

Yemen President Flees From Rebels

BY AHMED AL-HAJ AND
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Associated Press

SANAA, Yemen — President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi fled Yemen by sea Wednesday as Shiite rebels and their allies moved on his last refuge in the south, captured its airport and put a bounty on his head, officials said.

The departure of the close U.S. ally and the imminent fall of the southern port of Aden pushed Yemen further toward a violent collapse. It also threatened to turn the impoverished but strategic country into another proxy battle between the Middle East's Sunni powers and Shiite-led Iran.

Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies believe the Shiite rebels, known as Houthis, are tools for Iran to seize control of Yemen and say they intend to stop the takeover. The Houthis deny they are backed by Iran.

The crumbling of Hadi's government is a blow to Washington's counterterrorism strategy against al-Qaida's branch in Yemen, considered to be the most powerful in the terrorist network. Over the weekend, about 100 U.S. military advisers withdrew from the al-Annad air base where they had been leading a drone campaign against al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP.

Yemen now faces fragmentation, with Houthis controlling much of the north, including the capital of Sanaa, and several southern

provinces. In recent days, they took the third-largest city, Taiz, as well as much of the province of Lahj, both just to the north of Aden.

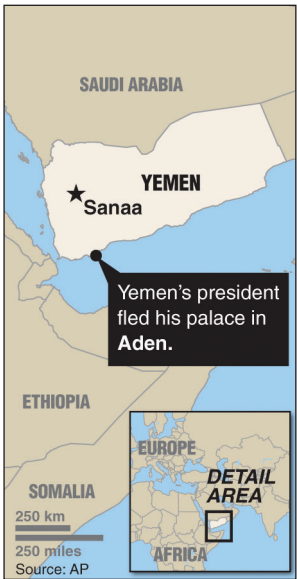
In fighting in Lahj, they captured Hadi's defense minister, Maj. Gen. Mahmoud al-Subaihi, and then swept into the nearby al-Annad base, which the U.S. military had left.

The Houthis are backed by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the autocrat who ruled Yemen for three decades until he was removed amid a 2011 Arab Spring uprising. Some of the best-equipped and trained military and security units remained loyal to Saleh and they have helped the Houthis in their rapid advance.

Hadi left Sanaa for Aden earlier this month after escaping house arrest under the Houthis, who overran the capital six months ago. In Aden, he had sought to make a last stand, claiming it as the temporary seat of what remained of his government, backed by allied militias and loyal army units.

With Houthis and Saleh forces closing in on multiple fronts, Hadi and his aides left Aden after 3:30 p.m. on two boats in the Gulf of Aden, security and port officials told The Associated Press. The officials would not specify his destination.

Saleh said in a speech two weeks ago that Hadi might head for the African country of Djibouti across the gulf, just as leaders of southern Yemen fled.



Hadi is scheduled to attend an Arab summit this weekend in Cairo, where Arab allies are to discuss forming a joint Arab force that could pave the way for military intervention against the Houthis.

The officials said Hadi had been preparing for the move since Sunday, when rebel leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi vowed in a fiery speech that his forces will keep advancing south, referring to Hadi as a "puppet" of international powers.

Shortly after Hadi fled his palace in Aden, warplanes targeted presidential forces guarding it. No casualties were reported. By midday, Aden's airport fell into hands of forces loyal to Saleh based in the city after intense clashes with pro-Hadi militias.

Yemen's state TV, now controlled by the Houthis, announced a bounty of nearly \$100,000 for Hadi's capture.

The Houthis still face multiple opponents. Sunni tribesmen and local militias are fighting them in many places around Yemen, and the rebels have little support in the south.

Some military units remain loyal to Hadi, although they are severely weakened. Alarmingly, al-Qaida militants have emerged as a powerful force against the rebels, and there are signs of a presence of the even more extremist Islamic State group. Last week, the group claimed responsibility for suicide bombings against the Houthis in Sanaa that killed 137 people.

AQAP is considered the terrorist group most dangerous to the U.S. because it successfully placed three bombs on U.S. bound airlines, although none exploded. U.S. officials acknowledge their efforts against AQAP are seriously hampered, with the U.S. Embassy closed and the last U.S. troops evacuated.

Although the Houthis are avowed enemies of al-Qaida, they can't project power against the militants the way the Hadi government could with U.S. support. The deeply anti-American rebels have rejected Washington's overtures, officials say.

Hadi's exit is a humiliating reversal, coming in large part at the hands of Saleh, the man he replaced in 2012 under a deal that allowed the former leader to remain free.

U.S. Conducts Airstrikes In Tikrit

WASHINGTON (AP) — At Iraq's request, the U.S. began airstrikes in Tikrit on Wednesday in support of a stalled Iraqi ground offensive to retake the city from Islamic State fighters. The bombing marked a significant expansion of the U.S. military role in Iraq.

"These strikes are intended to destroy ISIL strongholds with precision, thereby saving innocent Iraqi lives while minimizing" unintended damage to civilian structures, Lt. Gen. James L. Terry, the commander of the U.S.-led campaign to defeat the Islamic State group, said in a written statement.

"This will further enable Iraqi forces under Iraqi command to maneuver and defeat ISIL in the vicinity of Tikrit," Terry said, using an acronym for the Islamic State group.

