

International

Russian, US pressure mounts on Turkey over Syria threat

There is no question that this operation be limited to only an aerial operation: Erdogan

ISTANBUL, Turkey: International pressure mounted Tuesday on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan not to launch a threatened ground offensive against Kurdish fighters in Syria. Ankara launched a series of air strikes in Operation Claw-Sword on Sunday-hitting dozens of Kurdish militant targets across Iraq and Syria-and announcing that its military was once again "on the top of the terrorists".

The air raids followed a bombing in Istanbul that killed six people and wounded 81. Ankara blamed the attack on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is blacklisted as a terror group by the European Union and the United States. The Turkish leader has threatened a new military operation into northern Syria since May and upped those threats in the wake of this month's bomb attack. "There is no question that this operation be limited to only an aerial operation," Erdogan told reporters while returning home from the opening of the World Cup in Qatar.

The PKK, which has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984, denied any role in the November 13 bombing, which was the deadliest in five years after a spate of attacks in Turkey between 2015 and 2017.

The United States late Monday urged de-escalation and Russia said Tuesday it hoped Turkey would exercise "restraint" and refrain from "excessive use of force" in Syria. "We urge de-escalation in Syria to protect civilian life and support the common goal of defeating ISIS," US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement, referring to the fight against the jihadist Islamic State (IS) group.

"We understand and respect Turkey's concerns regarding its own security... We still call on all parties to

refrain from steps that could lead to seriously destabilising the situation," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

'Robust campaign'

"We hope to convince our Turkish colleagues to refrain from resorting to excessive use of force on Syrian territory," Alexander Lavrentyev, Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy on Syria, told reporters in the Kazakh capital Astana.

"Russia has for months... done everything possible to prevent any large-scale ground operation," Lavrentyev added. In return, Turkey asked its allies to stop supporting fighters from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) who assisted the US-led campaign against IS.

"We tell all our interlocutors especially the United States that the PKK is equivalent to the YPG and we insistently demand that all support to the terrorists be stopped," Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar told lawmakers. Turkey has launched three offensives into Syria since 2016 aimed at crushing Syrian Kurdish fighters, whom it charges are allied to the PKK. Erdogan has repeatedly called for a 30-kilometre (19-mile) "safe zone" to protect southern Turkey against cross-border attacks from Syrian territory.

At least three people, including a child, were killed in a Turkish border town on Monday by a rocket strike fired from Syria. Anthony Skinner, a Turkey expert and a political risk consultant, told AFP that conditions "are in place for a particularly robust campaign" against Kurdish militants ahead of Turkish presidential and parliamentary elections in June.

"Erdogan wants to bolster support for his AKP and its



AL-MALIKIYAH: Relatives mourn over the caskets of 11 people killed in Turkish air strikes during their funeral in Al-Malikiyah (Derik) in Syria's northeastern Hasakah province. —AFP

(nationalist) MHP allies, so he is playing the nationalist and security card. Hence the noise," he said. "Erdogan effectively used the security and stability cards in the run

up to the rerun of the general election in 2015. But his work is cut out now because of economic and socio-economic pressures." —AFP

Strong quake rattles Solomon Islands, no injuries

HONIARA, Solomon Islands: A 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck the Solomon Islands on Tuesday, swaying buildings, hurling items off shelves and briefly knocking out power in parts of the capital Honiara.

There were no reports of serious injuries or major structural damage. "This was a big one," Joy Nisha, a receptionist with the Heritage Park Hotel in the capital, told AFP. "Some of the things in the hotel fell. Everyone seems OK, but panicky."

At one recently built mall, chunks of cladding were shaken loose, crushing the bonnet of a car and breaking the windshield. The roof of an annex at the Australian High Commission also collapsed, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese told parliament in Canberra, stating "there are no known injuries".

Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles said damage assessments were ongoing and it was too early to know what military assistance might be sent to help.

"We always stand ready to support our Pacific neighbours," he told AFP by phone from Siem Reap, Cambodia. "We will no doubt look at what the needs are... and go from there." An AFP reporter in Honiara said the shaking lasted for around 20 seconds.

Power was immediately knocked out in some areas of the capital and phone lines were also down. Across the city, people fled their homes and workplaces for higher ground, fearing a tsunami.

"I was really scared because this is the first time I felt this kind of earthquake," said a manager at the Pacific Casino Hotel, who asked not to be named. "The



HONIARA, Solomon Islands: Residents stay in the open in downtown of Honiara on November 22, 2022, as people rushed from their offices and fleeing to higher ground after a strong earthquake. —AFP

building was really violently shaking... It was really strong, it made you move side to side."

Dozens of staff and guests fled the building to the relative safety of the car park, hoping not to be hit by debris on the way out. The nation's attorney general, John Muria, posted images on social media of office files that had spilled from several large metal cabinets.

