

International

UN cautions battle for Marib threatens millions of Yemenis

Houthi rebel advance on Yemen's last northern stronghold 'very alarming'

DUBAI: The UN's humanitarian chief said yesterday he was "very alarmed" by a Houthi rebel advance on the Yemeni government's last northern stronghold, saying an assault on Marib could endanger millions of civilians.

The Iran-backed Houthis have this month resumed an offensive to seize oil-rich Marib, some 120 kilometers (75 miles) east of the rebel-held capital Sanaa. The city's loss would be a major blow for Yemen's government, which is backed by a Saudi-led coalition, but also for the civilian population and the hundreds of thousands of displaced people sheltering in desolate camps in the region. "I'm very alarmed about the military escalation in Marib and its impact on the humanitarian situation," Mark Lowcock, the UN undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs, said in a tweet.

"An assault on the city would put two million civilians at risk, with hundreds of thousands potentially forced to flee with unimaginable humanitarian consequences. Now is the time to de-escalate, not to add even more to the misery of the Yemeni people," Military officials told AFP that the rebels had advanced towards the city on two fronts overnight after heavy fighting with government forces. Dozens from both sides have been killed in the past 24 hours alone, they said. The total casualty toll from the battle for Marib is unknown but reports indicate it is now in the hundreds.

"The rebels have advanced north and west of the city after seizing Al-Zor (in Sirwah district) up to the western sides of Marib dam, and tightened their grip on hills overlooking supply lines for several fronts," one of the officials said. The military coalition, which entered Yemen's conflict in 2015, has been pounding rebel positions, and the Houthi-run Al-Masirah television yesterday reported 13 airstrikes in several areas in Marib.

Once a sanctuary

The fighting is endangering sprawling camps for internally displaced people, many of whom have fled several times before ending up in Marib, the only part of



SANAA: Saudi-backed government troops repel a Houthi rebel offensive on oil-rich Marib, some 120 kilometers (75 miles) east of Yemen's rebel-held capital Sanaa. — AFP

the north not in Houthi hands. Until early 2020, Marib city was spared the worst of Yemen's six-year-old conflict, due to its strategic importance with its rich oil and gas reserves, and also because of its location near the border of regional power Saudi Arabia. It became a sanctuary for many in the early years of the war, taking in those hoping for a new start. But that relative stability went with fighting last year and after a lull since October-residents once again risk being in the line of fire as the two sides battle for control.

"If fighting moves towards populated areas or these displacement sites, we will see people flee again and towards locations to the east and south of Marib city with even less resources," International Organization for Migration spokeswoman Olivia Headon said.

"Much of this is desert area so just think about what any displacement in that direction would mean for families' access to water," Headon said around 650 families had been forced to flee in the recent upsurge of fighting

and that another shift in the frontlines would lead to further waves of displacement. Yemen's grinding conflict has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions, according to international organizations, sparking what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The upsurge in violence comes shortly after Washington decided to remove the rebels from its list of terrorist groups—a move that would come into effect yesterday—in order to ensure aid is unimpeded, and to pave the way to restart peace talks. Observers say the Houthis want to capture Marib as leverage before entering into any negotiations.

The rebels have also escalated attacks against Saudi Arabia. Its state media said yesterday that another "booby-trapped drone" launched by the Houthis had been intercepted and destroyed near Abha airport, which earlier this month was struck by an attack that left an aircraft in flames. — AFP

Ethnic clashes test 'melting pot' in Nigerian city

IBADAN, Nigeria: The ruins of Shasha market, in the southwest Nigerian city of Ibadan, were still smoldering three days after deadly ethnic clashes. Trader Ibrahim Adelabu surveyed what was left of the business he had built. His one blessing was that his family had escaped unhurt. Soldiers patrolled the streets and an armored personal carrier guarded the market entrance as Adelabu joined others, picking through the debris of houses and stores while residents wailed with grief nearby. "This place used to be my house and shops," said the 51-year-old trader, an ethnic Yoruba, as he showed AFP the wreckage of his building reduced to rubble.

"Where do you want me to start from now? I lost 25 million naira (around \$65,000). My joy is that my family escaped being lynched." Tense calm returned on Monday to Ibadan, capital of southwest Oyo state, after the clashes between the Yoruba who dominate the region and traders from the Hausa community, who mainly hail from Nigeria's north. Ethnic tensions are not uncommon in Africa's most populous country, where more than 250 ethnic and linguistic groups live side by side and where some southern states see a federal government that favors the north.

Yoruba and Hausa residents in Ibadan say the explosion of violence shocked many in a city where communities lived mostly in peace for decades. But southern states have seen a surge in intercommunity tensions in recent months over northern Fulani herders who move south for grazing cattle, often putting them in confrontation with Yoruba farmers.

