

International

Yemen's warring parties agree Hodeida ceasefire at UN talks

New round of talks scheduled in January

RIMBO: UN chief Antonio Guterres announced yesterday a series of breakthroughs in peace talks with the warring parties in Yemen, including a ceasefire for a vital port. In a highly symbolic gesture on the seventh and final day of the UN-brokered peace talks in Sweden, Yemeni Foreign Minister Khaled al-Yamani and rebel negotiator Mohammed Abdelsalam shook hands to loud applause—but both later voiced skepticism in separate press conferences.

If implemented, the deal on the Hodeida port, a key gateway for aid and food imports to a country where 14 million people stand at the brink of famine, would mark a major turning point after four years of devastating war. But a number of key issues remain unresolved. A new round of talks is scheduled for the end of January, with analysts predicting the US will continue to up the pressure on ally Saudi Arabia to end the conflict.

The fighting has triggered what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with one child dying every 10 minutes of preventable causes. International pressure has been mounting to halt the fighting between the Iran-linked Huthis and the government of Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi, backed by Saudi Arabia and its military allies.

Withdrawal within days

Guterres, who flew in to Sweden late Wednesday, announced that the government and Huthi rebels had agreed a ceasefire in the port of Hodeida. The UN will play a "leading

role" in monitoring the Red Sea port, which is under rebel control, and facilitate aid access for the civilian population. "There is a ceasefire declared for the whole governorate of Hodeida in the agreement and there will be both from the city and the harbor a withdrawal of all forces," Guterres told reporters.

UN special envoy Martin Griffiths, who was due to brief the Security Council on Yemen on Friday, said the pullout should take place "within days". The rivals have also reached a "mutual understanding" on Yemen's third city of Taiz, the scene of some of the most intense battles in the conflict, to facilitate the delivery of aid. But no deal has been reached on the future of the airport in the capital Sanaa or on economic measures needed to spare the population from further hunger.

More than expected

The January talks will focus on a framework for negotiations in a political process, which Guterres said was the only solution to the conflict. Foreign Minister Khaled al-Yamani told reporters the deals were the biggest step forward since the outbreak of the war but remained "hypothetical". Lead rebel negotiator said the Huthis had made "major concessions" on Hodeida. The rebels hold both Hodeida and the capital Sanaa while the Saudi led-military coalition controls Yemen's maritime borders and airspace.

Sanaa airport has been closed to commercial flights for nearly three years and Griffiths said its fate would be discussed at the next



RIMBO: The United Nations' Secretary General Antonio Guterres, center, holds a press conference together with Sweden's Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallstrom, right, and UN special envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths following peace consultations taking place at Johannesberg Castle in Rimbo, north of Stockholm, Sweden. — AFP

round. Analysts said the Rimbo talks progressed better than anticipated, two years after negotiations collapsed with no breakthrough after three months. "The Sweden talks have achieved more than anyone expected," the International Crisis Group told AFP. "We have heard a different tone from the government of Yemen in these talks, and

US pressure has clearly focused minds in the Gulf." Anger at the human cost of the war, as well as outrage over the October killing of US-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, has prompted the international community to take a harder line over the Yemen war, and particularly the role of the Saudi-led coalition. — AFP

Mali says foiled New Year's Eve terror attacks

BAMAKO: A four-man "terrorist cell" suspected of planning New Year's Eve attacks in Mali, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso has been dismantled by Malian intelligence services, a statement said on Wednesday. The suspects, two from Burkina, one from Mali and one from Ivory Coast, who were arrested last week, earlier "took part in the double attack on March 2 in Ouagadougou" as well as the abduction of a Colombian nun in February 2017 in southern Mali, it said.

They were "apprehended as they were preparing to carry out attacks" on the Malian capital Bamako, the Burkina Faso capital Ouagadougou and the Ivory Coast capital Abidjan "during New Year's Eve celebrations", the statement said. Eight soldiers were killed and scores injured in the twin attacks on Ouagadougou on March 2. France helped Malian forces stave off a jihadist insurgency that took control of large parts of northern Mali in 2012, but swathes of the country remain out of the government's control.

The former colonial ruler has deployed the 4,500-member Barkhane force in the region to repel attacks and stem insurgency. In Burkina Faso, bordering Mali and Niger, authorities have been battling jihadist attacks over the last three years. Attacks initially began in the north of the country but have since spread to the east, near the border with Togo and Benin. According to a report in late September, jihadist attacks have claimed 229 lives in the country since 2015. —AFP

Pentagon cautions Turkey over new operation against Syria Kurds

ANKARA: Any unilateral military action in northern Syria would be "unacceptable", the Pentagon said Wednesday after Turkey announced it would launch an operation against a US-backed Kurdish militia. The warning came after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey would soon begin a mission targeting the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers a "terrorist" group. "We will start an operation to free the east of the Euphrates from the separatist terrorist organization in the next few days," Erdogan said during a speech in Ankara, referring to territory held by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

American forces have worked closely with the YPG under the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance, which has played a key role in the war against the Islamic State (IS) extremist group. The Pentagon has repeatedly warned that any fighting between the Turks and the SDF is a dangerous distraction from the core US mission in Syria of fighting IS. Pentagon spokesman Commander Sean Robertson said any unilateral military action in northeast Syria would be a "grave concern", as it could potentially jeopardize US troops working with the SDF in the region.

"We would find any such actions unacceptable," he said in a statement. Turkey says the YPG is a "terrorist offshoot" of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984. PKK is black-listed as a terror group by Ankara and its Western allies. "The target is never American soldiers but terrorist organisation members active in the region," Erdogan told the audience at a defence industry summit.

American forces are with the SDF east of the Euphrates as well as in the flashpoint city of Manbij, which is west of the river. "We should not and cannot allow (IS) to breathe at this critical point or we will jeopardize the significant gains we have made alongside our coalition partners and risk allowing (IS) to resurge," Robertson said. The YPG also said a Turkish offensive would be to the benefit of IS.

"The (Turkish) threats coincide with the advance of our forces against the terrorists, this time with the entrance into the town of Hajin," YPG spokesman Nuri Mahmud said. The SDF launched an offensive on September 10 to expel IS from the Hajin pocket, on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River close to the Iraqi border. "Any attack on the north of Syria will have a direct impact on the battle of Hajin. The forces who are fighting (there) will return to defend their areas and their families," Mahmud said.

Washington's relationship with the YPG, seen as a key ally, is one of the main sources of tensions between the United States and NATO member Turkey. Ankara has repeatedly lambasted Washington for providing military support to the Kurdish militia. Erdogan has previously threatened to attack areas held by the YPG. In a bid to avoid any clash, the NATO allies agreed a "roadmap" for Manbij in June. —AFP