

Beirut, Iran attacks spark fears of 'regional war' for W Asia, US

US, 12 Allies Warn Houthis To Cease Red Sea Attacks Or Face Consequences

Washington: American, Israeli and Lebanese officials insist that few parties want Israel's war in the Gaza Strip to become a wider conflict that engulfs West Asia. But the assassination of a top Hamas leader in Lebanon on Tuesday, and the deaths of scores of people in twin explosions in Iran on Wednesday, threatened to bring West Asia — and the US — closer to the brink of a regional war, which the Biden administration has tried to stave off since Oct 7 Hamas' attacks.

Just hours after the bombs went off in Iran, the US and 12 of its allies issued a written warning to another militia group in the region, the Houthis of Yemen, who have been mounting near-daily missile, drone and attacks on commercial vessels. So far the US has held back from retaliating against Houthi bases in Yemen, in large part because it does not want to undermine a fragile truce in Yemen's civil war.

But now Biden officials are signalling that their patience is running out. "Let our message now be clear: We call for the immediate end of these illegal attacks and release of unlawfully detained vessels and crews," White House officials said in a statement on Wednesday. "The Houthis," it continued, "will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region's critical waterways." The warning — also signed by Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Japan, Singapore and the Netherlands — stopped short of threatening military strikes.

Just hours after the "final warning", an armed unmanned surface vessel launched from Houthi-controlled Yemen



Israeli Air Force prepares a soldier for evacuation at a beach in Gaza Strip

US air strike in central Baghdad kills an Iran-backed militia commander

Baghdad: A US air strike on the headquarters of an Iran-backed militia in central Baghdad on Thursday killed a high-ranking militia commander, militia officials said. Thursday's strike comes amid mounting regional tensions fuelled by the Israel-Hamas war. It also coincides with a push by Iraqi officials for US-led coalition forces to leave the country.

The Popular Mobilization Force, or PMF, a coalition of militias that is nominally under the control of the Iraqi military, announced in a statement that its deputy head of operations in Baghdad, Mushtaq Taleb al-Saidi, or "Abu Taqwa," had been killed "as a result of brutal American ag-

gression." A US official who spoke on condition of anonymity confirmed that US forces had conducted a strike Thursday against the group Haraqat al-Nujaba. The group, one of the militias within PMF, was designated a terrorist organisation by Washington in 2019.

Iraqi military spokesman Yehia Rasool said that the Iraqi army blames the US-led International Coalition Forces for the "unprovoked attack on an Iraqi security body operating in accordance with the powers granted to it by" the Iraqi military. The PMF, a group of Iranian-backed, primarily Shia militias, is officially under the command of the Iraqi army. AP

got within a "couple of miles" of US navy and commercial vessels before detonating on Thursday. Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, the head of US navy operations in the Middle East, said it was the first time the Houthis had used an unmanned surface vessel since their harassment of commercial ships in the Red Sea. They have, however, used them in years past.

On Monday, Iran's navy announced the deployment of a flotilla of warships to the waterway. A senior Iranian official said dispatching the warships, which join an Iranian spy ship already in the region, was meant to signal that Iran is supporting the Houthis and to raise the stakes. But the official said Iran has no plans for the warships to engage in a confr-

ontation with US naval vessels.

Hezbollah, the powerful Lebanese militant group, has pledged that Tuesday's killing of Saleh Arouri, the Hamas leader, in a Beirut suburb, would not pass without a response. A key ally to Hamas, Hezbollah exercises de facto control over Beirut's southern suburbs and has been engaged in escalating clashes with Israeli forces for months. The circumstances surrounding the blasts at a memorial for Iranian General Qassim Suleimani, in Kerman, Iran, were murkier.

While Iran was quick to blame Israel, European and American officials said they doubted that the Israelis conducted the strike: Most of the Iranian actions against Iran have been highly targeted, from taking out the chief architect of Iran's nuclear program to blowing up specific nuclear and missile facilities. Three senior US officials and one European official said Wednesday that the Islamic State was a possible perpetrator. The IS on Thursday took responsibility for the blasts, but Iran has not yet acknowledged its claim.

Several US officials said it was too soon to predict whether any kind of wider war would erupt. Israel, the officials said, would not have struck Arouri without some belief that they could do so without escalating the conflict on the Lebanon border. But with the explosions, whatever the cause, coming so quickly after the assassination, there was little doubt that the risk of a spreading conflict was once more front of mind in the US and Europe. "The chances of a regional war go up from 15% to as high as 30%," said retired Adm. James Stavridis, ex-Nato commander. "Still relatively low, but higher than before, and certainly uncomfortably high." NYT

Vice Admiral Dinesh Tripathi is new Vice Chief of Naval Staff

NEW DELHI, Jan 4 (ANI)

VICE Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi took charge as the Vice Chief of the Naval Staff on Thursday.

