

International

Turkish threat looms as Syria 'safe zone' deadline expires

Ankara impatient in Syria, but wary of angering Washington

ISTANBUL: Turkey's deadline to jointly establish a "safe zone" with the United States in northern Syria by the end of September has passed, leaving the threat of unilateral military intervention by Ankara hanging over the region. President Tayyip Erdogan told the United Nations last week he wanted to set up the zone along 480 km of border and reaching 30 km inside Syria.

Under the Turkish plan, up to 2 million Syrian refugees would be settled in the safe zone, with international support. If implemented, the project could halve the number of Syrian refugees sheltering in Turkey from Syria's eight-year conflict, and drive the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia - which Ankara says is a terrorist group threatening its security - from the border.

Expanding Turkey's military presence in Syria would also boost its weight among powers such as the United States, Russia and Iran which all seek to shape Syria's political future, reflecting a mantra of Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu that Ankara should be "strong both at the table and in the field". But Turkey's new emphasis on the refugee transfer, which would move large numbers of Sunni Arab Syrians into a traditionally Kurdish heartland, could face resistance from allies opposed to changing the region's demographic balance.

The United States agreed to the safe zone as a way to protect its Kurdish allies in Syria and address Turkish concerns about the border, after President Donald Trump announced plans last year to abruptly withdraw 2,000 US special forces troops that helped Kurdish

fighters battle Islamic State. But the US troops have yet to leave and Washington and Ankara have so far failed to agree on details. Turkey has accused the United States of dragging its feet and warned that it would take matters into its own hands.

Diplomats, analysts and Turkey's main opposition CHP party say Erdogan would be unwilling to anger the United States with a full-scale military incursion when Ankara's relations with Washington are already under strain. However Turkey has already launched two military incursions into northern Syria in the last three years and has stationed troops into the rebel-held Idlib region. It says preparations for another operation are complete.

The National Security Council, which includes Turkey's political and military leadership, said late on Monday that Turkey would strengthen efforts to set up the zone so that Syrian refugees could return as soon as possible. Erdogan has also warned the European Union that Turkey, which has received billions of euros in return for chocking off the flow of Syrian migrants into Europe in 2016, could "open the gates" once again if it does not get more funding.

Ahead of his trip to the UN General Assembly, Erdogan said he would discuss his plans with Trump and EU leaders, but he returned last week apparently empty-handed. "Turkey is not a country that can be stalled," he said on the plane home. Cavusoglu echoed his message: "If we cannot find a way with the United States, we will clear out the terrorist organization (ourselves)," he said, referring to the YPG.



Turkey wants to settle refugees in proposed zone



ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan delivers a speech during the opening of the third legislative session of the Turkish parliament's 27th term yesterday at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. — AFP

US warning

US and Turkish troops have so far carried out half a dozen joint air missions over northeast Syria and two land patrols. The NATO allies disagree over the depth of the zone and who should control it, while the United States avoids even referring to a "safe zone", talking instead of a "security mechanism". The United States has warned Turkey that unilateral action would not serve any country's security. "The last thing Turkey would like is an unintended clash with the US troops on the ground," said Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, of the German Marshall Fund in Ankara. Instead, he said Turkey could adopt a "gradu-

ated strategy" and continue negotiating with Washington while making incursions in areas where there are no US troops and few YPG forces.

Even so, Ankara would be wary of the political consequences in Washington, where Trump's public support for Erdogan is set against demands in Congress for sanctions on Ankara over its purchase in July of Russian S-400 missile defense systems. Cavusoglu said Ankara would move in stages - from joint patrols to "going inside and clearing out the terrorists", then establishing facilities for its forces inside Syria followed by "the humanitarian aspect and return of refugees". — Reuters

Lebanon backs key importers amid fears of dollar shortage

BEIRUT: Lebanon's central bank is to facilitate access to dollars for importers of petroleum products, wheat and medicine, state media said yesterday, following fears of a dollar shortage and possible currency devaluation. Local media said last week banks and money exchange shops were rationing dollar sales in the country, where Lebanese pounds and US dollars are used interchangeably in everyday transactions. Petrol station owners threatened to strike over a lack of dollars at a fixed exchange rate to pay for imports, while flour producers complained they had to resort to much higher rates from money changers.

