

International

Assad defies United States, presses assault in SW Syria

Russian envoy says Moscow helping recover south

BEIRUT: Syrian government helicopters dropped barrel bombs on opposition areas of the country's southwest on Friday for the first time in a year, a war monitor and rebel officials said, in defiance of US demands that President Bashar al-Assad halt the assault. Assad has sworn to recapture the area bordering Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and the army this week began ramping up an assault there, threatening a "de-escalation" zone agreed upon by the United States and Russia last year.

The United States on Thursday reiterated its demand that the zone be respected, warning Assad and his Russian allies of "serious repercussions" of violations. It accused Damascus of initiating air strikes, artillery and rocket attacks. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday demanded an immediate end to military escalation in southwestern Syria, saying he was "concerned at the significant risks these offensives pose to regional security," a spokesman for the U.N. chief said.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said earlier on Friday that the Syrian military escalation "unambiguously violates" the de-escalation arrangement and that over 11,000 people had already been displaced. "Russia will ultimately bear responsibility for any further escalations in Syria," Haley said in a statement. A major offensive would risk a wider escalation that could draw the United States deeper into the war.

The southwest is of strategic concern to US-allied Israel, which has this year stepped up attacks on Iran-backed militia allied to Assad. The barrel bombs targeted a cluster of rebel-held towns including Busra al-Harir northeast of Deraa city, where the government attack threatens to bisect a finger of rebel ground jutting northwards into land held by the government. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said

Syrian government helicopters had dropped more than 12 barrel bombs on the area, causing damage, but no reported deaths.

Abu Bakr al-Hassan, spokesman for the rebel group Jaish al-Thawra, which fights under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), said the munitions had been dropped on three towns and villages and that war planes had hit another. "I believe (the bombardment) is testing two things: the steadfastness of the FSA fighters and the degree of US commitment to the de-escalation agreement in the south," he told Reuters.

Syrian state television said on Friday that army units had targeted "lair and movements of terrorists" in the area. The Syrian government has denied using so-called barrel bombs - containers filled with explosive material that are dropped from helicopters and which cannot be accurately aimed. However, United Nations investigators have extensively documented its use of them during the conflict. While government forces have made heavy use of artillery and rockets in the assault, they have yet to draw on the kind of air power that was critical to the recovery of

other rebel-held areas. Russian warplanes have yet to take part, rebels say.

Still, Russia's Ambassador to Lebanon Alexander Zasytkin was quoted as saying that Russia was helping Damascus to recover the south. "The Syrian army now, with support from Russian forces, is recovering its land in the south and restoring the authority of the Syrian state," Zasytkin told the pro-Hezbollah newspaper al-Akhbar. "Israel has no justification to carry out any action that obstructs the fight against terrorism," he added.

Hostile force

A Syrian rebel commander in the south accused Iran of trying to torpedo the de-escalation agreement and vowed fierce resistance. "We possess

“Russia to bear responsibility for escalations in Syria”

Saudi Arabia's jailed trailblazers

DUBAI: Saudi authorities have in the past two months detained at least 16 people, including several identified as women's rights activists, on accusations of treason. The crackdown comes even as the kingdom breaks with long-held restrictions on women's lives, preparing to lift the world's only ban on female motorists today.

That was a goal some of the detainees had championed for decades, but credit for the policy change has gone to young Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, architect of an aggressively marketed reform package. Some of those detained have since been released. But for Saudi activists, their arrests confirmed that even if the monarchy dictates the easing of some social restrictions, it will resist granting any modicum of democracy. Three of the most prominent figures who continue to languish in detention are Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Yousef, and Ibrahim al-Modaimagh.

Loujain al-Hathloul

Loujain al-Hathloul was among a group of women's rights activists arrested in mid-May. The 28-year-old has long campaigned for women to be able to drive and an end to the kingdom's notorious guardianship system, which requires women to get permission from male relatives for many decisions. This was not the first time

Hathloul, from the conservative central region of Al-Qassim, has been behind bars.

Saudi authorities put her in juvenile detention in late 2014 when she tried to drive into the kingdom from the neighboring United Arab Emirates. Hathloul was freed 73 days later following an international campaign. Her most recent arrest triggered a smear campaign in the pro-government press, which printed her photo along with those of fellow feminists, branding them "traitors". Another activist, who declined to be named over fears for her family's safety, said that Hathloul represented Saudi Arabia's modern feminists.

"Loujain is the young rebel woman from Al-Qassim who embodies global values... and calls out the (lies) of the state," she said. On May 19, Hathloul's face was printed on the cover of Saudi Arabia's Al-Jazirah newspaper, alongside fellow activist Aziza al-Yousef, with the headline: "Your betrayal has failed".