Tikrit is deemed an important test of the ability of Iraq, with coalition support, to retake ground it ceded to the Islamic State last year. The U.S. initially did not provide air support in Tikrit because Baghdad pointedly chose instead to partner with Iran in a battle it predicted would yield a quick victory. In recent days, however, the Pentagon has called the Iraqi offensive "stalled."

An Associated Press correspondent in Tikrit reported hearing warplanes overhead late Wednesday, followed by multiple explosions. An Iraqi commander in the city told the AP that a warehouse used to store Islamic State weapons was bombed by a U.S. plane, and a U.S. official in Washington confirmed that arms warehouses were among the targets. The Iraqi commander spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss details of the airstrikes.

Cause Of Plane Crash Still A Mystery

SEYNE-LES-ALPES, France (AP) — The last communication from a doomed German jetliner was routine. The mangled black box has yielded sounds and voices, the lead investigator said Wednesday, but so far not the "slightest explanation" why the plane plunged into an Alpine mountainside, killing all 150 on board.

Midway through a flight from Barcelona to Duesseldorf on Tuesday, Germanwings Flight 9525 was chilling in its normalcy. The last communication was a routine request to continue on its route, said Remi Jouty, the head of the accident investigation bureau, or BEA.

Then minutes later, at 10:30 a.m., the Airbus A320 inexplicably began to descend. Within 10 minutes it had plunged some 32,000 feet from its cruising altitude of 38,000 feet, slamming into the remote mountainside at an altitude just above 6,000 feet, Jouty said.

With no distress call or other indication of anything out of the ordinary, French investigators struggled Wednesday to solve the mystery. While alarming, the descent was still gradual enough to suggest the plane was under the control of its navigators.

Afghan President Vows Self-Reliance

WASHINGTON (AP) — Afghan President Ashraf Ghani thanked Congress on Wednesday for billions of American tax dollars and vowed his war-ravaged country will be self-reliant within this decade.

"We're not going to be the lazy Uncle Joe," he said.

In a speech to a joint meeting of Congress, Ghani moved to mend U.S.-Afghan relations that were frayed under former President Hamid Karzai. Lawmakers have been critical about the lengthy U.S. troop presence in America's longest war, wasteful spending in Afghanistan and were stung by Karzai's anti-American rhetoric.

Ghani humbly thanked Congress for the nearly \$107 billion it has appropriated for Afghanistan so far. He paid homage to the 2,200 U.S. servicemen and -women who lost their lives in the war and the thousands more who were wounded, and thanked the U.S. aid workers who built schools, wells and cured the sick.

"At the end of the day, it is the ordinary Americans whose hard-earned taxes have over the years built the partnership that has led to our conversation today," he said to applause in the House chamber packed with hundreds of lawmakers, dignitaries and guests.

House Passes Budget To Erase Deficits

BY DAVID ESPO
AP Special Correspondent

WASHINGTON — Normally quarrelsome House Republicans came together Wednesday night and passed a boldly conservative budget that relies on nearly \$5 trillion in cuts to eliminate deficits over the next decade, calls for repealing the health care law and envisions transformations of the tax code and Medicare.

Final passage, 228-199, came shortly after Republicans bumped up recommended defense spending to levels proposed by President Barack Obama.

Much of the budget's savings would come from Medicaid, food stamps and welfare, programs that aid the low-income, although details were sketchy.

Rep. Tom Price, R-Ga., chairman of the House Budget Committee, called the plan a "balanced budget for a stronger America" — and one that would "get this economy rolling again."

Democrats rebutted that the GOP numbers didn't add up and called their policies wrong-headed.

The Republican-controlled Senate is likely to approve its version of a budget by week's end.

The plans themselves are non-binding and do not require a presidential signature. Instead, once the House and Senate agree on a common approach, lawmakers will have to draft legislation to carry out the program that Republicans have vowed to follow in the wake of campaign victories last fall that gave them control of both houses of Congress.

Still, House passage of a budget marked a significant victory for Speaker John

Boehner and the leadership, which has struggled mightily to overcome differences within a fractious rank and file.

An equally notable second triumph appeared on the horizon. Legislation to stabilize the system of payments to doctors who treat Medicare patients is expected to clear the House on Thursday, and President Barack Obama's declaration of support enhanced its chances in the Senate.

It includes a requirement for upper-income Medicare beneficiaries to pay more for their coverage, a provision that Republicans hailed as a triumph in their drive to curtail the growth of benefit programs.

There was nothing

bipartisan about the budget debate, though.

The House plan calls for \$5.4 trillion in deficit reduction over a decade, including about \$2 trillion from repeal of the law known as Obamacare. Nearly \$1 trillion would be saved from from Medicaid and CHIP, health care programs for the low-income, and \$1 billion from other unspecified benefit programs. Another \$500 billion would come from general government programs that already have been squeezed in recent years by deficit-reduction agreements between Congress and the White House.

The budget outline itself provides few if any details of the cuts envisioned, although once they appear in legislation they are highly likely to spark

a veto showdown with Obama.

The president has also vowed to defend the health care law that stands as his signature domestic achievement. The House has already voted more than 60 times to repeal it in part or whole, but for the first time since the law passed, House members have a willing partner in the Senate.

The prospect of sending Obama legislation to repeal the health care law contributed to the unusual degree of unity among House conservatives. Without a budget in place, they noted, the repeal measure would not have special protection against a Senate filibuster — and would not reach the White House.

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