The central bank on Monday adopted the measure to allow certain importers to obtain dollars at the bank rate to pay for key imports. "Banks that issue letters of credit for the importation of petroleum products (petrol, fuel oil and gas), wheat and medicine will be able to ask the Banque du Liban to ensure the value of such credits in US dollars," read the decision published by the National News Agency.

The mechanism requires that a "special account" be opened at the central bank, and at least 15 percent of the value of the credit be deposited in it in US dollars, as well as the full value in Lebanese pounds, it said. The



BEIRUT: A teller counts US dollars at a currency exchange company in the Lebanese capital Beirut yesterday. — AFP

central bank will take 0.5 percent from each transaction. Lebanon has had a fixed exchange rate of around 1,500 Lebanese pounds to the dollar in place since 1997. Central bank governor Riad Salameh last week denied that the country was facing a currency reserve crisis, but it has become very difficult to withdraw dollars from ATMs in Beirut.

Lebanese economist Jad Chaaban said the central bank measure was a welcome short-term solution to allow key products into the country. "It's a good measure to contain the crisis on importing these commodities and to keep the prices in check," said the associate professor at the American University of Beirut. And it will "ease pressure on the non-

bank exchange rate", he said. But he also called for the broader easing of capital controls keeping dollars in the banks, and "fundamental economic reforms" including to reduce dependency on imports.

Economic growth in Lebanon has plummeted in the wake of repeated political deadlocks in recent years, compounded by eight years of war in neighboring Syria. Lebanon's public debt stands at around \$86 billion - more than 150 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) - according to the finance ministry. Eighty percent of that debt is owed to Lebanon's central bank and local banks. In July, parliament passed an austerity budget as part of conditions to unlock \$11 billion in aid pledged at a conference in Paris last year. — AFP

Rough seas, restless nights; tracking Grace 1 supertanker

MADRID: Video journalist Marco Trujillo sat on his hotel balcony, eyes fixed on the silhouette of a supertanker in the Strait of Gibraltar, watching for the splash of an anchor chain or the smallest sign of movement. A month earlier British commandos had seized the Grace 1 there over suspicions it was breaking EU sanctions by taking Iranian oil to Syria - placing the vessel at the centre of a growing confrontation between Tehran and the West. After weeks of diplomacy and international legal wrangling, the Gibraltar authorities had just decided to lift the seizure order.

Now the world was watching to see when the ship would leave, where it would go and, ultimately, who would buy its crude. Trujillo was determined not to miss the moment it set sail. During the days, he and photographer Jon Nazca hired a fishing boat to get a closer look on the choppy waters - at one point witnessing the moment when it briefly raised the Iranian flag. During the nights, he slept fitfully, fearing he would wake up to find the ship gone. "I admit that you become a bit crazy. It transforms into an obsession," he said.

When it came to it, he was there watching



BANDAR ABBAS: Photo shows the British-flagged oil tanker Stena Impero as it leaves Bandar Abbas port in southern Iran. — AFP

as the vessel, now renamed "Adrian Darya 1", edged across his camera's viewfinder and out to sea just after 1 am on Aug 19, four days after the detention was lifted. "It was a relief and joyful feeling after so many days hypnotized by the ship," he said. Then the real hunt began. Reporters in Reuters bureaus from Athens to Istanbul and London to Singapore watched the satellite feeds offered by Refinitiv - a data and analytics company in which Thomson Reuters has a minority stake - following tankers across the world.

Erratic course

They tracked an erratic course towards Greece, then Turkey, then Cyprus, then Turkey, then Lebanon and on. "In the space

of 10 days, it punched in three different destinations, u-turning several times as it traversed the Mediterranean with a cargo of crude nobody officially wanted," said Greece and Cyprus bureau chief Michele Kambas.

The feeds could only supply so much information. The Turkey office sent cameraman Bulent Usta to the coast to scan the horizon. Correspondents phoned their sources to check each purported destination and cut through the rumors and fake sightings spreading on social media. "It became clear that ports in Syria and many other Mediterranean options were not big enough to accommodate a supertanker carrying 2 million barrels of oil," said senior shipping correspondent Jonathan Saul. — Reuters

Jordan's striking teachers reject government call

AMMAN: Tens of thousands of Jordanian teachers yesterday defied a government call to end their four-week nationwide strike over pay, in a deepening crisis that threatens to further strain the heavily indebted country's state finances. The powerful Jordanian Teachers' Syndicate on Saturday rejected as "bread crumbs" modest pay increases offered by Prime Minister Omar Al-Razzaz in a bid to end the strike, which is already the longest by state employees in decades. The strike comes as Jordan struggles to implement tough IMF-backed fiscal reforms.