Fiery rhetoric from some southern officials blaming northern Fulani for a surge in crime and kidnappings in their regions has stoked tensions.

The Ibadan clashes were serious enough for President Muhammadu Buhari, himself a Fulani from the

north, to call for unity, urging religious and community leaders to work together. The Ibadan clashes erupted after a disagreement between a Hausa laborer and a Yoruba trader, and spread quickly, residents said. The toll remains unclear, and the authorities while lamenting loss of life have remained tight-lipped about details. Residents said two Yoruba youths had died in the violence, while Haruna Yaro, the special assistant to the Hausa community leader in the market, said 23 Hausa traders and laborers had been killed. Oyo state police did not immediately return calls seeking confirmation.

Several thousand Hausa traders took refuge in the palace of the local leader of the Hausa community and have now fled the area, Hausa representatives said. "The Hausas are tenants in the community. We have been living together for years," Adelabu said.

"But we are surprised that they turned against us, looting and destroying our properties," Vice President Yemi Osinbajo said Shasha market was supposed to represent the country's unity—a "melting pot," he said, where northern traders would bring their goods to the southwest. "For decades, traders from the North have done business with their brothers from the Southwest and they have lived in peace and even inter-married," he wrote on Twitter. Yaro, the Hausa community representative in the market, told AFP "a minor misunderstanding" had ended in carnage. "We have been living together as neighbors for over 40 years. Hoodlums from town hijacked and started killing, looting and burning houses and shops," he said. Yaro said Hausa leaders had reached out to Yoruba leaders to make peace. "I was born and bred here. I speak Yoruba fluently," he said. "I don't have any other place to go." The clashes came at a time of increased tensions between northern Fulani herders and southern farmers, one of Nigeria's most persistent security problems. Buhari has warned against using ethnicity for political leverage, but some regional leaders accuse him of not acting decisively because he is himself an ethnic Fulani. Some southwestern leaders have blamed Fulani herders for an increase in criminal activity, and mobs have attacked some Fulani settlements. Oyo State Governor Seyi Makinde on Monday appealed for calm and called for a full investigation in the Ibadan violence. — AFP



IBADAN: A woman carries wares recovered from burnt shops as she walks past a three-storey building burnt during deadly ethnic clashes between the northern Fulani and southern Yoruba traders at Shasha Market in Ibadan, southwest Nigeria, on Monday. — AFP

Iran, Russia start joint naval drill in Indian Ocean

TEHRAN: Iran's armed forces yesterday launched a joint naval drill with Russia in the north of the Indian Ocean designed to "enhance security" of maritime

trade, state television reported. The "Maritime Security Belt Exercise" is to cover an area of 17,000 square kilometers (6,500 square miles) and include units from the Iranian army and the elite Revolutionary Guards as well as Russia's navy, the broadcaster quoted drill spokesman Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani as saying. "The purposes of this drill are to enhance security of international maritime trade, confront maritime piracy and terrorism, and exchange information," he added.

Russia's Baltic Fleet said in a statement on Monday that three ships will take part in the drill.

News in brief

Slovenia govt survives no-trust vote

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia: Slovenian conservative Prime Minister Janez Jansa's government on Monday survived a no-confidence vote brought by opposition parties who accuse him of trying to turn the country into an "authoritarian democracy". The motion, filed by center-left opposition parties, was backed by 40 votes, with seven MPs voting against and six invalid ballots-leaving the opposition short of the 46 required to bring down the government. This was the second attempt in as many months to oust Jansa, a similar motion in January having failed due to several coronavirus-related absences among MPs. — AFP

Cameroon arrests troops, police

YAOUNDE, Cameroon: Cameroon's army said on Monday it had arrested several soldiers and police for torturing a suspected "terrorist" in the country's conflict-scarred anglophone region. A 10-minute video posted on social media showed men in military uniforms armed with Kalashnikov rifles and a machete slapping a semi-naked man and kicking him in the head. "Two gendarmes, two soldiers and four police officers" were "caught up in this unacceptable act", army spokesman Cyrille Serge Atonfack Guemo said in a statement, adding that they had been "immediately arrested". — AFP

S Africa to seek jail time for Zuma

JOHANNESBURG: The chair of a South African judicial panel investigating mass state corruption said Monday he would seek jail time for former president Jacob Zuma after he failed to appear before the commission. The 78-year-old Zuma, who has repeatedly snubbed the commission probing graft during his nine-year tenure, refused to comply with a Constitutional Court order for him to appear on Monday. "The commission will approach the Constitutional Court and ask it to impose a term of imprisonment on Mr Zuma if it finds that he is guilty of contempt of court," said Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo. — AFP

