

US warns Yemen to be focus in “worldwide” war

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Tensions mounted Monday in advance of a widely expected expansion of US military operations inside Yemen, with the US, British, French and other embassies either closing down entirely or sharply curtailing operations, with many foreign personnel leaving the country.

Yemen is being targeted in the aftermath of the attempted bombing of a Northwest Airlines jetliner near Detroit, allegedly directed by al Qaeda operatives based in that country. In his Saturday radio speech, US President Barack Obama for the first time publicly named al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as the organizer of the Christmas Day attack.

Military and intelligence forces of the Yemeni government have mounted a series of attacks on what officials said were al Qaeda targets inside the country, which has multiple internal rebellions and secessionist movements that have taken up arms against the regime of longtime president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

On Monday, Yemeni security officials told Western news agencies they had killed two militants who were bodyguards for an al Qaeda leader allegedly planning a terrorist attack on the US embassy in Sanaa, the capital city. The leader, Mohammed al-Haniq, escaped.

Army vehicles have been mobilized on the streets of Sanaa, blocking access to the residential area that is home to many Western embassies. Besides the US, Britain and France, Japan, Germany, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands all cut back or suspended embassy operations and announced new security procedures, including a ban on walk-in visits without an appointment.

The top US military officer in the Middle East, General David Petraeus, head of US Central Command, met with President Saleh on Saturday in Sanaa to

discuss expanded US military and security aid to his government, a dictatorship in power for three decades. He delivered a personal letter to Saleh from Obama.

Petraeus announced that the US would more than double its current \$70 million a year in assistance, but the Pentagon said Monday that the details of this increase were still being worked out. Press reports indicate that US Special Forces are already on the ground inside Yemen, engaged in “joint training” with their Yemeni counterparts. This may well include participating in or leading raids on alleged al Qaeda targets.

US and British officials have made increasingly bellicose statements about the crisis in the region. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton portrayed the current low-intensity warfare in Yemen as a threat to the world, saying, “We see global implications from the war in Yemen and the ongoing efforts by al Qaeda in Yemen to use it as a base for terrorist attacks far beyond the region.”

A key US senator, Democrat Claire McCaskill of Missouri, told CNN Sunday, “President Obama said very clearly and very forcefully that there is a war against terror and violence that is a vast network. And we have been taking it to that network through the intelligence community, through additional resources in Somalia and Yemen. Unlike a myopic focus on Iraq, this administration is going worldwide in this war and is focused on it.”

In a Sunday interview with the BBC, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown also cited the wide scope for the conflict, saying that in addition to security measures at airports and embassies, “We’ve got to also get back to the source of this, which is Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and we’ve got to recognize that we’ve got a group of young people who have been radicalized as a

result of teaching by extremist clerics.”

Brown’s office announced that Britain and the US had agreed to work together to tackle “the emerging terrorist threat” from both Yemen and Somalia, which is just across the Gulf of Aden. This will include funding and training a new counterterrorism police force in Yemen.

Brown announced that Britain would host a summit in London January 28 to discuss ways to combat radicalization in Yemen. “The international community must not deny Yemen the support it needs to tackle extremism,” he declared.

The meeting would serve to coordinate military, security and economic assistance to the country, which is the poorest of the Arab nations. It is also one of the most heavily armed, with published estimates that there are 60 million guns in the possession of a population of 25 million, who have experienced several outbreaks of civil war over the past 40 years.

Press reports from Yemen suggested that the Iraq war has been a major radicalizing factor, with hundreds of Yemenis going to Iraq to fight against the US invasion and occupation, and now returning to their homes. There are also thousands of Yemenis who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s, serving, like Osama bin Laden, in the US-backed mujaheddin forces against the Soviet-backed regime then in power in Kabul.

While White House and Pentagon officials have publicly downplayed the prospects for military action involving ground troops, there are widespread expectations of some form of military strike with missiles, drones or fighter-bombers, all of which have been used in Somalia against alleged Al Qaeda targets.

Time magazine mused about the possibility, in a column headlined: “Al-Qaeda in Yemen: Does the U.S. Have a Military Option?” The magazine reported: “Now the Administration is assessing the wisdom of various military strikes on supposed al-Qaeda training sites inside Yemen. But there are few good options.... missile strikes into a country run by allies could prove politically disastrous for a nation whose citizenry seethes with anti-American sentiment.”

Also Monday, Washington announced stepped-up security measures for passengers on international flights into the United States, with people traveling from 14 countries to be subjected to “full body pat-

down and physical inspection of property” or full-body scanners. The 14 countries include Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria, listed as “state sponsors of terrorism,” as well as others described as “terrorism-prone” or “countries of interest” to US intelligence agencies: Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Yemen.

The legal director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Nawar Skora, said he would file a formal protest against the new rule, which he said placed all citizens and residents of these countries under suspicion as terrorists. “This is extreme and very dangerous,” he said. “All of a sudden people are labeled as being related to terrorism just because of the nation they are from.”



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