



Midnight market abuzz in Syria's divided Hasakeh

Pakistan student stabbed 23 times fights for justice

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Yemeni pro-government forces stand next to a pickup truck carrying anti-aircraft guns along the way to Al-Durayhimi district, about nine kilometers south of Hodeidah international airport. — AFP

Yemen forces assault rebel port city

The offensive remained on the outskirts of the rebel-held airport

AL JAH: Yemeni forces backed by a Saudi-led coalition launched an offensive to retake the rebel-held port city of Hodeida, a key aid hub, sparking calls from the international community for restraint.

Pro-government troops began the assault Wednesday despite mounting international fears about the humanitarian fallout, pressing toward Hodeida airport south of the city after receiving a "green light" from the coalition.

The UN Security Council will meet for urgent talks on the offensive, diplomats said, after a request from Britain. The closed-door meeting will be the second this week on the Yemen crisis. By Wednesday night, the offensive remained on the outskirts of the rebel-held airport. The Red Sea port, controlled by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels who hail from northern Yemen, serves as

the entry point for 70 percent of the impoverished country's imports as it teeters on the brink of famine.

The official United Arab Emirates news agency WAM confirmed that the operation was ongoing "with the participation and the support, through land and sea and air, of the Emirati armed forces". It added that the attacking forces managed to "liberate areas... in the surroundings of the airport" and captured and killed "dozens of Houthi" rebels.

The request for the Security Council meeting came after the UN envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, said he was still holding negotiations on keeping the key port open to aid deliveries. "We are in constant contact with all the parties involved to negotiate arrangements for Hodeida that would address political, humanitarian, secu-

rity concerns of all concerned parties," he said. US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis has said he "strongly supports" Griffiths' efforts "to bring all sides of the conflict to the negotiating table".

The European Union's foreign policy chief warned of the "devastating" impact the assault would have. "The latest developments will only lead to further escalation and instability in Yemen," Federica Mogherini said in a statement. The coalition insisted its humanitarian aid response would go in parallel with military operations.

Houthis fan out

Two Saudi and UAE aid ships were in the waters off Hodeida, coalition spokesman Turki al-Maliki told Saudi state media. The two countries also said they would operate a dedicated shipping lane to Hodeida from Abu Dhabi and the

southern Saudi city of Jizan to deliver food and medical supplies. In Hodeida, people waited anxiously for the fighting to reach their neighborhoods. Those contacted by AFP said Houthi fighters had fanned out across the city. Coalition sources said the alliance carried out 18 air strikes on Houthi positions on the outskirts of Hodeida on Wednesday.

According to medical sources in the province, 22 Houthi fighters were killed by coalition raids, while three pro-government fighters were killed in a rebel ambush south of Hodeida. The UAE armed forces said on Wednesday night that four Emirati soldiers were killed in Yemen, without specifying when and where. The city of Hodeida, home to 600,000 people, was captured by the insurgents in 2014 along with the capital Sanaa.—AFP