



Runners participate in the 'Karachi Green Marathon' organized by the municipal corporation to promote environmental awareness in Karachi, Pakistan, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

MISSILE ATTACK BY HOUTHİ REBELS INSİDE SAUDI ARABİA

Coalition launches 'large-scale' Yemen operation

AFP, Riyadh

The Saudi-led coalition yesterday launched a "large-scale" assault on Yemen after missiles fired by Iran-backed Houthi rebels killed two people in the kingdom, the first such deaths in three years.

The Huthis warned Yemen's oil-rich northern neighbour of a "painful" response if the coalition does not stop its "aggression" against the conflict-riven country.

Yemen has been wracked by civil war since 2014 pitting the internationally recognised government supported by the Saudi-led military coalition against the Huthis who control much of the north.

Tens of thousands of people have since been killed, in what the UN has described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The latest violence came overnight when two people -- one Saudi and the other Yemeni -- were killed in the projectile attack on Jazan, said Saudi's civil defence.

"A military projectile fell on a commercial store on the main street, resulting in two deaths," it said, adding six Saudis and a Bangladeshi national were wounded.

Images from the official Saudi Press Agency purportedly of the aftermath of the attack showed a large crater in the ground and destroyed vehicles.

The Saudi-led coalition said shortly afterwards that it was "preparing for a large-scale military operation". It later launched



an air strike in which "three civilians including a child and a woman were killed, and six others were wounded", Yemeni medics told AFP.

The coalition will hold a news conference today to address the latest developments, the Saudi authorities said.

Earlier Houthi spokesman Yahya Saree said the rebels had launched three ballistic missiles on Jazan, a southern region of the kingdom bordering Yemen.

The insurgents often launch missiles and drones into Saudi Arabia, targeting its airports and oil infrastructure. The latest was the first in more than three years that has resulted in fatalities in the kingdom, which recorded its first death from a Houthi missile attack when a missile struck Riyadh in 2018.

It also comes as fighting between the two sides intensifies, with the coalition ramping air strikes on Sanaa.

PROTEST MARCH AGAINST MILITARY RULE IN SUDAN

Tear gas fired, internet cut

REUTERS, Khartoum

Sudanese security forces fired tear gas to disperse protesters in the capital Khartoum yesterday as the opponents of military rule marched towards the presidential palace, a Reuters witness said, while internet services in the city were also cut.

It is the 10th day of major demonstrations since an Oct. 25 coup, with protests continuing even after Abdallah Hamdok was reinstated as prime minister on Nov. 21. The demonstrators have demanded that the military have no role in government during a transition to free elections.

In neighbouring Omdurman yesterday, security forces also fired tear gas at protesters around 2 km away from a bridge connecting the city to central Khartoum, another Reuters witness said.

Internet services were disrupted in the capital, Khartoum, and soldiers blocked roads early in the day, the witnesses said.



Locals were also unable to make or receive calls domestically.

Despite the internet being cut off, people were still able to post on social media, with images showing protests taking place in several other cities including Madani and Atbara.

At the same time, soldiers and Rapid Support Forces were out in force blocking roads leading to bridges

linking Khartoum with Omdurman, its sister city across the Nile river, they said.

The SUNA state news agency reported that the province of Khartoum closed bridges on Friday evening in anticipation of the protests.

UN Special Representative to Sudan Volker Perthes urged Sudanese authorities not to stand in the way of yesterday's planned demonstrations.

"Freedom of expression is a human right. This includes full access to the Internet. According to international conventions, no one should be arrested for intent to protest peacefully," Perthes said.

The military could not immediately be reached for comment.

A march planned for Saturday is due to converge on the presidential palace and the demonstration will end at 5:00 pm (1500 GMT), organisers say.

Forty-eight people have been killed in crackdowns on protests since the coup, the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors said.

Won't enrich uranium beyond 60pc if talks fail

Says Tehran ahead of resumption of nuke talks

AFP, Tehran

Iran has no plans to enrich uranium beyond 60 percent if nuclear talks in Vienna fail, the head of the country's atomic agency said yesterday.

Atomic Energy Organization of Iran director Mohammad Eslami said the enrichment levels were related to the needs of the country, in remarks published by the Russian news agency RIA Novosti.

"Our targets related to enriching uranium are meeting our industrial and production needs... and those of our people," he was quoted as saying.

Asked whether Iran plans to enrich beyond 60 percent purity if the talks fail, he said "No".

Eslami was speaking ahead of the resumption on Monday of talks in Vienna aimed at reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Iran's arch-rival Israel, which staunchly opposes the nuclear deal, had reportedly warned in November that the Islamic republic had taken the technical steps to prepare to enrich uranium to military-

grade levels of around 90 percent.

Tehran insists its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes.

The 2015 deal offered Iran relief from sanctions in return for curbs on its nuclear programme, but was derailed in 2018 when the US unilaterally withdrew under then president Donald Trump.

Other parties to the deal have taken part in the talks, but the United States has only engaged indirectly.

While the US and its Western allies have repeatedly called on Iran to offer assurances on its nuclear programme, Tehran has insisted sanctions must be lifted first.

US negotiator Rob Malley on Tuesday warned of a "period of escalating crisis" if diplomacy failed to restore the agreement.

In his interview with RIA Novosti, Eslami said Iran's nuclear activities comply with the regulations of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency.

The IAEA recently expressed concerns over Iran's stockpile of highly-enriched uranium, however.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

DECEMBER 26

1492 - 1st Spanish settlement La Navidad in the New World is founded by Christopher Columbus (modern Môle-Saint-Nicolas in Haiti).