Only a quarter of Jordan's 4,000 public schools opened yesterday and a fraction of its 1.5 million or so students turned up for lessons, in what economists said was a blow to the Razzaz government, which came to power in 2018 after street protests over IMF-backed austerity measures. Scuffles broke out in several schools between parents and striking teachers, according to two wit-

nesses, and state media reported that many teachers had prevented pupils from entering classrooms, asking them instead to go home. Many parents are not sending their children to school out of solidarity with the striking teachers.

The teachers' union, which has 100,000 members, is demanding a 50% pay hike. Razzaz says pay increases that took effect this month averaging \$35 per month were the most Jordan could afford. His government has said teachers could lose their jobs over what it describes as an illegal action. The teachers, whose average salary is around 450 dinars (\$630) per month, say they have fallen behind others in a bloated public sector plagued by corruption and mismanagement.

Salaries eat up much of the \$13 billion state budget in a country which has one of the world's highest levels of government spending relative to the size of its economy. The government fears that new pay demands by other public sector employees, including doctors, and pension increases for retired soldiers would wreck efforts to restore fiscal prudence as a basis for a sustained economic recovery. The fiscal plan agreed with the International Monetary Fund aims to cut Jordan's public debt of \$40 billion, equivalent to 95 percent of GDP. — Reuters

Morocco journalist gets 1-year jail for 'illegal abortion'

RABAT: Moroccan journalist Hajar Raissouni was sentenced in a Rabat court Monday to one year in jail for an "illegal abortion" and sexual relations outside marriage, provoking a storm of protest from rights groups. In a case that has sparked widespread debate on personal and media freedoms in Morocco, her gynaecologist, who spoke up in her defence, was given two years and her Sudanese fiancé one year in prison.

"This trial had no foundation - the accusations were baseless," said Abdelmoula El Maroufi, a defence lawyer for Raissouni, after the verdict. A journalist for Akhbar Al-Yaoum - an Arabic-language newspaper which has a history of run-ins with the authorities - she was sentenced under Article 490 of the legal code of the Muslim kingdom. That article punishes sexual relations out of wedlock, while the law also forbids all abortions unless the mother's life is in danger.

An anaesthetist was handed a one-year suspended sentence and a medical assistant eight months, also suspended. Meriem Moulay Rachid, lawyer for the convicted gynaecologist, said: "The judicial system has had its word, (but) we will appeal." Relatives of Raissouni also told AFP that they would appeal. Raissouni was arrested on August 31 as she left a clinic in Rabat. In court, she denied having had an abortion, saying she had been

treated for internal bleeding - testimony backed up by her gynaecologist.

The journalist denounced the affair as a "political trial", saying she had been questioned by police about her family and her own writing. She appeared calm on arrival at the courtroom, wearing a black veil covering her head, and waved to her relatives before taking her place in the dock.

'Devastating blow'

Rights groups were quick to condemn the verdicts. Amnesty International described them as a "devastating blow for women's rights in Morocco". Instead of "publicly slandering Hajar Raissouni... and convicting her on unjust charges, Morocco's authorities should revoke her conviction and order her immediate and unconditional release" and all others convicted in the case, said Heba Morayef, Amnesty's Middle East and North Africa director.

Ahmed Benchems, the regional director for Human Rights Watch, described the sentencing of Raissouni and her fiancé as a "black day for freedom in Morocco". The verdicts were "a blatant injustice, a flagrant violation of human rights, and a frontal attack on individual freedoms," he wrote on Twitter.

A Moroccan historian present in court likewise hit out at the entire premise of the case. "It is a case of political repression, repression of independent opinion and vengeance (against) the family", said Maati Monjib. Raissouni had said she was quizzed by authorities about an uncle who is an outspoken Islamist newspaper columnist. Ibtissam Lachgar, co-founder of the Alternative Movement for Individual Freedom - a feminist organization - argued that the case was "political" in its motivation. — AFP