

**President Saleh vows to return to Yemen 'soon'**  
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SANAA, Aug 17 — Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh said yesterday he would soon return home from Saudi Arabia where he is recovering from a June assassination attempt that followed months of mass protests against his 33 years in power.

Saleh's return would dismay demonstrators who had hoped his sojourn in Riyadh would become permanent and would also irk the United States, which has urged its former ally to stay away.

"See you soon in Sanaa," said a feisty-looking Saleh at the end of a televised speech, which was watched by an audience of some 6,000 of his tribal supporters in the Yemeni capital.

Saleh, who looked in much better health than in his last televised appearance from a hospital in Riyadh, attacked opposition parties, and tribesmen who have sided with them, as "highway robbers" and "opportunists" who had hijacked the grassroots protest movement calling for his own removal.

"There is a political party in the opposition whose slogan claims it is the party of Islam. What Islam? They have distorted Islam," he said, referring to the Islamist Islam party.

Popular protests against Saleh snowballed after uprisings ousted veteran presidents in Tunisia and Egypt this year, but the Yemeni leader has clung on, defying international pressure and thrice backing out of a Gulf-brokered transition deal.

In his speech, Saleh, who has previously pledged not to stand for another term in 2013, reiterated that he would only hand over power "via elections, not via coups."

Analysts said it remained to be seen whether Saleh would in fact return, in defiance of US and Saudi pressure for a transition of power after seven months of unrest which has brought Yemen close to civil war and crippled its economy.

"He is in a difficult situation as it is unclear whether Washington and especially the Saudis will allow him to go back," said Theodore Karats, a security analyst at the Dubai -based ENIGMA group, adding that Saleh was under pressure to return from relatives who hold top military posts in Yemen.

The United States and Saudi Arabia once saw Saleh as an ally against an ambitious Yemen-based al Qaeda wing, but are thought to have concluded that he is now a liability who is only worsening the instability in which militants thrive.

#### Transition deal

In Washington, US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland declined comment on whether Saleh should return to Yemen and repeated the US view that he should sign a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to ease him from power.

"Saleh, before he left Yemen, made a commitment to sign the GCC agreement, to move forward with a democratic transition," she said. "If he is well enough to make a statement, he is well enough to sign the GCC agreement and allow his country to move on."

"We are interested in the actions he takes to allow his country to move on democratically — wherever he does those from," she added. "I am not going to comment on whether he stays or whether he goes. What we need him to do is sign the document."

Saleh's tenacity has frustrated many Yemenis who thought they had seen the last of him when he flew to Riyadh for treatment after the bomb blast at his palace mosque in June.

A member of Saleh's ruling General People's Congress party said this week that senior Islam member Hamid al-Ahmar, who owns Yemen's Sabayon mobile network, was the "prime suspect" in the assassination attempt. Lamar has denied involvement.

Sitting at a desk, Saleh stopped short of accusing Islam of being behind the attempt on his life.

Yemen's complex web of conflicts includes a months-long army campaign against al Qaeda-linked militants who have seized areas in the southern Abyan province, including its capital Zinjibar.

Fighting in north

At least 10 tribesmen were killed this week in fighting between pro-opposition tribesmen and Saleh loyalists in the increasingly volatile Arhat area north of the capital Sanaa.

Armed tribesmen from Arhat, 40km north of Sanaa, had prevented government troops from reaching the capital, where anti-Saleh protesters have camped out since February.

An opposition source said the Republican Guard launched a tank-backed assault on villages in the Arhat area Monday evening, killing at least 10 anti-Saleh tribesmen.

Arhat is not far from the Republican Guard's main Soma base, which tribesmen tried to seize last month. At the time, the government said tribesmen wanted to use it as a stepping stone to capture Sanaa airport, which the tribes denied.

A defence ministry website Monday cited tribal sources as accusing hard line Muslim cleric Sheikh Abdul-Majid al-Zindani, once a political ally of Saleh, of summoning more than 300 al Qaeda-linked "terrorists" to join the fight.

Saleh's foes accuse him of exaggerating the al Qaeda threat, or even of deliberately orchestrating the Qaeda takeover of Zinjibar, to try to extract support from Washington and Riyadh. — Reuters

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