

## DECLINE OF ANCIENT TRADE ROUTE DEEPENS YEMENI FOOD CRISIS

**SHARJAH:** Captains of small wooden dhows are carrying food and wares from the United Arab Emirates to war-torn Yemen. But supplies are falling even from this centuries-old Arabian sea route that is one of the last lifelines to a country on the brink of famine.

A two-year-old civil war has severely restricted the flow of food into the main Yemeni cargo ports of Hodeidah and Salif on the Red Sea, where all the large grain silos are located.

The small wooden boats sailing from souks in the UAE are moving small but vital supplies by making for the smaller ports to the south coast that are of little use to larger vessels - and often sidestepping military inspections that choke traffic by dropping anchor at secluded coves nearby.

The deals originate in the sprawling Al Ras Market, a collection of dusty alleyways near the Dubai Creek where an array of food and spices are on display including colourful sacks of Pakistani and Indian rice. The dhows - plying the ancient trade route that once carried the likes of pearls, frankincense and myrrh - supply 14,000 to 18,000 tons of foodstuffs a month to Yemen, according to traders. That represents a drop of about 30-40 percent over the past year because of problems with payment, as well as adverse sailing conditions.

"The Yemeni currency is destroyed, sometimes we can't get paid enough. We can only go once a month because the seas are too rough," said trader Mohammed Hassan, at a docking station at nearby Port Khaled in Sharjah "Sometimes we have to wait 40 days." The volumes of food carried on this route represent a small fraction of the supply to Yemen, which relies on imports for 90 percent of its food. But it has become increasingly important as fighting has raged, the economy has collapsed and Yemen has needed all the help it can get.

### Port damage

Thousands of people have been killed in the civil war pits the Iran-allied Houthi group against a Saudi-backed coalition - which includes the UAE - fighting to restore the government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The conflict has choked imports. Sixty percent of Yemenis, or 17 million people, are in "crisis" or "emergency" food situations, according to the United Nations. While vessels seeking access to Houthi-held areas must face inspections for smuggled weapons, the government-controlled south has less restrictions. Food imports into Hodeidah have fallen relentlessly, with only a few ships arriving each week - compared with dozens before the war - and more shipping lines pulling out due to the growing risks, according to aid and shipping sources.

In recent weeks damage to infrastructure in the neighboring port of Salif has also cut food deliveries, aid officials said. "The country is living on its reserves," said Robert Mardini, International Committee of the Red Cross regional director for the Near and Middle East in Geneva this week.

"There is a lack of liquidity, no payment of salaries, which means that the spending power has collapsed and that the price of food is soaring whenever it is available."

### 'Pay thugs'

UAE-based dhow captains avoid these snarl-ups by steering clear of the big Red Sea ports and instead ply their trade to the south, often docking at informal inlets. The average journey takes about five to eight days, with the boats capable of taking up to 2,000 tons of goods, still small fry compared with cargo ships that could provide more relief to one of the poorest and most unstable countries in the world. —Reuters



**DAMASCUS:** A general view shows smoke rising from buildings following an air strike on Jobar, a rebel-held district on the eastern outskirts of the Syrian capital Damascus yesterday. —AFP

## US-BACKED SYRIAN FIGHTERS REACH IS-HELD DAM IN NORTH PUSH TOWARDS TISHRIN DAM TO LIBERATE RAQQA

**BEIRUT:** US-backed Syrian fighters reached a major dam held by the Islamic State group in northern Syria yesterday as Syria's UN ambassador said hundreds of American personnel are "invading my country," insisting that any effort to liberate the city of Raqqa - the de facto capital of the Islamic State group - should be done in coordination with the Damascus government.

The push toward the Tishrin Dam came three days after US aircraft ferried Syrian Kurdish fighters and allies behind IS lines to spearhead a major ground assault on the IS-held town of Tabqa where the dam is located. Tabqa is west of the city of Raqqa. Cihan Sheikh Ehmed, the spokeswoman for the Syrian Democratic Forces, said the fighting is ongoing at the entrance of the dam, adding that there have been casualties among IS fighters. She gave no further details.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said SDF fighters are marching slowly toward the buildings of the Tishrin Dam because of mines and explosives planted by IS.

