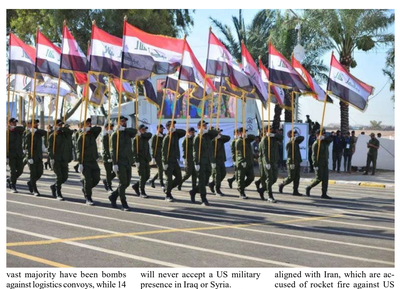
The Kabul Times DAILY
facebook.com/thekabultimes
INTERNATIONAL
Saratan 08-1400 Tuesday 29 June 2021 INo: 82- Vol: LIX
www.thekabultimes.gov.af

USD 01	GBP 01	INR 1000	PKR 1000	EUR 01	IRR 1000	AED 01
AFN 79.40	AFN 109.45	AFN 1078	AFN 498	AFN 94.73	AFN 0.37	AFN 21.22

US carries out air raids on Iran-backed militias in Syria, Iraq



The United States carried out another round of air raids against Iran-backed armed groups in Iraq and Syria, in response to drone attacks against US personnel and facilities in Iraq, with the militias threatening to retaliate.

In a statement on Sunday, the US military said it targeted operational and weapons storage facilities at two locations in Syria and one location in Iraq.

It did not say whether it believed anyone was killed or injured, but the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least five fighters were killed and several others wounded.

Syria's state-run SANA news agency said one child had been killed and at least three other people were wounded.

The attacks came at the direction of US President Joe Biden, the second time he has ordered retaliatory attacks against Iran-backed militia since taking office five months ago. Biden last ordered limited bombing against a target in Syria in February, that time in response to rocket attacks in Iraq.

"The United States took necessary, appropriate, and deliberate action designed to limit the risk of escalation – but also to send a clear and unambiguous deterrent message," John Kirby, spokesman for the Pentagon, said in a statement.

Kirby said the targets were selected because "these facilities are utilized by Iran-backed militias that are engaged in unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks against US personnel and facilities in Iraq".

The Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada military factions were among the "several Iran-backed militia groups" that had used the targeted facilities, Kirby added.

Two Iraqi militia officials told The Associated Press in Baghdad that four militiamen were killed in the air strikes near the border with Syria.

Armed groups aligned with Iran in a statement named four members of the Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada faction they said were killed in the attack on the Syria-Iraq border. They vowed to retaliate.

Threat of retaliation

Al Jazeera's Mahmoud Abdelwahed, who is in Iraq's capital Baghdad, described the US attacks as "significant" and said Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), an umbrella group that includes the Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada brigades, vowed revenge.

"The PMF say that they will attack American military facilities with missiles. Politicians affiliated with the PMF have also been tweeting, saying the United States only understands the language of force," he said.

"We also know these groups are blaming the United States for not withdrawing from Iraq and for not implementing the decision by the Iraqi House of Representatives," he added, referring to a parliament resolution approved in January last year, which called for all foreign troops to leave the country in the wake of the US killing of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani.

The US now has 2,500 troops in Iraq, deployed as part of an international coalition to fight what remains of the ISIL (ISIS) group.

There have been more than 40 attacks against US interests in Iraq since the start of the year. The vast majority have been bombs against logistics convoys, while 14 were rocket attacks.

Two US officials, speaking to the Reuters news agency on condition of anonymity, also said Iran-backed militias had carried out at least five drone attacks against facilities in Iraq used by US and coalition personnel since April. One of the locations the US targeted on Sunday included a facility that was used to launch and recover the drones, a defence official said.

The US military used F-15 and F-16 jet fighters in the air raids and said the pilots returned safely. The attacks came even as Biden's administration is looking to potentially revive a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, known as the JCPOA. Critics have said Iran cannot be trusted and have pointed to the drone attacks as further evidence that Iran and its proxies will never accept a US military presence in Iraq or Syria.

Biden and the White House declined to comment on the attacks on Sunday.

Lawrence Korb, a former US assistant secretary of defence, said the raids could "very definitely" be seen as Biden "serving notice" on Iran as negotiations continue to restart its nuclear deal with world powers.

"The first time he used military force was about a month after he was inaugurated," Korb told Al Jazeera. "I think it was no accident that he did it then to send that signal to Iran. The fact that he's doing it now while they are about to undergo the seventh round of the talks on the JCPOA is him saying: 'Just because we are there, it doesn't mean we are going to ignore it [other issues]'."

