

Rebel drone kills 6 loyalists at biggest Yemen airbase

Attack threatens to hamper UN-led peace efforts

AL-ANAD AIR BASE: A rebel drone hit Yemen's largest air base yesterday, killing six loyalist soldiers during a military parade in an attack which threatens to hamper UN-led peace efforts. At talks in Sweden last month, the UN brokered several agreements between Houthi rebels and the Saudi-backed government seen as the best chance of ending nearly four years of devastating conflict.

The Shiite Houthi rebels said they carried out the strike on Al-Anad air base, in government-held Lahij province some 60 kilometers north of Yemen's second city Aden. At least 12 people were wounded, including top commanders, according to medics at Ibn Khaldoun hospital in the provincial capital Huta. Footage of the attack showed a drone exploding over a podium around which dozens of military personnel were standing.

Soldiers scrambled to carry wounded comrades to military vehicles, while a man holding a camera bled on the ground. An AFP correspondent at the scene said journalists were among the wounded. Originally built by the then Soviet Union during the Cold War, Al-Anad served as the headquarters for US troops overseeing a long-running drone war against Al-Qaeda until March 2014, when it was overrun by the Houthis. Government forces recaptured it in August 2015 as they recovered territory from the rebels with support from a Saudi-led military coalition.

Top brass wounded

Yemen's deputy chief of staff Saleh Al-Zandani, intelligence Brigadier General Saleh Tamah and senior army commander Fadel Hasan were

among the wounded, along with Lahij governor Ahmad Abdullah Al-Turki, doctors at Ibn Khaldoun hospital told AFP on condition of anonymity. Chief of staff General Abdullah Al-Nakhi was also at the base at the time of the attack, a pro-government official said. He was not named among the casualties.

The attack came one day after UN envoy Martin Griffiths warned "substantial progress" was needed on the ground before full-blown negotiations could be launched on ending the civil war. The strike on loyalist top brass is likely to create a new obstacle to the launch of formal peace talks. Yemeni Information Minister Moammer Al-Eryani said the attack was "a strong blow" to the UN's peace efforts. "The Houthi militia does not believe in the language of peace and knows nothing but killing and terror," he tweeted.

The Houthis said the attack was "in response to the enemies' continuous air raids", in a statement carried by the rebels' Al-Masirah TV. In last month's talks, the warring sides agreed truce deals for the key rebel-held aid port of Hodeida and battleground third city Ta'ez.

'We see nothing reassuring'

Griffiths told the UN Security Council on Wednesday that both parties in the Yemen war had "largely adhered to the ceasefire and there has been a significant decrease in hostilities". Residents in Hodeida yesterday remained on edge amid the relative calm. "We are afraid that the agreement between the Houthis and the resistance (Yemeni government alliance) will collapse," Mohammed Ali told AFP.



An image grab taken from a video obtained by AFP TV shows a wounded Yemeni soldier being carried by comrades after a drone exploded above Yemen's al-Anad airbase in the government-held southern province of Lahj. — AFP

"We are watching the situation with great concern. We see nothing reassuring." The latest negotiations sparked hopes of ending a conflict which has left nearly 10 million people just one step from famine in what the UN describes as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. But Griffiths has warned repeatedly that even small steps towards peace remain fragile. "It is my

view and it is shared by the leadership of both parties, but also others, that substantial progress, particularly on Hodeida of course, is something that we would like to see before we reconvene the next consultations," he said. A new meeting is to be held in Jordan next week to follow up on a major prisoner swap agreed by the warring parties last month. — AFP

Ceasefire sees jihadists take over Syria's Idlib

BEIRUT: A jihadist group dominated by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate yesterday sealed its grip on northern Idlib, the last major rebel bastion, in a deal ending days of fighting with rival factions. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) signed a ceasefire with what was left of a rival alliance that sees it confirm its supremacy and unites the region under a jihadist-led administration.

Under an accord reached by rebel backer Turkey and regime ally Russia in September, Ankara was expected to rein in Idlib factions to stave off a threatened government offensive with potentially disastrous humanitarian repercussions. The jihadists' deal, a copy of which was circulated on local media outlets, brings an immediate end to the fighting between HTS and the rival National Liberation Front, which was directly backed by Turkey.

"This morning, HTS and NLF signed an agreement to put an end to ongoing fighting... and establish the control of the salvation government in all areas," the group's propaganda channel Ebaa said. The self-proclaimed Salvation Government is an HTS-dominated body which had been administering large parts of the Idlib area, including its eponymous capital. Its reach now extends to most of the Idlib province and parts of the neighbor-

ing provinces of Aleppo and Hama. The deal sees Ankara-backed Islamist factions Ahrar al-Sham and Suqur al-Sham stand down, as areas they once held come under HTS administrative control. These include the two major towns of Ariha and Maarat al-Noman.

'Indispensable interlocutor'

Last week, HTS seized dozens of villages from another key NLF component, Nouredine Al-Zinki, in the northeast of the enclave. Other jihadists — such as the Al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Deen group and Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) — maintain a presence in the Idlib region but are allied with HTS. The clashes between HTS and its NLF rivals in Idlib had killed 137 people on both sides since the start of the year, most of them fighters, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group.

The deal announced yesterday provides for an immediate cessation of hostilities, an exchange of detainees, the lifting of all checkpoints inside the region, and its unification under the authority of the Salvation Government. Analyst Sam Heller said the latest development put HTS squarely in control of the Idlib region.

"Now it can present itself to Turkey and others as an indispensable interlocutor in any non-military solution to Idlib," said the analyst with the International Crisis Group. It was however unclear if it would make it harder for Turkey to implement the September deal for a buffer zone around Idlib, reached in the Russian resort town of Sochi. "It's not clear whether the Sochi deal's success and the continuation of the Idlib de-escalation actually depends on the memorandum's literal implementation,



IDLIB: In this file photo taken on August 14, 2018 Syrian fighters attend a mock battle in anticipation of an attack by the regime on Idlib province and the surrounding countryside, during a graduation of new Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) members at a camp in the countryside of the northern Idlib province. — AFP

or more political atmospherics such as the health of the Turkish-Russian bilateral relationship," he said.

Simultaneously, Ankara has been threatening to launch a cross-border offensive against the Kurdish militia controlling large parts of northeastern Syria. The recent announcement by US President Donald Trump that he was ordering a full troop pullout from Syria has left Washington's Kurdish allies more exposed than ever. — AFP