Prior to his current appointment, Vice Admiral Tripathi served as the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOC-in-C) of the Western Naval Command.

An alumnus of Sainik School Rewa and the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, Vice Admiral Tripathi was commissioned into the Indian Navy on July 1, 1985. Specialising in Communication and Electronic Warfare, he has an illustrious career serving on frontline warships, including stints as Signal Communication Officer and Electronic Warfare Officer.

Vice Admiral Tripathi com-



New Vice Chief of Naval Staff Vice Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi (Left) with Indian Navy Chief Hydrographer Vice Admiral Adhir Arora (Right) prior to inspecting the Guard of Honour, at the South Block Lawns, in New Delhi on Thursday.

(ANI)

manded Indian Naval Ships Vinash, Kirch, and Trishul, demonstrating his leadership and operational skills. Throughout his career, he held various crucial operational and staff positions, such as Fleet Operations Officer of Western Fleet at Mumbai and Principal Director of Network Centric Operations at New Delhi.

Promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral, he served as Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Policy and Plans) at NHQ and Flag Officer Commanding Eastern Fleet. In June 2019, on reaching the rank of Vice Admiral, he assumed the role of Commandant of the Indian Naval Academy at Ezhimala, Kerala.

Subsequently, he held the position of Director General of Naval Operations from July 2020 to May 2021.

Fencing of Myanmar border unacceptable: Mizoram CM

'Move Would Amount To Acceptance Of British Blunder'

H C Vanlalruata | TNN

Aizawl: A day after the Centre decided to terminate the 40-year-old Free Movement Regime (FMR) in areas near the Myanmar border in the four northeastern states, Mizoram CM Lalduhoma said Thursday that any move to fence the porous border was unacceptable as it would amount to acceptance of a "blunder by the British colonial government".

The bilaterally agreed FMR allows people living along the border to travel up to 16km inside either country with passes for specified periods.

"The British government divided the Mizo people living in both India and Myanmar. The Mizo people reject the proposal to fence the border," officials quoted Lalduhoma as having told foreign minister Jaishankar.

The 74-year-old former IPS



CM of Mizoram Pu Lalduhoma with PM Narendra Modi in New Delhi on Thursday

officer met PM Narendra Modi on Thursday and Jaishankar — his former 1977 batchmate from the foreign service — on Wednesday in New Delhi, barely a month after his assembly poll landslide.

Mizoram rejects the British-demarcated border with the Chin state of Myanmar as this was done without consulting the Mizo people,

Lalduhoma is understood to have told Modi. The state shares a 700km border with Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Lalduhoma is understood to have pointed out to the PM that the people of Mizoram want to tend to refugees in the state as "they are not strangers, but brothers of the same blood". "The border divided the two countries, which is difficult to accept for us. We are craving to unite under one administrative unit. We want to include a Greater Mizoram concept in the 'Akhand Bharat' (Greater India) project," Lalduhoma was quoted by officials as having told Modi.

Mizoram has been sheltering thousands who fled ethnic conflict and political instability in Myanmar, Bangladesh and, this year, from Manipur. Lalduhoma also pressed for the Inner Line Permit regime to be streamlined. The PM asked him to submit a proposal in writing.

At \$4.6bn, healthcare sees 22 PE deals in '23: Report

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The healthcare sector continued to be a hub of private equity deal activity in 2023, with India registering 22 deals valued at \$4.6 billion. This is a tad lower than \$4.7 billion achieved in 2022.

The country's growing middle class is catalysing a significant surge in healthcare expenditure, propelled by the upswing in disposable incomes and a proliferation of insurtech platforms, alongside the presence of private payers, says Bain & Company's annual Global Healthcare Private Equity and M&A report.

India has seen a long-term rise in biopharma-related activity (for example, in generics and active pharmaceutical ingredient manufacturing), albeit with a slow-down year over year, while also witnessing growth in domestic demand driven by an expanding middle class and government insurance programmes. These macroeconomic dynamics, coupled with a number of successful exits by early investors in India — such as TPG's sale of a controlling stake in Care Hospitals to Blackstone — have propelled private equity sponsors to regard India as a place to deploy healthcare capital at scale, it adds.

Globally too, the sector held its own in a tepid market

with deals totalling around \$60 billion, despite higher global interest rates, inflationary pressures, and broader geopolitical uncertainty. Biopharma captured the bulk of dealmaking momentum, contributing 48% of global deal value, including six deals of over \$2 billion.

In 2024, investors will continue to bet on the transformative nature of generative AI, new modalities and inno-

three global position in small molecule and generic manufacturing, satisfying 50% of global vaccine needs.