To the east of Raqqa, SDF fighters clashed with IS gunmen inside the village of Karama, according to the Observatory and Mohammed Khedhr of Sound and Picture Organization, which documents IS violations. Karama is about 15 kilometers (10 miles) east of Raqqa, making it a strategic village to capture.

The attacks on the Tabqa and Karama were ongoing under the cover of airstrikes by the US-led coalition, according to the activists.

SDF fighters have been on the offensive since November under the cover of airstrikes by the US-led coalition with the aim of eventually surrounding Raqqa and storming it. In France, the country's defense minister said the campaign by international forces to take back IS' de facto capital will start in the coming days. Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Raqqa is a "major objective" for the US-led coalition trying to quash IS extremists in Syria and Iraq.

Le Drian spoke on CNEWS television yesterday. He said: "Today we can say that Raqqa is encircled and that the bat-

tle will begin in the coming days. It will be a very hard battle but it will be an essential battle." As the coalition advances in its battle to retake the IS stronghold of Mosul in Iraq, the US has been intensifying involvement in Syria's conflict ahead of the battle for Raqqa.

In Geneva, where peace talks between the Syrian government and opposition resumed yesterday, Syria's ambassador to the UN Bashar Al-Ja'afari insisted that "American warplanes" had bombed a school in the village of Mansourah, west of Raqqa, a day earlier and were responsible for the deaths of 237 civilians among some 500 people fleeing Raqqa. He did not elaborate.

Al-Ja'afari said any military presence in Syria without government approval was "illegitimate." Using the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State group, he said: "Those who are truly fighting Daesh are the Syrian Army with the help of our allies from Russia and Iran."

The US has deployed more than 700 advisers, marines and Rangers to Syria to support fighters battling Islamic State militants. —AP

## AUB IN BEIRUT SETTLES US LAWSUIT FOR \$700,000

**BEIRUT:** American University of Beirut, a recipient of US government aid, has agreed to pay \$700,000 to settle a civil lawsuit over accusations that it assisted three organizations linked to the militant group Hezbollah, federal prosecutors said. As part of its deal with the US Attorney's Office in Manhattan, a party to the lawsuit, the university also agreed to revise its policies, prosecutors said in a statement on Thursday. The agreement resolved a case originally filed under seal by an unnamed complainant. American University of Beirut receives funding from the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Acting Manhattan US Attorney Joon Kim said in the statement, "For years, the American University of Beirut accepted grant money from USAID, but failed to take reasonable steps to ensure against providing material support to entities on the Treasury Department's prohibited list." The US Attorney's Office said the university in the Lebanese capital admitted to training representatives of Al-Nour Radio and Al-Manar TV, media groups that the US Treasury Department lists as branches of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

Between 2007 and 2009 the university provided the training in workshops to representatives

from Al-Nour and Al-Manar, who were allowed to participate among a larger group of journalists, a statement from the US Attorney's Office said.

For instance, one workshop was titled "Citizen/Online Journalism" and provided instruction on how to produce blogs, videos and podcasts, prosecutors said. Federal prosecutors said the university used its website to connect students with Jihad Al-Binaa, another organization that the US Treasury Department has said is linked to Hezbollah. American University of Beirut (AUB) said in a statement on Friday that its conduct had been neither "knowing, intentional or

reckless." "AUB is pleased to have reached the settlement and looks forward to continuing to provide a world-class education to students of all backgrounds," the statement said. The university, founded in 1866, centers its teaching on the American liberal arts tradition. "With today's settlement, the university is being made to pay a financial penalty for its conduct, and importantly, it has admitted to its conduct and agreed to put proper precautions in place to ensure that it does not happen again," Kim said in a statement. The \$700,000 penalty levied on the university will be paid to the US government. —Reuters