

UN BLAMES SAUDI-LED FORCES FOR MOST YEMEN DEATHS

SANAA: The Saudi-led coalition bombing Yemen for one year has caused the vast majority of civilian deaths in the conflict, the UN rights chief said yesterday, warning international crimes may have been committed.

During its campaign against Iran-backed rebels in Yemen there have been repeated criticisms that coalition air strikes have not done enough to avoid non-military targets. Rights groups have also raised concerns about civilian casualties caused by the Houthi rebels, but United Nations human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein said the coalition bore the greatest responsibility. "Looking at the figures, it would seem that the coalition is responsible for twice as many civilian casualties as all other forces put together, virtually all as a result of air strikes," Zeid said in a statement.

"We are possibly looking at the commission of international crimes by members of the coalition."

His office said it had tallied just under 9,000 civilian casualties, including 3,218 killed, since the coalition on March 26 last year intervened to support President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi after rebels seized large parts of Yemen including the capital Sanaa. The Houthis are allied with elite troops loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Zeid voiced particular alarm at two air strikes on a market this week in northern Yemen's rebel-held Hajja province.

'Repeated failure'

The UN children's agency on Thursday put the death toll from those strikes at 119, and Zeid's office said Friday that 106 of those killed in the crowded market were civilians, including 24 children.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon demanded an investigation into the incident, one of the deadliest yet

in the war. During an exclusive interview on Wednesday the coalition spokesman, Brigadier General Ahmed Al-Assiri, told AFP the strikes targeted "a militia gathering", the term he uses to describe Houthis. Assiri said an independent panel was being formed nationally to examine charges of possible abuses against civilians in the war. The alliance says it does not aim at civilians, and that targeting is verified many times to ensure non-combatants will not be killed.

Zeid's office condemned "the repeated failure of the coalition forces to take effective actions to prevent the recurrence of such incidents, and to publish transparent, independent investigations into those that have already occurred." Assiri said the coalition itself has investigated various incidents and some of the findings have been released. —AFP



WEST BANK: Israeli soldiers and police officers examine the scene of an attack in the Gush Etzion junction in the West Bank yesterday. The Israeli military said a Palestinian tried to attack soldiers with a knife in the West Bank before he was shot and killed by forces at the scene. —AP

US HAILS SAUDI MOVE TO WIND DOWN YEMEN CAMPAIGN

TRIBAL MEDIATION BRINGS CALM TO SAUDI-YEMEN BORDER

SANAA: As tribal mediation brings calm to the Saudi-Yemen border after a nearly year-long campaign led by Riyadh against Yemeni rebels, Washington has welcomed talk of an end to the coalition's major combat. The United Nations yesterday echoed US concerns over non-military casualties, saying the alliance had caused the vast majority of civilian deaths in the war.

"We have expressed our concerns about the loss of innocent life in Yemen. The violence there that is plaguing that country has caught too many innocent civilians in the crossfire," White House spokesman Josh Earnest said on Thursday. He said "we would welcome and do welcome" a statement from the coalition spokesman, Brigadier General Ahmed Al-Assiri, who told AFP in an exclusive interview that the coalition is "in the end of the major combat phase". This would be fol-

lowed by security stabilisation and then reconstruction, Assiri said.

The coalition intervened on March 26 last year to support President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi after rebels seized large parts of Yemen including the capital Sanaa. Supported by coalition air strikes and some ground troops, anti-rebel forces have retaken territory, including much of the south. But they have failed to dislodge the Shiite Huthi rebels from Sanaa or to completely remove them from the country's third city Tazeh where intense battles continue.

Mustafa Alani, of the independent Gulf Research Centre, said that although fighting is not necessarily going to finish by March 26 "the operation is basically reaching its end."

He said the coalition is keen "not to go beyond that psychological date." Rights

groups have raised concerns about civilian casualties caused by the coalition as well as by the Houthis, who are allied with elite troops loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. There have been repeated criticisms that coalition air strikes have not done enough to avoid non-military targets. "Looking at the figures, it would seem that the coalition is responsible for twice as many civilian casualties as all other forces put together," UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein said in a statement. The United Nations said 119 people were killed in air strikes on a market in the rebel-held northern province of Hajja on Tuesday. Zeid's office said 106 of those killed were civilians, including 24 children. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon demanded an investigation into the incident, one of the deadliest yet in the war. —AFP

SYRIAN REBELS CONDEMN KURDISH-LED MOVES TOWARDS AUTONOMY

BEIRUT: Syrian rebel factions yesterday condemned a declaration of federalism in Kurdish-controlled regions of northern Syria and vowed to resist it by force, a day after those areas voted to seek autonomy. A statement from a number of Syrian insurgent groups, some of whom are represented in the main opposition body that is participating in peace talks, said the federalism announcement was a "project to divide" Syria.

Syria's Kurdish-controlled northern regions voted on Thursday to seek autonomy under a federal system, drawing rebukes from the main opposition's High Negotiations Committee, the Damascus government, Turkey and Washington. The rebel statement said this was "exploitation" of the Syrian uprising that began five years ago and descended into civil war, and condemned what it said were attempts by "groups... which took control of parts of Syrian land to establish their racial, nationalist and sectarian entities".

It compared Kurdish groups to Islamic State, and said the YPG militia and its political arm the PYD were terrorists. The YPG, which has been backed by Washington in its fight against IS, has beaten back the jihadists to control swathes of northern Syria, but the PYD has so far been excluded from peace talks that began this week in Geneva.

The vote to unite three Kurdish-controlled provinces in a federal system appears aimed at creating a self-run entity within Syria, a status that Kurds have enjoyed in neighbouring Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The three Kurdish-controlled regions agreed at a conference in Rmeilan in northeast Syria to establish the self-administered "federal democratic system of Rojava - Northern Syria", officials announced. Rojava is the Kurdish name for north Syria. —Reuters



A Syrian refugee girl adjusts her headscarf while she plays with another girl at an informal tented settlement near the Syrian border on the outskirts of Mafraq, Jordan, yesterday. —AP