

Yemen's Saleh seeks exile in reluctant Oman

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MUSCAT, Jan 25 — Outgoing Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh is seeking exile in neighbouring Oman but the sultanate is reluctant to host him for fear of harming relations with Yemen, diplomats said yesterday.

Saleh left Sanaa on Sunday and headed to the United States for medical treatment after a brief stopover in Oman. He had said in a parting speech that he would return to Yemen.

A foreign diplomat in Muscat said Saleh had sought permission to reside there. An Omani government source declined to confirm or deny receiving such a request but said Oman would be reluctant to agree to it in case it would harm future ties with Yemen.

A spokesman for the Yemeni embassy in Washington, Mohammed Albasha, said: "Reports suggesting that President Saleh will not return to Yemen and that he is seeking asylum or refuge in Oman or the US are nonsense. I strongly deny them."

The United States, which endorsed a plan to coax Saleh out of office by granting him immunity from prosecution over the deaths of protesters during an uprising against his rule, defended its decision to issue him a visa, despite criticism that it would be seen as sheltering him.

"We ... believe that his absence from Yemen at this critical juncture will help facilitate a transition that completes the end of his rule, helps Yemen and ultimately has a positive effect on the rights and dignity of the Yemeni people," White House spokesman Jay Carney said on Monday.

"Our policy focus remains on preventing further instability and keeping that transition on track," he said, adding Saleh would stay in the United States for a limited time only.

The United States and Saudi Arabia fear protracted political upheaval in Yemen could give al Qaeda's regional wing a foothold near oil shipping routes through the Red Sea.

Those concerns were underscored when Islamist militants seized the town of Radda last week led by Tareq al-Dahab, a relative of US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, whom Washington accused of a main role in the Yemeni branch of al Qaeda and assassinated in a drone strike last year.

Dahab had said he would withdraw from Radda, about 170km southeast of Sanaa, if the town was run according to Islamic law and several jailed militants, including his brother Nabil, were released.

A tribesman negotiating with the militants on behalf of the government said they had agreed to Nabil's release and the formation of the council but refused to let militants run it, at which point the talks broke down.

Third day of strike

Despite Saleh's departure, many believe he and his supporters will still wield influence over Yemen, where a year of anti-government demonstrations has been punctuated by warfare between Saleh's forces, those of a rebel general and tribal militias.

Yemeni air force officers blocked main roads in the capital yesterday, the third day of a strike demanding the resignation of their commander, a half-brother of Saleh, witnesses said.

Hundreds gathered outside the residence of acting leader Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, calling for General Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar to be dismissed. Others sat in the road, blocking traffic.

The strike is part of a wave of work stoppages that has gripped Yemen since Saleh signed a Gulf-brokered deal formally handing power to Hadi in November.

Political turmoil has worsened the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, which has half a million people displaced by various internal conflicts, including fighting between government troops and Islamists in the south of the country.

Maria Calivis, director of the UN childrens' fund UNICEF for the Middle East and North Africa told a news conference in Sanaa yesterday that 500,000 Yemeni children were now at risk of death from malnourishment.

Four people were injured in an explosion in the village of al-Maajilah, in southern Abyan province, which a local official said was caused by unexploded ordnance from an air strike.

Government forces have used air strikes in the province against alleged members of al Qaeda, the target of a US "counter-terrorism" drive that includes the use of drones. Dozens of people were killed in a 2009 strike in the area. — Reuters

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