people's efforts, will be a year of economic prosperity," he said in a speech broadcast on state television.

The government is this week expected to outline its budget for the next Persian year, which starts March 20, and like last year will do so at a time of plunging oil prices. "This government is running the country with \$30 oil and not with \$147 dollar oil," he said, comparing the cur-

rent price of crude to its value during the era of his hard line predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"The government is running the country under sanctions not under normal circumstances. God willing, in the coming days we will witness a wrapping up of the sanctions scroll in this country," Rouhani said his cabinet "was proud to have been able to curb inflation despite all difficulties" and said the economy will be shown to have grown by the end of the current year.

Atomic activities

Inflation was more than 40 percent when Rouhani came to power in August 2013 but it has since fallen to 13 percent, according to the national statistics agency. On the back of the deal on Iran's nuclear program—the Islamic republic has always denied seeking a bomb but agreed to curbs on its atomic activities in return for sanctions relief—Rouhani wants to make

greater inroads in domestic policy.

If the president's allies poll well they could swing the balance of power away from conservatives in the 290-member parliament, potentially leading to social and political reforms he promised before being elected in 2013. But Rouhani has faced criticism from hardline groups about the nuclear deal, with opponents warning it could lead to "infiltration" by the United States and derailment of Iran's revolutionary principles.

The US led the nuclear talks, which also involved Britain, China, France, Russia and Germany. On the same day as the parliamentary polls, the electorate will pick 88 members for the Assembly of Experts, a committee of clerics that monitors the work of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Assembly has the power to dismiss Khamenei, who is 76 and has led the Islamic republic since 1989. But its more likely and most crucial role will be to pick his successor. — AFP