

YEMEN'S RETURNED LEADER WORKS TO STAMP AUTHORITY

ADEN: Yemen's President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi worked yesterday to restore his authority after returning from six months of exile with a vow to liberate the country from Shiite Houthi rebels. Hadi's first act was to chair a meeting of cabinet members already back in the southern port city of Aden, which had been the embattled leader's last refuge before he fled to Saudi Arabia in March. He instructed the ministers to focus on basic services such as water, electricity, housing, healthcare and security for ordinary Yemenis in the impoverished and war-battered country.

On the security front, the 70-year-old president stressed the need to integrate members of the Popular Resistance pro-government militia into the regular army, the

government-run Saba news agency reported. Under the cover of Saudi-led coalition air strikes, loyalists have battled the Houthis alongside the Popular Resistance volunteer force, southern separatists, Islamist militants and Sunni tribes, in a makeshift alliance.

Hadi, who is recognized by the international community, flew in late Tuesday aboard a Saudi military aircraft that landed at an airbase adjoining the civilian airport in Aden. The president promised the Yemeni people that the Houthis, who hailed from the mountainous north, would be driven from the capital Sanaa.

"The return to the capital Sanaa will come soon after the liberation of all cities and provinces," from the hands of militias, he said in a statement. The presidency said

Hadi would remain in Aden for a few days before heading to New York to attend the UN General Assembly which runs until October 6.

Opens road to Sanaa

Analysts view the return of Hadi as mostly symbolic in the short term. "It's a signal to all the actors, in the Houthi-camp or anti-Houthi, that the legitimate government is back," said Mathieu Guidera, a professor and Middle East specialist at the University of Toulouse in France. "This will not in itself change much on the ground but it will open up the road to Sanaa for the coalition, at the official invitation of the sitting government," he said.

Hadi, a southerner, fled the rebel-

controlled capital in February after escaping house arrest under the Houthis, and took shelter in Aden. But the following month he was forced to abandon the southern city and go into exile in Riyadh as the Houthis advanced, and soon afterwards the Saudi-led coalition launched an air war against the rebels.

Much of Aden has been reduced to rubble by ferocious fighting between government forces supported by coalition air strikes and Houthis backed by renegade soldiers loyal to ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh. In July, bolstered by training and equipment provided by the coalition, the loyalists retook Aden, enabling Prime Minister Khaled Bahah and several ministers to return last week.

The Houthis have since lost five southern provinces to pro-government forces, who on September 13 launched a major offensive in oil-rich Marib province east of the capital, with thousands of Saudi and Emirati soldiers deployed on the ground. But the Iranian-backed rebels, who still control much of northern and central Yemen, appear to have slowed the loyalist advance.

Pro-Hadi forces have also been locked in fierce fighting to retake Yemen's third city Ta'ez, which is seen as a crucial gateway to Sanaa. The United Nations says around 5,000 people have been killed and 25,000 wounded, many of them civilians, since late March in Yemen. The UN aid chief has called the scale of human suffering in Yemen "almost incomprehensible". — AFP



PALMYRA: In this file image posted on a militant website by the Aleppo branch of the Islamic State group on July 3, 2015, file photo, which has been verified and is consistent with other AP reporting, a militant smashes items that the group claims are smuggled archaeological pieces from the historic central town. — AP

EXPERTS AND LOCALS SCRAMBLING TO DOCUMENT SYRIA'S HERITAGE

DESPERATE TO STAY A STEP AHEAD OF ISLAMIC STATE

BEIRUT: Scientists are slipping 3-D cameras into Syria to local activists and residents to scan antiquities. A US-funded project aims to provide local conservators with resources to help safeguard relics. Inside Syria, volunteers scramble to document damage to monuments and confirm what remains. The rush is on to find creative and often high-tech ways to protect Syria's millennia-long cultural heritage in the face of the threat that much of it could be erased by the country's war, now in its fifth year. Giving the drive new urgency, experts are desperate to stay a step ahead of the Islamic State group, which has ruthlessly destroyed and looted sites that fall into its hands as it spreads across Syria and neighboring Iraq.

The efforts are tempered by a recognition of the realities - that in some cases the best that can be hoped for is to document ancient monuments in as great detail as possible so that if they are destroyed they can still be studied in the future, or possibly accurate replicas could one day be built. All acknowledge that nothing short of a military or political solution can stop the danger posed by the militants and the conflict.

Fraught with risks

The campaigns are also fraught with risks. Getting supplies to activists on the ground can expose them to retribution from IS militants or others suspicious of outside powers. As a result, the various efforts underway are mostly cloaked in secrecy, with their organizers reluctant to give specifics on their activities for fear of endangering those on the ground. But among experts, there's a feeling that something - anything - must be done.

"I don't want to be having this conversation with somebody three years down the road, and they say, 'Gee why didn't you start in 2015 when they (IS) only controlled three percent of the sites,'" said Roger Michel, whose Million Image Database, an Oxford Institute of Digital Archaeology project, began distributing hundreds of 3-D cameras around the region to activists.