Iraq's government is struggling to deal with militias ideologically aligned with Iran, which are accused of rocket fire against US forces and of involvement in killing peaceful pro-democracy activists.

Earlier in June, Iraq released Iran-aligned militia commander Qasim Muslih, who was arrested in May on terrorism-related charges, after authorities found insufficient evidence against him.

Kirby said of Sunday's air raids: "As a matter of international law, the United States acted pursuant to its right of self-defence. The strikes were both necessary to address the threat and appropriately limited in scope."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a statement on Sunday the US air strikes "appear to be a targeted and proportional response to a serious and specific threat," adding, "protecting the military heroes who defend our freedoms is a sacred priority".

'Arab Alliance' meets in Iraq in first visit in decades for an Egyptian leader

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and Jordan's King Abdullah met in Baghdad on Sunday during the first visit by an Egyptian head of state to Iraq since Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990.

The first Gulf War ruptured diplomatic relations between Iraq and Egypt, but these have improved in recent years with many senior officials from both countries exchanging visits.

The US has been urging Iraq to boost ties with Arab nations to counter Iran's influence and Sisi's visit is for a third round of talks between Egypt, Jordan and Iraq aimed at closer security, economic, trade and investment cooperation.

In recent years, Iraq had signed cooperation deals in the energy, health and education sectors with both countries.

On Sunday, the three leaders discussed several areas of regional interest, including the recent development on the Palestinian issue, combating terrorism and economic cooperation, an Egypt presidency statement said.

"The leaders stressed the need to intensify consultation and coordination between the three countries on the most important regional issues," it added.

Kadhimi, Sisi and Abdullah held a summit in Amman last year and were due to hold another in Baghdad in April, but this was delayed after a deadly train crash in Egypt. Egypt signed 15 deals and memoranda of understanding in sectors including oil, roads, housing, construction and trade in February after Iraq's cabinet in December approved renewing its contract to supply the Egyptian General Petroleum Corporation (EGPC) with 12 million barrels of Basra light crude for 2021. Iraq is also planning to build a pipeline that is meant to export 1 million barrels per day of Iraqi crude from the southern city of Basra to Jordan's Red Sea port of Aqaba. **alarabiya**

Saudi Arabia to inoculate those aged 12 to 18 with Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine

Saudi Arabia will start inoculating young people aged 12 to 18 against COVID-19 with the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine after it was approved by the Saudi Food and Drug Authority, the health ministry said on a tweet on Sunday.

The Kingdom has inoculated at least 70 percent of its adult population, with more than 16.8 million COVID-19 first doses administered, adding that it will launch the next campaign for second doses for those aged 50 and above.

Saudi Arabia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Waleed al-Khuraiji said the government has "devoted all its efforts" to confront the COVID-19 pandemic.

Al-Khuraiji delivered a speech on behalf of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan at the virtual ministerial meeting for international cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Kingdom took the necessary precautionary and health measures "in accordance with the highest international medical standards and the announced protocols of the World Health Organization," the deputy foreign minister said.

Outbreaks emerge across Australia in 'new phase' of pandemic

Australian leaders will hold an emergency meeting on Monday, over a spike in Covid infections.

The Sydney outbreak linked to the highly contagious Delta variant has grown to 128 cases.

Cases have also been recorded in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia.

Officials say it is a "critical time" for the country, which has kept case numbers low with border closures and lockdowns.

This is the first time in months that cases have emerged in multiple parts of the country at the same time.

"I think we're entering a new phase of this pandemic, with the more contagious Delta strain," Treasurer Josh Frydenberg told ABC News on Monday.

The escalation in Covid infections has prompted lockdowns in the cities of Sydney and Darwin, as well as restrictions across four states.

The situation remains most concerning in Sydney, where some 5 million residents are subject to a stay-at-home order.

The New South Wales (NSW) state government on Sunday expanded a lockdown to cover all of greater Sydney, the Blue Mountains, Central Coast and Wollongong.

Many businesses and venues have been ordered shut.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian on Monday reported 18 new cases, down from the 30 reported the previous day. Nearly 59,000 people had been tested in the past 24 hours.