Aftershocks

The quake struck at a relatively shallow depth of 15 kilometres, just off the southwest coast of Guadalcanal island, according to the US Geological Survey. A tsunami warning was issued for an area of the Solomons coast within 300 kilometres (185 miles) of the epicentre, but the UN-backed Pacific warning centre later said the threat had "largely" passed.

As nightfall approached, power was starting to return to Honiara, but local authorities urged caution. "We expect aftershocks so people should stay alert around buildings and tall structures because of the size of the earthquake," said David Hiba Hiriasia, director of the Solomon Islands Meteorological Service. —AFP

pare the lists of names of the prisoners to be pardoned under the decree. The minister did not provide details on how many prisoners will be pardoned and the timeframe for the work of the special committee.

Based on the decree, the amnesty will cover prisoners who were convicted for carrying out acts of aggression against a foreign country which could threaten Kuwait's security. It also includes those jailed for spreading false news about the internal situation of Kuwait, which could undermine the position of the country.

The amnesty will also include prisoners jailed for publicly insulting the authority of HH the Amir by any means whether in writing or in speech, in addition to those convicted for misusing their phones to threaten others or the security of the state. Several months ago, HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf issued a decree pardoning a number of opposition political leaders, many of them had been living in exile in Turkey, and a number of other prisoners in the country. The government had also promised to pardon more political prisoners, which has been the main demand of a majority of MPs.

"Nothing is impossible for Saudi Arabia... The future is here and we are the future," 35-year-old Tareq Al-Shammari said at the Mrsool Park stadium, as fans stormed the pitch and belted out chants and songs around him. "We have people who love football and we adore it," said Sultan, wearing a white thobe (gown) and a green-and-white scarf. We are investing in infrastructure and we have all the capabilities to compete with European countries."

"I'm so, so, so happy," said a fan who gave her name as Bayan. "No one from Saudi expected that, but they did it." Riyadh prepared for an all-night party as congratulations poured in from high-ranking Saudi officials. Messi is no stranger to Saudi Arabia, having been named a tourism adviser to the kingdom as it tries to tempt visitors from abroad. Yet Saudis on Twitter were quick to gloat over his loss, with one meme showing a man in a white robe roasting a goat - representing Messi, sometimes referred to as the Greatest Of All Time or GOAT - over an open fire. —AFP

UN denounces 'hardening' of Iranian response

GENEVA, Switzerland: The United Nations on Tuesday denounced Iran's increasingly harsh and deadly crackdown on mass protests that have been rocking the country for more than two months. "UN Human Rights Chief Volker Turk says the rising number of deaths from protests in Iran, including those of two children at the weekend, and the hardening of the response by security forces, underline the critical situation in the country," spokesman Jeremy Laurence told reporters in Geneva.

"We urge the authorities to address people's demands for equality, dignity and rights, instead of using unnecessary or disproportionate force to suppress the protests," he said. "The lack of accountability for gross human rights violations in Iran remains persistent and is contributing to the growing grievances."

His comments came after Iranian security forces on Monday intensified their crackdown in western Iran's Kurdish-populated regions, directly shooting at protesters, using heavy weapons and killing a dozen people over 24 hours, rights groups said.

The Kurdish-populated provinces of western and northwestern Iran have been hubs of protest since the death in custody of 22-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini on September 16, after she was arrested by morality police in Tehran.

Hundreds killed

The demonstrations sparked by Amini's death have become the most serious challenge to Iran's clerical regime since the 1979 revolution. The UN rights office

said more than 300 people had been killed since the protests began, including more than 40 children.

The Norway-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) group on Saturday put the death toll at at least 378 people. There have been particularly intense anti-regime demonstrations in several towns in the last few days, rights groups say, largely sparked by the funerals of people said to have been killed by the security forces in previous protests. Laurence said sources had told the rights office that more than 40 people had been killed in mainly Kurdish cities in the past week. Two 16-year-old boys were among six killed over the weekend, he said.

"Significant numbers of security forces have also been deployed in recent days," he said, adding: "Overnight, we received reports of security forces responding forcefully to protests in several mainly Kurdish cities, including Javanrud and Saqqez."

Since the beginning, he said, "protesters have been killed in 25 of Iran's 31 provinces, including more than 100 in Sistan and Baluchistan".

Withholding bodies

Laurence voiced particular concern at "the authorities' apparent refusal to release the bodies of those killed to their families, or making the release of their bodies conditional on the families not speaking to the media or agreeing to give a false narrative on the cause of death."

He also pointed to the thousands of people "detained throughout the country for joining peaceful protests," adding that a growing number of Iranian celebrities and sports stars who had voiced support for the protests were being summoned and arrested.

Especially alarming, he said, was that so far six people connected to the protests had been handed death sentences. "We call on the authorities to release all those detained in relation to the exercise of their rights, ... and to drop the charges against them," Laurence said. —AFP

MPs hail Amir's 'historic'...