Aziza al-Yousef

If Loujain al-Hathloul represents Saudi Arabia's young, outward-looking feminists, fellow activists say Aziza al-Yousef embodies an older generation of trailblazers. Yousef, 61, was one of a small number of women who responded to calls to defy the kingdom's driving ban in 2013 and again in 2014. The retired university professor in 2016 attempted to deliver a petition to the Royal Court, signed by thousands of Saudis, demanding an end to the guardianship system that gives men control over their female relatives' rights to study, marriage and travel.—AFP



HODEIDAH: A Yemeni fighter from the Amalqa Brigades walks carrying a package along a road during the offensive to seize the Red Sea port city of Hodeidah from Iran-backed Huthi rebels, on its southern outskirts near the airport.—AFP

cause a catastrophe in the country already undergoing the world's most urgent humanitarian crisis. The port is the main lifeline for 22 million people who depend on aid, including 8.4 millions on the verge of starvation. "We're seeing high levels of malnutrition on the ground," Lise Grande, the UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen told Reuters on Friday.

"Of the main issues we are concerned about, none is more significant right now than the possibility of a cholera outbreak," she added. "We could see hundreds of thousands of people affected." Hodeidah itself is home to 600,000 people more directly in the line of fire. Since 2015, Hodeidah residents have used privately-owned generators to produce electricity. But this month's offensive has left them struggling to obtain the necessary diesel oil.—Reuters



ABU AL-ZUHUR: A Syrian woman helps a girl ride on a truck to join a convoy returning displaced people home into government-controlled territory at Abu al-Zuhur checkpoint in the western countryside of Idlib province.—Reuters

many weapons," said Colonel Nassim Abu Arra, commander of the Youth of Sunna Forces group. Rebels in the southwest have received support, including arms from Assad's foreign foes during the seven-year-long war.

Analysts of the conflict believe this support continued even after U.S. President Donald Trump decided last year to shut down a military aid program run by the Central Intelligence Agency, though it may have been scaled back. Assad has this year recaptured the last remaining enclaves of insurgent territory near the capital Damascus and the city of Homs, including the densely populated eastern Ghouta region.

But there are still large areas outside his control.

Apart from the southwest, the rebels hold a swathe of northwest Syria. Insurgent groups backed by Turkey also hold parts of the northern border area. And the quarter of Syria east of the Euphrates is controlled by an alliance of Kurdish and Arab militias supported by the United States. The United States also has a base at Tanf, near Syria's borders with Iraq and Jordan, which controls the Damascus-Baghdad highway.

On Thursday a commander in the regional alliance backing Assad said a US strike had killed a Syrian army officer near Tanf. The Pentagon, however, said a US-backed Syrian rebel group had engaged "an unidentified hostile force" near Tanf, without casualties on either side.—Reuters

Australian Embassy Kuwait Job Vacancy

Driver and Mandoub (LE 2)

Closing date for applications is 3 July 2018

The Australian Embassy Kuwait is looking for an experienced Mandoub and Driver.

The position provides official transport for the Ambassador, Embassy staff and official visitors as well as performs a full range of Mandoub duties including liaison with government ministries and local authorities on protocol matters.

The applicant must hold a valid driver's licence with a proven safety record, and have extensive knowledge of road systems in Kuwait.

You must have good communication and organisational skills, and a willingness to work flexible hours and undertake overtime as required.

The applicant should be an experienced Mandoub and be proficient in written and spoken Arabic and English.

For the full position description, including application requirements please visit the Australian Embassy website at www.kuwait.embassy.gov.au

Residents suffer as Hodeidah battle grinds on

DUBAI: Residents unable to flee Hodeidah face constant bombardment, lack of clean water and power cuts as an Arab coalition battles to capture Yemen's main port from Iran-aligned Houthis in the biggest battle of a three-year war. "We hear loud explosions all the time," Assem Mohammed, a 30-year-old pharmacist, said by telephone. "We haven't had water for three days."

Mohammed, with his wife and six-month-old daughter, are among a dwindling number of residents who have remained in Hawak district, a neighborhood sandwiched between the airport, captured this week by the coalition, and the sea port, the latest target of the military offensive. Drivers transporting fleeing residents out of Hodeidah have more than doubled their fares since the battle began, while the hospital where Mohammed works has threatened employees with dismissal if they are absent for long periods.

"Electricity has also been cut in most of the city since three days, and in some neighborhoods for a week," he said. He blamed the water shortage on damage to pipes that relief workers say has been caused by the Houthis digging trenches. Houthi officials could not immediately be reached for comment. The alliance of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched its assault on Hodeidah last week in an effort to cut the Houthi fighters who control the capital and most populated areas off from the outside world.

The United Nations fears that the campaign could