"We have to be prepared for the numbers to bounce around and we have to be prepared for the numbers to go up considerably because with this strain, we are seeing almost 100% of transmission within households," she said.

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard has described the Delta variant which was first detected in India as a "very formidable foe".

"No matter what defensive steps we're taking at the moment, the virus seems to understand how to counter-attack," he said.

Rapid spread

While the two cases in Western Australia have been traced to the Sydney outbreak, the positive cases in Queensland and the Northern Territory have been linked to people who became infected despite completing hotel quarantine.

The remote Northern Territory has recorded seven cases, prompting authorities to extend a lockdown of the capital, Darwin on Monday until Friday.

The Delta outbreak there had spread from a mining camp and now posed significant risk to the community, officials said.

"For the first time, we do have public exposure sites in the Northern Territory," said Chief Minister Michael Gunner.

Authorities are also on alert after a member of cabin crew staff for Virgin Australia worked on five domestic flights while infected with the Delta variant. The airline has contacted all affected passengers and crew.

Travel bubble suspended

The outbreaks have prompted some inter-state and international border closures.

New Zealand paused its quarantine-free travel bubble with all of Australia until at least Tuesday because of the latest outbreak.

The travel corridor between the two neighbours was opened in April. Travel between New Zealand and specific Australian regions has been closed for short periods as outbreaks emerged, but this is the first time the bubble has been shut with all of Australia.

Australia has maintained very low rates of Covid transmission throughout the pandemic due to a closed-border policy, stringent quarantine and swift testing and tracing systems.

It has recorded no deaths this year, but 910 deaths and 30,450 cases overall.

The newer, more infectious Covid variants however, have strained the nation's defences - with several small outbreaks this year.

Sydney's outbreak first emerged two weeks ago in Bondi, the famous beach suburb, before spreading rapidly across the city. **bbc**

Hong Kong police arrest former Apple Daily journalist at airport

Police in Hong Kong have arrested a former senior journalist with the now-closed Apple Daily at the airport on Sunday night on a suspected national security offence, according to local media.

Police, who typically do not name arrested people, said in a statement that a 57-year-old man had been arrested at the airport for "conspiring to collude with foreign countries or foreign forces to endanger national security".

They added that he had been detained and investigations were continuing.

The South China Morning Post and Citizen News identified the detainee as Fung Wai-kong, an editor and columnist at the now-closed pro-democracy tabloid.

He was believed to be leaving for the United Kingdom when he was arrested, they said.

Fung is the seventh member of staff at the pro-democracy Apple Daily newspaper to be arrested on national security grounds in recent weeks. The arrests come as authorities in Hong Kong crack down on dissent in the semi-autonomous city, arresting most of the city's prominent pro-democracy figures and revamping Hong Kong's election laws to keep opposition voices out of the legislature.

Earlier this month, authorities froze $2.3m worth of assets linked to the Apple Daily newspaper, forcing it to cease operations. The Apple Daily printed its final edition last week, citing employee safety and an inability to pay wages. Hong Kong authorities say dozens of the paper's articles may have violated a China-imposed national security law, the first instance of authorities taking aim at media reports under the legislation.

The Hong Kong Journalists' Association, reacting to reports of the airport arrest, condemned the police for targeting journalists again, and asked them to explain the incident.

"The HKJA reiterates that freedom of speech and freedom of the press are core values ?of Hong Kong," it said in a statement. "If even the writing of the literati cannot be tolerated, it will be difficult for Hong Kong to be regarded as an international city."

The shutdown of Apple Daily and the arrest of its journalists have sent a chill through Hong Kong's media industry. The online pro-democracy outlet Stand News said in a statement late on Sunday that it would remove commentaries published on its site before June and halt its fundraising efforts because of concerns over the sweeping national security law. The measures were taken to protect the news outlet's supporters, writers and editorial staffers in the "literary inquisition" of Hong Kong, Stand News said in a statement.

Despite the precautionary measures taken, Stand News pledged to keep reporting the news.

"In the past six and a half years, the Stand News team has been through trials and hardships with the people of Hong Kong, cherishing each other and weaving the common memory of Hong Kong's survival," it said in a statement. "To pass on these memories, we will stick to our posts, walk with the people of Hong Kong … and write and record the news and happenings in Hong Kong."