

YEMEN REBEL ROCKET KILLS POLICEMAN ON SAUDI BORDER

RIYADH: Rocket fire by Yemeni rebels killed a policeman and wounded a civilian on the Saudi side of the border, the civil defense department said late on Wednesday. They were the latest casualties inside the kingdom since Saudi Arabia began leading an Arab military coalition that intervened in its southern neighbor to support President

Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi in March 2015. At least 128 people have died in southern Saudi Arabia since the intervention began—some in border skirmishes, others in rocket fire.

Video footage circulating on social media showed shattered glass and a trail of blood at the entrance to a court building in Dhahran South that its posters said was the

aftermath of the Wednesday rocket strike. The building's front wall was pockmarked from shrapnel. A guard house appeared to have taken the brunt of the strike, and a policeman sat slumped and bloodied in his chair, apparently dead.

The death toll has been far higher on the other side of the border. More than 7,400

people have been killed in Yemen since the Saudi-led intervention began, including around 1,400 children, according to World Health Organization figures.

The UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, Jamie McGoldrick, said on Tuesday that the death toll was closer to 10,000.—AFP



GENEVA: UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura briefs the press after speaking to a group of Syrians holding a vigil to urge parties in the intra-Syrian negotiations to find a solution to the plight of detainees, abductees and missing persons, on the first day of a new round of Syria peace talks in Geneva yesterday.—AFP

UN ENVOY MEETS SYRIAN RIVALS

HOPES DIM FOR PEACE TALKS

GENEVA: The UN's Syria envoy launched consultations yesterday with rival sides in the six-year conflict, but hopes of breakthrough are clouded by persistent violence and deadlock over the country's political future. Staffan de Mistura began separate meetings with Syrian regime and opposition delegates in Geneva, notably to discuss the agenda and the format for the negotiations proper—the first UN-hosted peace talks in 10 months. The opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) said Wednesday that it wants direct negotiations with the regime, but both sides would have to agree. Neither regime delegation chief Bashar Al-Jafaari nor opposition team chief Nasr Al-Hariri spoke as they arrived at UN offices in the Swiss city.

De Mistura said he planned to host an opening meeting later in the day with both sides. On the eve of the talks—the fourth brokered by the United Nations and the first since April last year—Russia called on Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to stop bombing during the discussions. But just hours after rival delegations arrived, de Mistura admitted there was limited ground for progress. "Am I expecting a breakthrough? No, I am not expecting a breakthrough," the veteran diplomat said, noting that "momentum" toward further talks was likely the best that can be hoped for.

Call for direct negotiations

An HNC spokesman said the umbrella group wanted face-to-face discussions with government representatives. "We ask for direct negoti-

ations... It would save time and be proof of seriousness instead of negotiating in (separate) rooms," Salem Al-Meslet told AFP on Wednesday. During three previous rounds of talks in Geneva last year, the rivals never sat down at the same table, instead leaving de Mistura to shuttle between them.

This time, de Mistura has voiced hope that he will manage to bring the two sides together for direct talks. The ground—both in territory and diplomatically—has shifted since the last UN-sponsored talks broke up in April 2016, and the rebels are in a significantly weaker position. The army has recaptured the rebel bastion of eastern Aleppo and the United States, once staunchly opposed to Assad, has said it is reassessing every aspect of its Syria policy under President Donald Trump. But the toughest issues remain similar to those in the last round in April 2016.

Bloody message

The latest truce was brokered in late December by opposition supporter Turkey and regime-backer Russia ahead of separate negotiations in Kazakhstan that also involved Iran. The deal has reduced violence but fighting flared again this week including a government bombing campaign on rebel territory around Damascus. The HNC charged that Assad was trying to send "a bloody message" before the talks resume. A bitter dispute over Assad's fate also continues to divide the camps.

The HNC has insisted he must leave

office as part of any deal, while Damascus has said the president's future is not open for negotiation. De Mistura's office has said that the talks remain focused on "political transition". For the UN, that term can include a broad range of scenarios but the opposition sees it as implying Assad's removal. Forcing the Syrian president from power had been the stated goal of Barack Obama's administration but Trump's election has muddied the US stance.

Trump has said that defeating the Islamic State group is Washington's top priority in the region and that the US would be narrowly focused on American interests. On Thursday the US special representative to the Syrian crisis Michael Ratney was due to attend the opening ceremony, the US office at the UN in Geneva said. The UN envoy acknowledged that the change of leadership in Washington had injected new uncertainties into the peace process.

"I'm not criticizing, I'm not complaining," he told reporters but added that all camps were looking "forward to seeing what their strategy is." For the Syrian opposition there is urgency—this is the fourth round of UN-brokered talks, and violence which has killed more than 310,000 people over the last six years.

"We hope to see something achieved here in Geneva 4 because there is no way Syrians will be moving to Geneva 5 with this cost they are paying in Syria," said the HNC spokesman. "We hope to end it right now here."—AFP

MALI SOLDIERS, ARMED GROUPS HOLD FIRST JOINT PATROL IN NORTHERN TOWN

GAO, Mali: Malian soldiers staged their first joint patrol yesterday with members of rival armed groups in the town of Gao where Islamist militants killed more than 77 people last month in the deadliest such attack in the country's history. The long-awaited patrol is part of an initiative aimed at easing local tensions so that government forces can focus on fighting the militants. More such patrols are due over the next few weeks under the terms of a 2015 UN-brokered peace deal.

Hundreds of soldiers from Mali's army, France's operation Barkhane, the UN peacekeeping mission, the Tuareg separatist Coordination of Azawad Movements and pro-government militias took part in the patrol, a Reuters witness said. They moved through the town on foot and in pick-up trucks, starting at around 9.45 a.m. local time (0945 GMT) on a roughly 7-km route and met no resistance, the witness said.

The Jan 18 attack in Gao claimed by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb shows the difficulty faced by the government and international peacekeepers in combating militant Islamist groups, some with links to al Qaeda, based in the desert north. Gao is a town of 50,000 people on the banks of the Niger river, where the offices of the 13,000-strong UN mission in Mali, MINUSMA, were flattened by a truck bomb in December. A French-led military intervention in 2013 pushed insurgent groups back from northern Mali—a vast desert area they had taken the year before—but Islamist militants still conduct frequent attacks there.—Reuters

SOMALIA'S NEW PRESIDENT APPOINTS PRIME MINISTER

MOGADISHU: Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed has appointed a political newcomer as the prime minister just before he departed to Saudi Arabia for his first foreign trip since he was inaugurated. Somali-born Norwegian national Hassan Ali Khaire, the former executive Africa of the British energy explorer Soma Oil, was appointed as the new prime minister yesterday morning. Mohamed, who was inaugurated as president on Wednesday, also holds US citizenship. He was elected earlier this month in a step toward establishing Somalia's first fully functioning central government in a quarter-century.

The new president has vowed to make security a priority in a country where Somalia's homegrown Islamic extremist group, Al-Shabab, still carries out deadly attacks in the capital, Mogadishu, and elsewhere.—AP



MOGADISHU: Somalia's newly appointed Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire, also spelt Khaire, talks on the phone in Mogadishu yesterday.—AFP