

Heavy fighting in capital of Yemen

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Heavy fighting between anti-government rebels and forces loyal to president Ali Abdullah Saleh raged through Wednesday night and into Thursday in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen. Dozens of people were believed killed, many of them civilians caught in the crossfire between tribal militiamen and various factions of army troops.

At least three separate military conflicts were taking place across Yemen. In the capital city, as many as 200 people have been killed in ten days of fighting sparked by Saleh's reneging on an agreement to step down as president after 33 years of authoritarian rule. It was the third time this year that Saleh has gone back on such a deal.

Other conflicts were taking place in the southern city of Taiz, where troops loyal to Saleh massacred unarmed demonstrators, killing an estimated 68 people, and in Zinjibar on the coast of the Gulf of Aden, where Saleh called in air strikes on his own citizens, claiming that "terrorists" linked to Al Qaeda had seized control of the town.

The fighting in Sanaa was both the bloodiest and the most immediately threatening to the survival of Saleh's rule. A two-day ceasefire collapsed Tuesday night, with renewed gunfire between Saleh's troops and militiamen headed by Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar, leader of the Hashed, the country's largest tribe.

In a development that has ominous implications for the regime, tanks controlled by a dissident military officer, General Ali Mohsen, were said to have joined in action with the militiamen in clashes in the Hassaba district in the northern part of the capital, where most streets and large buildings are barricaded by the rival armed groups.

A government spokesman said, "What was new in today's clashes is the use of armored vehicles ... which the Ahmar don't have." The official, deputy information minister Abdu al-Janadi, said the

headquarters of the ruling party, the General Peoples Congress, had been attacked.

The Yemeni defense ministry said that Special Forces, commanded by Saleh's son Ahmed, had been deployed to retake government buildings held by al-Ahmar's militiamen. Al Jazeera reported that another 2,000 tribesmen had entered Sanaa to reinforce al-Ahmar.

The British *Guardian* reported that the Presidential Guard, another elite unit under Saleh's personal control, had attacked the headquarters of an armored brigade commanded by Brigadier General Mohammed Khalil, which had previously been considered neutral in the conflict.

The newspaper added that, "on Tuesday, Saleh imposed collective punishment on the Hassaba neighbourhood by cutting water supplies and electricity... There was also fighting for the first time in the Hada neighbourhood, a stronghold for Saleh supporters in the south of the capital. The interior ministry said in a statement that tribesmen had taken over a five storey building there after clashing with the army."

The *New York Times* reported "large numbers of tribal fighters surging south toward the capital" and that "tanks and armored vehicles could be seen rolling to Sanaa" from the opposite direction to reinforce Saleh, suggesting that both sides were mobilizing forces for a final confrontation in the Yemeni capital.

Thousands of people were fleeing the city to escape the urban warfare. There were reports of young men forming defense committees to protect their homes and keep the fighters on both sides from using them as military positions.

The Saleh government has been under siege by a mass opposition protest movement for more than three months, with hundreds of thousands demonstrating for an end to his dictatorial rule and occupying main

squares in Sanaa, Taiz, Aden and other cities. The regime responded with sporadic violence until last week, when full-blown civil war erupted in the capital.

Last Friday, for the first time, the Yemeni military launched air strikes against its opponents, using attack helicopters to target a military checkpoint seized by tribal militiamen at Al Fardha, east of the capital. This was followed by air strikes by fighter jets on Zinjibar Monday, which people in the city said had targeted residential areas.

Saleh has portrayed the armed opposition to his regime as inspired by Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula, an offshoot of the terrorist group founded by Osama bin Laden. Press reports, however, described the militants who seized control in Zinjibar as members of a group called the Aden Army, which fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s as part of the US-backed war against Soviet occupation forces, and then returned home and sided with Saleh in a 1994 civil war against secessionist rebels in southern Yemen.

The complex and murky conflict in Yemen has sent alarm bells ringing in the major imperialist centers, particularly Washington, a longtime sponsor of Saleh's regime. Yemen has a key strategic position, with a long border with Saudi Arabia, the world's leading oil exporter, and a long coastline, along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which is a key route for oil shipments from the Persian Gulf to Europe.

On Wednesday the White House announced that Obama's counterterrorism adviser, John O. Brennan, would visit Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates this week to discuss "the deteriorating situation in Yemen."

Brennan held talks with officials in Riyadh, the Saudi capital city, then traveled on to the UAE. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the two strongest powers in the Gulf Cooperation Council, which groups the six oil-rich monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

The GCC negotiated previous deals with Saleh to leave power in return for amnesty for all crimes committed during his three decades of rule. But, each time he refused to sign or implement the agreement.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton called Saleh's failure to carry out his promise to resign "a source of great conflict." She told reporters in Washington, "We cannot expect this conflict to end unless President Saleh and his government move out of

the way to permit the opposition and civil society to begin a transition to political and economic reform."

What US imperialism means by "political reform" is the integration of a section of the bourgeois opposition into positions of power, while "economic reform" means further opening up Yemen to machinations of the multinational corporations and Western banks.

It is quite likely that the rebellion by the tribal forces headed by Sadiq al-Ahmar, as well as the split in the Yemeni military, are prompted by pressure from Washington to push Saleh out of power as quickly as possible.

The Pentagon and CIA have longstanding relations with Yemeni officers like General Ali Mohsen, with the US having supplied some \$200 million in military aid to the impoverished country over the last four years.

The so-called tribal forces are closely linked to imperialism as well. Sadiq al-Ahmar's brother, Hamid al-Ahmar, is both a billionaire and a main leader of Islah (Reform), the moderate bourgeois party that is being groomed to play a major role in a restructured Yemeni government.

The imperialist powers, the Gulf monarchies, and the various bourgeois factions in Yemen are all in agreement on the overriding necessity to block any popular revolution from below, which would threaten to spread beyond Yemen's borders and challenge their interests throughout the Arabian peninsula.



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