2004 - An earthquake measuring 9.15 struck off the west coast of northern Sumatra, unleashing a tsunami that crashed into Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and India and left nearly 230,000 people dead with over 43,000 missing.

SOURCE: REUTERS

'Let's Go Brandon'

Caller taunts Biden during White House Christmas event

AFP, Washington

President Joe Biden was trolled by a caller Friday who said "Let's Go Brandon" -- a coded insult that has become a rallying cry for supporters of Donald Trump -- during a White House Christmas Eve event.

The incident, which quickly went viral online, took place after Biden and First Lady Jill Biden spoke by video conference with North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) officials, who track Santa's travel across the globe.

After being assured of St Nick's progress, the president fielded calls from several American families.

One man identified himself as "Jared," a father of four. Biden spoke briefly with the caller's children, asking what presents they wanted for Christmas and telling them they needed to be in bed before midnight. He also remarked on how he and Jared both had sons named Hunter.

Wrapping up the call, Biden wished Jared a "wonderful Christmas."

"I hope you guys have a wonderful Christmas as well, Merry Christmas, and let's go Brandon!" Jared replied.

"Let's go Brandon, I agree," returned Biden, without reacting to the dig. It was not immediately clear if the president

had understood the reference, though Jill Biden chuckled uncomfortably and rolled her eyes.

Biden asked Jared where he was calling from, but by then the call had been disconnected. A clip of the moment spread widely on social media, with some praising the president for his calm response.

"Let's Go Brandon" is a euphemism for a vulgar insult that originated when a reporter at a NASCAR event misheard a chant of "F- Joe Biden" while interviewing driver Brandon Brown in September.

Since then it has been taken up as a political slogan by supporters of Trump, Biden's predecessor.

Trump had his own headline-grabbing Christmas Eve moment when, in 2018, he raised doubts about Santa's existence in a call with a seven-year-old boy.

"Are you still a believer in Santa Claus? 'Cuz at seven it's marginal, right?" he said.

The Santa tracker presented by NORAD dates to 1955, when a Colorado newspaper advertisement misprinted a phone number to connect children with Santa and mistakenly directed them to the military nerve center hotline.

Libya urged to reschedule presidential polls 'swiftly'

AFP, London

The US and four European powers on Friday urged war-torn Libya to quickly set a new date for delayed presidential elections.

In a joint statement, they urged the North African country's leaders to "swiftly" name a new date and issue the final list of presidential candidates, which had been a key point of contention in the run-up to the polls that were set for Friday.

"We call on the relevant Libyan authorities to respect the aspirations of the Libyan people for prompt elections," said Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the United States.

The authorities overseeing the country's first-ever presidential election said earlier this week that holding it on Friday as scheduled would be "impossible".

The vote was intended to mark a fresh start for the oil-rich country, a year after a landmark ceasefire and more than a decade after its 2011 revolt that toppled and killed dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

But speculation of a delay had been mounting for weeks. There were bitter disputes over the vote's legal basis, the powers of the winner and the candidacies of several deeply divisive figures.

The country's electoral commission has suggested rescheduling the vote to January 24, but it remains to be seen whether agreement can be reached among divided institutions.

Libya's parliament is to meet on Monday to debate a new timeline.

Another key issue will be the mandate of the current interim government, which was meant to end Friday with the elections.



A family asks for alms along a highway in Surigao City, Surigao del Norte province yesterday, more than a week after Super Typhoon Rai devastated the province.

PHOTO: AFP

'We still have hope'

Philippine typhoon survivors wish for roofs and food at Christmas

AFP, Alegria

Father Ricardo Virtudazo stands in a pool of water in his typhoon-hit church in the southern Philippines

delivering Christmas Day mass to dozens of devotees whose wishes this year were for new roofs, food and fine weather.

More than a week after Typhoon Rai cut a swathe through the archipelago, killing nearly 400 people and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless, survivors clung to family and faith after their homes -- and planned festivities -- were wiped out.

"What's important is all of us are safe," said Joy Parera, 31, attending Christmas mass with her husband at San Isidro Labrador Parish church in the town of Alegria, on the northern tip of Mindanao island.

A light rain soaked the pews and white tiled floor of the damaged

church, which has been left with a gaping hole in the roof after Rai ravaged the area.

Devotees wore masks as they gathered inside the church festooned with Christmas decorations and prayed for a better year.

"We still have hope," Virtudazo told AFP. "In spite of the calamities they experience, they still have faith in God."

Christmas is one of the most important events in the Christian calendar and in the Catholic-majority Philippines, families typically gather to share a meal.

But the widespread destruction caused by Rai in the southern and central regions of the country has dampened celebrations as many survivors plead for drinking water and food.

Mindanao, Siargao, Dinagat and Bohol islands are among the most

devastated by the storm, which knocked out electricity, tore off roofs, shredded wooden buildings, felled concrete power poles and uprooted trees.

The scale of the damage, lack of mobile phone signal or internet in many areas, and depleted government coffers after the Covid-19 response were hampering efforts to distribute aid.

Nardel Vicente said his Christmas wish was for someone to help him buy a new roof for his house in Alegria after it was wrecked by Rai, which hit the country on December 16 as a super typhoon.

Jobless and with little money to spare, Vicente said his family would not be able to prepare a festive meal this year.

But he added: "That's ok -- we're alive. It's better than welcoming Christmas with a dead loved one."

