UN envoy warns 'dire' military situation risks Yemen peace

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The fighting in Yemen has killed thousands of civilians and created the world's worst humanitarian crisis, leaving millions suffering from food and medical care shortages and pushing the country to the brink of famine last year.

The Yemen conflict began with the 2014 takeover of the capital Sanaa by the Houthis, who control much of the countryâ€™s north. (AP Photo/Hani Mohammed, File)

The UN special envoy for Yemen warned Tuesday the â€œincreasingly direâ€• military situation in the Arab worldâ€™s poorest country is putting UN efforts to end the five-year conflict at â€œgreat riskâ€• and causing dozens, and perhaps hundreds, of civilian casualties.

Martin Griffiths told the UN Security Council that the U.S.-backed Arab coalition battling to restore Yemenâ€™s internationally recognized government and Houthi Shiite rebels â€œhave announced expansive military goals and exchanged fierce rhetoric.â€•

Hostilities have escalated significantly along several fronts, including some which had been quiet for months, and reported airstrikes and cross-border aerial attacks â€œhave increased considerably,â€• he said in a video briefing from Geneva.

Griffiths also warned that the escalating military action could threaten the main port of Hodeida, which handles about 70% of Yemenâ€™s commercial and humanitarian imports. A December 2018 agreement led to the reopening of the port and the initial redeployment of rival forces but Griffiths said the situation in Hodeida today â€œis vulnerable to an increase in violence.â€™

UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock said escalating fighting in the Marib, Jawf and Sanaa governorates, which had been mostly quiet for the last two years, has displaced more than 35,000 people since mid-January.

â€œThis escalation, in addition to clashes in other places, has reversed the trend towards decreasing civilian casualties that we had seen in previous months,â€• he said, pointing to 160 civilians killed or wounded across Yemen in January and airstrikes on Saturday in Jawf that reportedly killed dozens of civilians.

The Yemen conflict began with the 2014 takeover of the capital Sanaa by the Houthis, who control much of the countryâ€™s north. The Saudi-led coalition allied with the government has been fighting the Houthis since 2015.

The fighting has killed thousands of civilians and created the worldâ€™s worst humanitarian crisis, leaving millions suffering from food and medical care shortages and pushing the country to the brink of famine last year.

In mid-January, Griffiths had reported to the council on a major reduction in military operations and expressed hope then that this would lead to talks between the government and the Iranian-backed Houthis on ending the conflict.

The UN envoy recalled that earlier report on â€œsigns of hope and momentum towards peaceâ€• at the start of his briefing on Tuesday, but also his concerns that renewed violence could reverse gains, make peace more difficult and worsen the humanitarian crisis.

Today, Griffiths told the council: â€œWe are witnessing in Yemen what we have long feared.â€•

The warring parties â€œhave reassured me many times of their belief in a peaceful, political solution to this conflict,â€• he said. â€œThe escalation directly contradicts the partiesâ€™ desire to move in that direction.â€•

Griffiths said leaders on both sides â€œhave the ability and responsibility to rein in the violence, scale down the rhetoric and commit to a more sustainable de-escalation.â€•

Britainâ€™s UN Ambassador Karen Pierce said the most important thing about the council was a call by all members for deescalation and starting a wider political process.

Lowcock criticized both sides but especially the Houthis for impeding humanitarian workers from helping the millions in need.

Last year, he said, the Houthis issued more than 200 regulations on humanitarian action, severely disrupting the delivery of aid and suggesting that humanitarian organizations pay a 2 percent tax to fund the rebelsâ€™ aid coordination body.

Last week, Lowcock said, the Houthis returned food looted from a U.N. World Food Program warehouse in Hajjah in December and announced they were dropping the proposed 2 percent levy and would implement a long-pending agreement on using biometrics to register aid recipients.

â€œWe welcome these announcements. And we are looking forward to seeing them implemented,â€• he said.

US Ambassador Kelly Craft warned the Houthis that the United States â€œmay be forced to consider suspending or reducing our assistance in northern Yemen as early as March unless undue Houthi interference ceases immediately and access to vulnerable populations improves.â€•

She accused Iran of undermining prospects for a political solution in Yemen, pointing to the U.S. Navyâ€™s interdiction just last week of â€œ358 Iranian-made missiles and other weapons on their way to the Houthis.â€•

Russiaâ€™s deputy UN ambassador Vladimir Safrankov urged talks between Yemenâ€™s warring parties, adding: â€œWe consider it harmful and counterproductive to stoke anti-Iran rhetoric.â€• He reiterated Russiaâ€™s proposal for a collective security agreement in the Persian Gulf region.

Safrankov said â€œa creative synthesisâ€œ of ideas from Russia along with France and Iran, who also have ideas on this issue, would establish a basis for international cooperation _ and that would help stop the war in Yemen, improve the situation in the Gulf and establish dialogue between Arab states and Iran.

- AP