Historical sites have been damaged constantly since the war began, struck by shelling and government airstrikes or exposed to rampant looting. Syrian government officials already say they have moved some 300,000 artifacts from around the country to safe places over recent years, including from IS-controlled areas.

The Islamic State group's advances mean antiquities in Syria and Iraq face the danger not just of damage but of intentional eradication. The most stunning example came in the past month, when the militants blew up two famed temples in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra. Satellite images showed that the two temples, which had survived for nearly 2,000 years, were reduced to rubble.

'Flood the region'

The Million Image Database project, which is backed by UNESCO, aims to "flood the region" with low-cost, easy-to-use 3-D cameras, delivered to activists to document antiquities in their area, Michel said. The point-and-shoot cameras, which cost about \$50 each, take a stereoscopic image of the relics, with a granularity of detail measured in centimeters.

"The idea is to have as many images made of as many objects and buildings as possible in advance of the destruction by the IS forces," Michel said. Nearly 1,000 cameras have already been deployed or are on their way, not only to Syria, but also Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt. The aim is to distribute 5,000 cameras region-wide by next year, at a total cost of \$3 to \$6 million.

The camera user can then upload the pictures or videos to the project's website. The website is closed to the public to protect the activists' anonymity and to ensure the site remains a purely scholarly venture, not a social media platform for activists, said Alexy Karenowska, a physicist who developed the web interface and is the project's technology director. As the project progresses, it will find a way to share storytelling from the material to the public, she said.

The project has also linked up with a leading Chinese 3-D concrete printing company to consider eventually reconstructing some of the architecture that has been destroyed. A separate project would carry out far more detailed scans of antiquities in Syria and Iraq using laser scanners. The scanners bounce lasers off the surface of objects in the field, measuring millions of points a second to create a data set known as a point cloud. The data can be used to create 3-D images accurate to two or three millimeters to create models or virtual tours of the sites or allow full-scale reconstructions.

But while the scanning brings the highest precision, it also requires experts, accompanied by security teams, to visit the sites to scan them over extended periods of time using precise equipment - a much more unwieldy footprint in potentially dangerous areas than the 3-D cameras. The project, called "Anqa," the Arabic word for the phoenix, the legendary bird that rises from the ashes, aims to laser-scan 200 objects in Syria, Iraq and other parts of the region, said its director Ben Kacyra, of the California-based scanning company CyArk. It will work with the government antiquities departments in Syria and Iraq, as well as UNESCO, to deploy teams in northern and southern Iraq, Damascus and other areas, Kacyra said. For security considerations, he would not specify what sites he plans to scan.

"We have a story to tell there that we can't lose for our children and grandchildren," Kacyra said. "Our heritage is much more than our collective memory. It is our collective treasure." Kacyra, an engineer originally from the Iraqi city of Mosul, and his wife set up the non-profit company CyArk to digitally preserve heritage sites around the world after the 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. One site he scanned, the Kasubi royal tombs in Uganda, were torched in 2010, and now the government is using his imagery to reconstruct them. After Mosul fell to Islamic State group control in 2014 and the extremists began destroying antiquities there, Kacyra focused on documenting heritage in the Mideast. — AP

AMID MIGRANT MOBILIZATION, TURKEY IS HARDENING RULES

ISTANBUL: As refugees probe the land route between Turkey and the European Union, Ankara has begun enforcing long-dormant rules on Syrians' travel, in part over concerns about how the flow is affecting the country's image, according to a government document obtained by The Associated Press and interviews with officials and migrants.

So far the moves appear ad hoc and aimed only at preventing refugees from reaching the Turkish frontier city of Edirne, where hundreds are staging a sit-in near the Greek border. But one academic said it was a sign of a more-determined effort by Turkey to get a handle on the country's massive refugee population.

"In the case of Syrians, this is the first time they are trying to be strict on movement," said Ahmet Icdyugu, who directs the Migration Research Center at Istanbul's Koc University. "They're clamping down." The one-page Interior Ministry document, dated Aug. 29, says officials consider that "Syrians who are trying to go to third countries through our country illegally are posing a threat to public order and public security and are negatively affecting our country's image internationally."

It orders checks on Syrians' documents at the entrance and exit to each province and

Muthana Al-Abdullah, a 22-year-old engineering student from Aleppo, told the AP at Esenler. Three bus company managers at the station confirmed that they had been instructed to refuse tickets to Syrians. On Sunday - by which time the crowds were leaving - one of the managers said rules had been relaxed again.

Ankara has been extraordinarily generous to people from Syria in the years since civil war broke out there. Turkey hosts roughly 2 million refugees, a number that far outstrips all neighboring European countries put together and has turned the country into the world's No. 1 host of refugees overall. But even though the Turks have spent some \$7.6 billion feeding and housing the influx, many struggle to make ends meet.