Private equity investors, including Advent International, Carlyle, and PAG, capitalised on this growth, expanding in pharma services like CDMOs and APIs. India has historically served as the back-end for many US- and Europe-focused healthcare data and analytics companies. Re-

Growing Middle Class Spends

Bain & Company's Global Healthcare PE and M&A report findings:

Key drivers of sector

- Growing middle class catalysing the surge in healthcare expenditure
- Upswing in disposable incomes
- Proliferation of insurtech platforms
- Government insurance programmes



Likely areas of interest in 2024

- Investors will continue to bet on the transformative nature of generative AI
- New modalities and innovative therapies

vative therapies such as glucagon-like peptide-1 agonists (GLP-1s), and India as a place to deploy healthcare capital at scale, the report says.

Investors seeking to manage geopolitical risk began to broaden their horizons, with India representing the largest share of announced deal value and continuing to see a long-term rise in biopharma-related activity. The domestic pharmaceutical sector, buoyed by government policies and skilled talent, holds a top-

cent years, however, witnessed a surge in direct-to-consumer digital health companies especially in fitness, wellness, telemedicine, and insurtech.

Investments in Asia-Pacific are evolving, and India's favourable macro tailwinds have made it a leading destination for capital. India has traditionally seen investments in biopharma and providers, and it is still too soon to know whether green shoots in other areas can achieve comparable prominence, the report said.

India, Nepal seal 10,000 MW hydropower deal for 10 years

Visiting EAM Announces \$75M Grant To Kathmandu For Quake Relief

Kathmandu/Delhi: India and Nepal signed several agreements, including one for purchase of 10,000 MW of hydropower by India from Nepal, as foreign minister S Jaishankar held "comprehensive and productive" talks with his counterpart NP Saud and also called on President Ramchandra Paudel and Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda.

The agreement will facilitate export of 10,000 MW of electricity from Nepal to India in the next 10 years. The two countries had reached an understanding on electricity export during Prachanda's visit to India during May 31-June 3 last year.

"Discussions focused on our overall bilateral ties, trade & economic relations, land, rail & air connectivity projects, cooperation in defence & security, agriculture, energy, power, water resources, disaster management, tourism, civil aviation, people-to-people & cultural



Foreign minister S Jaishankar with Nepal PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' during a meeting in Kathmandu on Thursday

exchanges and development partnership," Jaishankar said on X, after chairing the 7th India-Nepal Joint Commission meeting with Saud.

During Jaishankar's visit, India also announced grant assistance to Nepal worth \$75 million for reconstruction of earthquake affected areas.

Besides the signing of the long-term power pact, three other agreements were also inked between the two sides. An agreement for

the implementation of high impact community development projects was also signed. An MoU for cooperation in renewal energy development between Nepal Electricity Authority and NTPC Ltd was also signed. Nepal and India also signed the launch service agreement for the Munal satellite developed by Nepal Academy of Science and Technology (NAST).

Jaishankar also witnessed the handing over of

the fifth tranche of earthquake relief supplies to Nepal. The country witnessed a powerful earthquake on November 3, in which 154 people were killed and hundreds of houses were damaged.

The two leaders also jointly inaugurated three cross-border transmission lines. These include 132 KVA Raxaul-Parwanipur, Kushaha Kataiya and New Nautanwa-Mainahia cross-border transmission lines, according to officials.

Nepal's foreign ministry said that various aspects of Nepal-India relations were discussed under the thematic areas of economic relations, connectivity, trade and transit, power and water resources, education and culture and political matters, among others.

Earlier, Jaishankar called on President Paudel and PM Prachanda during which the two sides exchanged substantive views on Nepal-India relations. TNN & AGENCIES

Houthis launch sea drone to attack ships hours after US, allies issue 'final warning'

WASHINGTON, Jan 4 (AP)

AN ARMED unmanned surface vessel launched from Houthi-controlled Yemen got within a "couple of miles" of US Navy and commercial vessels before detonating on Thursday, just hours after the White House and a host of partner nations issued a "final warning" to the Iran-backed militia group to cease the attacks or face potential military action.

Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, the head of US Navy operations in the Middle East, said it was the first time the Houthis had used an unmanned surface vessel, or USV, since their

harassment of commercial ships in the Red Sea began after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. They have, however, used them in years past.

Fabian Hinz, a missile expert and research fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said the USV's are a key part of the Houthi maritime arsenal and were used during previous battles against the Saudi coalition forces that intervened in Yemen's war. They have regularly been used as suicide drone boats that explode upon impact.

Most of the Houthis' USVs are likely assembled in Yemen but often fitted with compo-

nents made in Iran, such as computerized guidance systems, Hinz said.

The location of this latest attack was not immediately clear, but Cooper said it took place in international shipping lanes.

Since late October, the Houthis have launched scores of one-way attack drones and missiles at commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea. US Navy warships have also intercepted ballistic missiles the Pentagon says were headed toward Israel. Cooper said a total of 61 missiles and drones have been shot down by US warships.