Nigeria evaluating four COVID jobs

ABUJA: Nigeria is evaluating four coronavirus vaccines for possible approval, including Russian, Indian and Chinese jabs, the health minister said. Nigeria's national drug agency has dossiers for Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, the Covishield-branded AstraZeneca shot made by India's Serum Institute, Covaxin by India's Bharat vaccines and China's Sinopharm. "Some of them are nearly ready for results," Health Minister Osagie Ehanire said at a briefing. Officials said Nigeria expects to receive 16 million doses of vaccines against the disease soon. — AFP

DR Congo mine boss named PM

KINSHASA, DR Congo: DR Congo's President Felix Tshisekedi on Monday named the head of state-owned mining giant Gecamines as prime minister, following a prolonged tussle for power with allies of his predecessor. Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde Kyenge, 43, whose appointment was announced in a decree read on nationwide television, succeeds Sylvestre Ilunga Ilukamba, who was forced out after a coalition between supporters of Tshisekedi and former president Joseph Kabila broke down. The months-long crisis was seeded in the outcome of elections in December 2018 that led to the first peaceful transition of power in the Democratic Republic of Congo's history. — AFP

French agency reveals Russian hacks

PARIS: France's national cybersecurity agency said Monday it had discovered a hack of several organizations that bore similarities to other attacks by a group linked to Russian intelligence. It said the hackers had taken advantage of a vulnerability in monitoring software sold by French group Centreon, which lists blue-chip French companies as clients, such as power group EDF, defense group Thales, or oil and gas giant Total. The French ministry of justice and city authorities such as Bordeaux are also named as Centreon customers on the group's website. — AFP

Exercises will include "liberating a commercial ship abducted by pirates", and fighting fires, it said. According to Tahani, the Indian navy will also join the exercise, in a message of "peace and friendship for neighboring and regional countries".

Iran's state news agency IRNA said the drill is to last three days. The Iranian army said the exercises will also "expand bilateral relations" with Russia. Iran, China and Russia held a similar drill in the area in 2019, and the Islamic republic participated in "Caucas 2020" drills held in Russia last September. — AFP



A local farmer walking in a swarm of desert locust in Meru, Kenya. — AFP

Kenya's locust hunters on tireless quest to halt ancient pest

MERU, Kenya: As dawn breaks in central Kenya, a helicopter lifts off in a race to find roosting locusts before the sun warms their bodies and sends them on a ravenous flight through farmland. Pilot Kieran Allen begins his painstaking survey from zebra-filled plains and lush maize farms, to dramatic forested valleys and the vast arid expanses further north, his eyes scouring the landscape for signs of the massed insects.

The chopper suddenly swings around after a call comes in from the locust war room on the ground: a community in the foothills of Mount Kenya has reported a swarm. "I am seeing some pink in the trees," his voice crackles over the headphones, pointing to a roughly 30-hectare (75-acre) swathe of desert locusts. Reddish-pink in their immature-and hungriest-phase, the insects smother the tips of a pine forest.

Allen determines that nearby farms are at a safe distance and calls in a second aircraft which arrives in minutes to spray the swarm with pesticide. On the ground, having warmed to just the right temperature, the thick cloud of locusts fills the air with a rustling akin to light rainfall. But a few hours from now, many will be dead from the effect of the poison. Last month alone, Allen logged almost 25,000 kilometers (15,500 miles) of flight—more than half the circumference of the world—in his hunt for locusts after a fresh wave of insects invaded Kenya from Somalia and Ethiopia. Like other pilots involved in the operation—who have switched from their usual business of firefighting, tourism, or rescuing hikers in distress—he has become an expert on locusts and the dangers they pose. "Those wheat fields feed a lot of the country. It would be a disaster if they got in there," he says pointing to a vast farm in a particularly fertile area of Mount Kenya.

Second wave

Desert locusts are a part of the grasshopper family which form massive swarms when breeding is spurred by good rains. They are notoriously difficult to control, for they move up to 150 kilometers (90 miles) daily. Each locust eats its weight in vegetation daily and multiplies twenty-fold every three months. The locusts first infested the east and Horn of Africa in mid-2019, eventually invading nine countries as the region experienced one of its wettest rainy seasons in decades.

Some countries like Kenya had not seen the pest in up to 70 years and the initial response was hampered by poor co-ordination, lack of pesticides and aircraft, according to Cyril Ferrand, a Nairobi-based expert with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). A slick new operation to combat a second wave of the pests has improved control and co-operation in Kenya, Ethiopia and parts of Somalia.—AFP