"There is no future for my my children here at all," said Mohammed Ali Al-Baya, a 40-year-old cell phone salesman from Aleppo who was among those stuck at the bus station. He and his compatriots say they don't want to risk the dangerous boat trip across the Aegean Sea taken by so many others and had organized with the help of a Facebook group to travel to Edirne and try to walk to Greece en masse and on foot.

That border rush appears to have been a step too far for Turkish officials, who contin-



ISTANBUL: Hundred of migrants, who were blocked at a bus station, walk down a highway towards Turkey's western border with Greece and Bulgaria. — AP

asks law enforcement to tell transport companies that Syrians are not allowed to leave the provinces where they have registered without permission. The document only refers to Syrians, who constitute the overwhelming majority of Turkey's roughly 2 million refugees.

Many mystified

The effect of the order, whose authenticity was confirmed by two government officials, was that hundreds of Syrians who tried to reach Edirne to join their fellows last week found themselves stuck for days just outside a sprawling bus terminal in Esenler on the European side of Istanbul. Hundreds of people, most of them Syrian, camped for days in and around a nearby mosque, many sleeping rough behind a cordon of police in riot gear. Most were mystified by the refusal of bus companies to sell them tickets. "I don't know why they say no, really,"

ue to block the refugees who reached Edirne from approaching the border. For Al-Baya and others stuck at the station, it was the first time they had ever been prevented from traveling within Turkey. One senior government official said the Interior ministry document was a reminder of pre-existing rules that bar Syrians from leaving the province they have registered in. He said the aim was to prevent "unauthorized mobilizations" and that Syrians with travel passes could still circulate freely. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to be named.

Nazir Hakim, a member of the Syrian National Coalition, an opposition group with offices in Turkey, said that it was wrong to speak of new restrictions on his fellow Syrians. But he acknowledged that Ankara was reinforcing its existing rules. "Before, they closed their eyes," he said. "Now, they apply the law." — AP

FRANCE TO SELL WARSHIPS TO EGYPT, AFTER RUSSIA DEAL GETS SCRAPPED

PARIS: Egypt agreed yesterday to buy two Mistral warships which France built for Russia before scrapping the sale over the Ukraine crisis, showing Paris increasingly values Cairo as a stable partner in a chaotic region. The deal is the second big military contract this year between France and Egypt, although the financial details of the sale were not divulged.

President Francois Hollande and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi "have agreed on the principle and terms and conditions of Egypt's acquisition of the two Mistral-class vessels," the French presidency said. The two warships, which can each carry 16 helicopters, four landing craft and 13 tanks, were ordered by Russia in 2011 in a 1.2-billion-euro (\$1.3-billion) deal. However France found itself in an awkward situation as the date of delivery neared in 2014, and ties between Russia and the West plunged to Cold War lows over Moscow's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Paris faced the wrath of its allies around the world if it were to deliver the technology to Russia, and decided to cancel the delivery. It was an expensive decision for France, which has had to foot the bill of over a billion Euros for the upkeep of the ships and the cost of train-

ing 400 Russian sailors to crew them.

After months of intense negotiations, France and Russia agreed on the reimbursement of the deal in August. Paris returned 949.7 million Euros which had already been paid and also committed not to sell the two warships to a country that could "contravene Russia's interests," such as Poland or the Baltic states, a diplomatic source told AFP. Several countries were said to be interested in the warships, including Canada, India and Singapore. While experts have said any sale would likely see a significant price cut, government spokesman Stephane Le Folli insisted France would not suffer "any losses" in the deal.

Ships after jets

The deal comes after Egypt became the first foreign buyers of France's Rafale fighter jet, agreeing to purchase 24 in February, in what Paris hailed as an "historic" accord. The 5.2-billion-euro (\$5.9 billion) sale of the planes and a frigate was a rare triumph for France which had failed to export its flagship multi-role combat jet.

However rights group Amnesty International slammed the decision to sell the jets to a nation it has accused of "alarming" human rights abuses. Analysts

said that deal required overlooking some serious abuses by a regime which Paris sees as a bulwark against several threats in the region.

With Libya to the west wracked by instability, and the threat from Islamic State-linked jihadists on its eastern flank, Egypt has become a strategic partner to France despite a rights record sullied by Al-Sisi's brutal crackdown on opponents. Sisi was elected president in May 2014 with almost 97 percent of the vote a year after toppling the country's first freely elected leader, Islamist Mohamed Morsi.

A subsequent crackdown on Morsi's supporters left at least 1,400 dead and thousands more in jail. Hollande said during a visit to Egypt in August that the ever-closer ties between Paris and Cairo were hinged on the "fight against terrorism". "Unfortunately it is the Egyptian people who pay the price," Didier Billion of the Paris-based Institute of Strategic and International Relations said at the time of the Rafale sale. "We can shut our eyes over the rights situation in Egypt but we can't shut our eyes over Russia, because Russia is at the centre of an international power struggle," said Billion. "We can see morals and international relations don't mix well." — AFP



BEIRUT: A Lebanese man carries a sheep on September 23, 2015 at a live-stock market in the Lebanese capital Beirut as Muslims prepare to celebrate Eid Al-Adha. — AFP