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An Amiri decree was issued Monday, granting a special amnesty to an unspecified number of mainly Kuwaiti political prisoners who had been convicted to years of jail terms for violating legislation governing freedom of speech. A government committee was set up immediately to look into the cases of prisoners who will be included in the amnesty. The panel is headed by Deputy Premier and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Barak Al-Sheetan and includes the attorney general and interior ministry undersecretary as members.

Sheetan said the decree stipulates to grant amnesty to a number of Kuwaiti citizens jailed for committing crimes, mostly political, between Nov 16, 2011 until the end of 2021. The minister said the special committee will start meetings on Thursday to pre-

Green Falcons soar to...

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Turki Al-Sheikh, an adviser at the Royal Court and head of Saudi Arabia's General Entertainment Authority, announced on Twitter that admission fees would be waived at major theme parks and entertainment centers in Riyadh on Tuesday.

Disbelieving Saudis formed impromptu dance circles and waved the sword-embazoned national flag from the windows of speeding cars in Riyadh on Tuesday after their team's sensational win over Lionel Messi's Argentina. As the final whistle blew in the group-stage shocker with a 2-1 scorecard that ended Argentina's 36-match unbeaten streak, fans watching on a big screen at a stadium in the capital sent shisha pipes flying as they rushed to celebrate.

Iran enriching uranium to 60% at Fordo plant

TEHRAN: Iran said Tuesday it had begun producing uranium enriched to 60 percent at its Fordo plant, an underground facility that reopened three years ago amid the breakdown of its nuclear deal with major powers. The move was part of Iran's response to the UN nuclear watchdog's adoption last week of a censure motion drafted by Western governments accusing it of non-cooperation.

"Iran has started producing uranium enriched to 60 percent at the Fordo plant for the first time," Iran's ISNA news agency reported, a development then confirmed by Atomic Energy Organization of Iran chief Mohammad Eslami. An atomic bomb requires uranium enriched to 90 percent, so 60 percent is a significant step towards weapons-grade enrichment.

Iran has always denied any ambition to develop an atomic bomb, insisting its nuclear activities are for civilian purposes only. Under a landmark deal struck in 2015, Iran agreed to mothball the Fordo plant and limit its enrichment of uranium to 3.67 percent, sufficient for most civilian uses, as part of a package of restrictions on its nuclear activities aimed at preventing it covertly developing a nuclear weapon.

In return, major powers agreed to relax sanctions they had imposed over Iran's nuclear program. But the deal began falling apart in 2018 when then US president Donald Trump pulled Washington out of the agreement and reimposed crippling economic sanctions. The following year, Iran began stepping away from its commitments under the deal. It reopened the Fordo plant and starting enriching uranium to higher levels.

In January 2021, Iran said it was working to enrich uranium to 20 percent at Fordo. Several months later another Iranian enrichment plant reached 60 percent. President Joe Biden has expressed a desire for Washington to return to a revived deal and on-off talks have been underway

since April last year. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said late last month that he saw little scope to restore the deal, as Iran battles nationwide protests sparked by the September death in morality police custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman.

The heavily protected Fordo plant around 180 km south of Tehran was built deep underground in a bid to shield it from air or missile strikes by Iran's enemies. Archfoe the Zionist entity has never ruled out military action if it deems it necessary to prevent Iran developing a nuclear weapons capability. The Zionist entity is widely suspected to hold the region's sole if undeclared nuclear arsenal, although it has consistently refused to confirm or deny that it is nuclear-armed.

The implementation of the 2015 deal was overseen by the International Atomic Energy Agency but the UN watchdog's relations with Iran have declined sharply in recent months. The IAEA board of governors passed a resolution on Thursday criticizing Iran for its lack of cooperation. "We warned that political pressure and resolutions wouldn't change anything and that the adoption of a resolution would draw a serious response," said Eslami. "That's why the production of uranium enriched to 60 percent began at Fordo from Monday."

The ISNA news agency said that the step at Fordo was one part of Iran's response. "As well, in a second action in response to the resolution, Iran injected (uranium hexafluoride) gas into two IR-2m and IR-4 cascades at the Natanz plant," it said, referring to an older enrichment facility. The UN watchdog has been pressing Iran to explain the discovery of traces of nuclear material at three sites it had not declared, a key sticking point that led to the adoption of an earlier censure motion by the IAEA in June.

In a report seen by AFP earlier this month, the IAEA said Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium stood at 3,673.7 kg as of Oct 22, a decrease of 267.2 kg from the last quarterly report. This included significant stockpiles of uranium enriched to higher levels - 386.4 kg to 20 percent and 62.3 kg to 60 percent. The IAEA complains that the ability of its inspectors to monitor Iran's stepped up nuclear activities has been hampered by restrictions imposed by Iran. —AFP