

International

Yemeni rebels free 290 prisoners in a move hailed by UN and ICRC

Houthis announce the capture of hundreds of loyalist forces

SANAA: Yemen's Houthi rebels have freed 290 prisoners, including dozens of survivors from a Saudi-led coalition strike on a detention centre earlier this month, the ICRC said yesterday. The International Committee of the Red Cross hailed the move as "a positive step that will hopefully revive the release, transfer and repatriation of conflict-related detainees" under a deal struck last year between the rebels and Yemen's government. The Houthis recently announced the capture of hundreds of Yemeni loyalist forces in an August offensive near the Saudi border, but they were not among those freed yesterday.

The United Nations' special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, welcomed the initiative to "unilaterally release detainees". "I hope this step will lead to further initiatives that will facilitate the exchange of all the conflict-related detainees as per the Stockholm Agreement," Griffiths said, referring to the 2018 accord. He called on all parties to work together to speed up the release of prisoners, saying they and their families had "endured profound pain and suffering." In a statement, he urged the parties to meet at the "nearest opportunity" to resume discussions on future exchanges. The Houthis' own announcement on the prisoner release said there were 350 in the group, including three Saudis. "We have presented to the United Nations a unilateral initiative to release 350 prisoners," Abdel Kader Mortaza, the Houthi official in charge of prisoner affairs, said at a press conference in Sanaa.

'Break the deadlock'

Mortaza reiterated Houthi claims that they had taken prisoner more than 2,000 fighters, including Saudi sol-

diers, in the August offensive near the southern Saudi region of Najran. Footage aired by the Houthis on Sunday, which had been billed as showing proof of the mass capture, was short on details. A government source confirmed to AFP that 200 prisoners were killed in the fighting, but said that the number of prisoners taken was less than the Houthis claimed, estimating the number to be about 1,300 Yemeni soldiers. Mortaza said the fighters were held in what he described as the rebels' largest "operation to capture prisoners" and that they would be treated "humanely".

However, he described yesterday's release of prisoners as designed to "break the deadlock that has prevailed for several months". "This initiative reasserts our seriousness and credibility when it comes to the implementation of the (Sweden) agreement," Mortaza said. "We urge the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross to press the other side into taking a similar step or give us the same number of their prisoners in any future deal."

Years of conflict in Yemen have killed tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians. Since the Saudi-led coalition intervened to back up the government in 2015, the fighting has plunged the country—the poorest in the Arab world—into what the UN calls the globe's worst humanitarian crisis. In early September, the coalition struck a former college in the western city of Dhamar, used by the Houthis as a detention centre. The Red Cross said over 100 people were killed. Riyadh said the attack was aimed at a "legitimate military target" and that the site was not on any no-strike list.—AFP



SANAA: Yemeni prisoners, said to belong to the Saudi-backed government forces, line up as they are prepared to be released by the Houthi rebels from the central prison in the capital Sanaa yesterday.—AFP

Al-Shabaab attacks US base, EU convoy

MOGADISHU: The Al-Shabaab militant group claimed responsibility for an attack on a US base in Somalia yesterday, as the European Union confirmed a separate strike against a convoy of Italian advisers. The militants struck the US base at Baledogle, about 110 kilometers northwest of the capital Mogadishu, with explosives before gunmen opened fire on the compound. In a statement, Al-Shabaab said: "In the early hours of yesterday morning, an elite unit of soldiers... launched a daring raid on the US military base".

"After breaching the perimeters of the heavily fortified

base, the Mujahideen (holy fighters) stormed the military complex, engaging the crusaders in an intense firefight." The US Mission to Somalia denied Al-Shabaab fighters penetrated the camp defenses, saying Somali security forces repelled the attack. "The security forces stopped this ultimately failed attack due to their alertness and swift response, not allowing the attackers to breach the outer defensive perimeters of the base," the mission said in a statement. "We are thankful that there were no SNA (Somali National Army) casualties between the multiple attacks." Baledogle is a major launching site for US drone operations against Al-Shabaab, an Al-Qaeda-linked group which controls large parts of Somalia, and the Islamic State in Somalia outfit. "Two heavy explosions occurred, the first one bigger than the other. There was also a heavy exchange of gunfire after the blasts but we don't know about the details," Mohamed Adan, a Somali

elder close to the scene of the attack, told AFP by phone.

Car bomb hits convoy

In a separate incident yesterday, a security official said EU advisers training the Somali National Army were also attacked by a car bomb in Mogadishu. "There was a car bomb targeting the EU military advisors along the industrial road. A vehicle loaded with explosives was rammed into one of the convoy vehicles," said Omar Abikar, a Somali security officer. A statement from the EU Training Mission in Somalia confirmed the convoy had been "hit by an explosion" while returning from the army headquarters. "No EUTM-S soldiers were injured in the explosion. Two vehicles sustained damage," read the statement.

The mission offers military advice and provides training to Somalia's army, currently still propped up by some 20,000 African peacekeepers as the country recovers

from decades of civil war and an Islamist insurgency. Italy's defense ministry said in a statement that two armored vehicles in an Italian convoy "were involved in an explosion," adding: "For the instant there have been no consequences for Italian soldiers". SITE Intelligence, which monitors jihadist activities worldwide, said Al-Shabaab had claimed responsibility for both attacks.

The US Africa Command, AFRICOM, said in a brief statement emailed to AFP that it was "monitoring the situation. We are working to confirm details on the incident and will have more information as soon as we can confirm facts on the ground." Baledogle is a Soviet-built base which, despite secrecy surrounding US operations in Somalia, has emerged as one of the bases from where they carry out their strikes. US strikes in Somalia surged in April 2017, after President Donald Trump declared the south of the country an "area of active hostilities". —AFP

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