

International

Turkey, Iran vow to work closer on Syria after US announcement

‘Syria’s territorial integrity must be respected by all sides’

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani yesterday vowed to work closer to end the fighting in Syria. But the two leaders made no comment on US President Donald Trump’s shock announcement that he was pulling US troops out of the war-ravaged nation.

“There are many steps that Turkey and Iran can take together to stop the fighting in the region and to establish peace,” said Erdogan, without elaborating, at a joint news conference with Rouhani in Ankara. “Syria’s territorial integrity must be respected by all sides. Both countries are of the same opinion regarding this,” Rouhani said in translated remarks. The two leaders’ meeting had been arranged before Trump’s announcement about the US pull-out, a move already welcomed on Thursday by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Some Western analysts consider the US presence a key counterweight to Iranian influence in the region. Ankara has repeatedly called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s ouster and supported Syrian opposition fighters. Tehran and Moscow meanwhile are Damascus’s strongest allies and have helped to turn the war in Assad’s favor. Turkey, despite its differences with Iran and Russia over Syria, has worked closely with both countries to find a political solution to the war through the Astana

process launched last year. As part of the peace talks which began in the Kazakh capital, Turkey, Iran and Russia agreed four “de-escalation” zones in Syria. All of those except the northwestern province of Idlib have been retaken by Damascus. At yesterday’s news conference, Rouhani said Turkey and Iran would continue their cooperation under the Astana peace process.

Turkey ‘stands by Iran’

Erdogan threatened last week to launch a new operation east of the Euphrates in northern Syria against the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG). This US-backed Kurdish militia is viewed by Ankara as a “terrorist offshoot” of Kurdish insurgents inside Turkey. There are around 2,000 US forces in Syria, most of them on a train-and-advise mission helping the YPG under the banner of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance fighting against the Islamic State extremist group.

Turkey and Iran, regional rivals for centuries, have in recent times focused on developing a pragmatic relationship and boosting trade. Erdogan yesterday repeated Turkey’s criticism of the US this year pulling out of the nuclear deal with Iran and imposing new sanctions on the Islamic republic. “I want to stress once more than we (Turkey) do not



ANKARA: Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani (L) and Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) attend a joint press conference at the Turkish presidential complex. — AFP

support these decisions and that American’s sanctions against Iran increase the risks to the region’s safety,” he said, adding that Turkey would “stand by the Iranian people”.

The deal envisaged sanctions on Iran being lifted in return for it accepting inspections by the UN atomic watchdog and limits on its nuclear activities. — AFP

‘Uneasy calm’ in Yemen’s Hodeida as combatants await UN truce team

HODEIDA: An uneasy calm returned to the battleground Yemeni city of Hodeida yesterday after further overnight skirmishes as the warring parties await the promised deployment of UN staff to oversee a hard-won but fragile truce. The ceasefire in the Red Sea port city which is a vital aid lifeline for millions at risk of starvation is the centrepiece of a peace push that is seen as the best chance yet of ending four years of devastating conflict.

Military officials and residents have reported intermittent fighting between Saudi-backed government forces and Houthi Shiite rebels since the UN-brokered ceasefire came into effect in the Red Sea port city on Tuesday. A pro-government official told AFP that four loyalists were wounded in a firefight on Wednesday night. “The exchange of fire lasted for about half an hour, and there is an uneasy calm this morning,” he said.

Residents reached by telephone confirmed to AFP that there was no fighting yesterday morning. The official added there has been intermittent fighting on a number of battlefronts in Hodeida province, including the districts of Hays and Al-Tuhayta. Pro-government forces and Houthi rebels accused each other on Thursday of breaching the ceasefire agreed at talks in Sweden earlier this month. The rebel-run Saba news agency said loyalists targeted a “number of neighborhoods in the city” overnight.

‘Breathing down the neck’

UN observers are due in Yemen to head up monitoring teams made up of government and rebel representatives tasked with overseeing the implementation of the UN-brokered ceasefire,

under the auspices of a Redeployment Coordination Committee. The committee’s UN chair, Patrick Cammaert, convened its first meeting by videoconference from New York on Wednesday “to discuss the general outlines of its work, including agreement of a code of conduct”, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

UN chief Antonio Guterres was “breathing down the neck” of officials to make sure the UN observers are deployed as soon as possible, Dujarric said. He added that Cammaert will head on Thursday to Jordan from where he will travel to the rebel-held capital Sanaa and Hodeida. A UN official told AFP that he was expected in Amman on Friday.

“His departure to Yemen depends on logistics arrangements and flight availability,” the official, who requested anonymity, said. Brigadier General Ahmed al-Kokbani, a Yemeni government representative on the committee, told AFP that the videoconference with Cammaert covered the bases of the committee’s mission. “Cammaert asked members of the team to work diligently in calming the situation and to reject any violations,” he said.

The Saudi-led coalition said Wednesday that the hard-won ceasefire agreement will collapse if rebel violations persist and the United Nations does not intervene. The committee’s observers are due to oversee the withdrawal of the warring parties from Hodeida, including a rebel pullout from the city’s docks that are the entry point for 80 percent of Yemeni imports and nearly all UN-supervised humanitarian aid.

Cammaert is due to report back to the Security Council on the situation on the ground on a weekly basis. According to the International Crisis Group, the “odds are stacked against” UN envoy Martin Griffiths and his team. “The Hodeida agreement came about in a rush, and critics have assailed it as too vague and open to interpretation,” it said in a statement on Wednesday. “Griffiths will now have to build on this imperfect but highly welcome and overdue agreement, which, as Crisis Group has argued, the UN Security Council should endorse via a new resolution. “Without strong international support, the Hodeida ceasefire will falter.” — AFP

Syria Kurds say to keep up anti-IS fight

RAS AL-AIN: Syrian Kurdish forces said yesterday they will keep fighting the Islamic State group in eastern Syria unless they come under Turkish attack, after their US allies announced their withdrawal. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) stressed they would freeze operations if Turkey attacked, as widely expected after a pullout of US forces which have served as a buffer.

“The Hajin battles continues,” said Mustafa Bali, a spokesman for the Kurdish-dominated force, referring to the main front against IS in the Euphrates Valley. “The US decision is just a decision and does not yet affect the situation on the ground,” Bali told AFP. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, fighting was ongoing yesterday.

Backed by air strikes from the US-led coalition, SDF forces last week seized Hajin, the largest village in the last pocket of territory still controlled by IS in eastern Syria. Hundreds of die-hard jihadists, however, have regrouped in Sousa and Al-Shaafa, the last two hubs in the ever-shrinking rump of the group’s once sprawling “caliphate”. “We have previously said that, if attacked, we would dedicate ourselves to the defense of our land,” Bali said.

“The scenario of a halt in the anti-terrorist battle is tied to Turkish threats,” the SDF spokesman added. He also hinted the US pullout, which many Kurds see as a betrayal, could make Syria’s autonomous Kurdish administration less inclined to retain custody of detained IS fighters whom Western countries do not want to return home. — AFP