

Yemen's Houthis will not stop Red Sea attacks until Israel ends Gaza war



People walk down a ladder after they toured the Galaxy Leader commercial ship, seized by Yemen's Houthis last month, off the coast of al-Salif, Yemen [File: Khaled Abdullah/Reuters]

Sanaa, December 19 (RHC)-- Yemen's Houthis will not halt attacks on ships linked to Israel in the Red Sea, despite the United States announcing a new maritime protection force to counter them, a

spokesperson for the rebel group said.

“Even if America succeeds in mobilising the entire world, our military operations will not stop ... no matter the sacrifices it costs us,” Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a senior Houthi official, said in a post on X on Tuesday.

The Houthis would only halt their attacks if Israel’s “crimes in Gaza stop and food, medicines and fuel are allowed to reach its besieged population”, al-Bukhaiti said. He spoke after U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced a coalition on Monday to protect trade in the Red Sea after the attacks forced shipping lines to suspend operation

The Houthis have waged attacks on more than a dozen commercial ships in an attempt to pressure Israel to end its bombardment of the Gaza Strip. “These reckless Houthi attacks are a serious international problem and they demand a firm international response,” Austin said about the new 10-nation coalition. He said the force would operate “with the goal of ensuring freedom of navigation for all countries and bolstering regional security and prosperity”.

After the U.S. announcement, Houthi Major General Yusuf al-Madani said in a statement: “Any escalation in Gaza is an escalation in the Red Sea ... Any country or party that comes between us and Palestine, we will confront it.”

Spokesperson al-Bukhaiti told Al Jazeera on Monday that the group would confront any US-led coalition in the Red Sea. “You have the military establishment in Yemen, in the areas controlled by the Houthis, warning that they will continue to target ships cruising through the Bab el-Mandeb strait and the Red Sea and they insist they are doing this to protect people in Gaza, in particular,” Al Jazeera’s Hashem Ahelbarra said, reporting from Doha on Tuesday.

“A top Houthi official, Mohammed Abdulsalam, who is also a senior negotiator, said the attacks by the Houthis are not an act of defiance but if this new coalition is adamant on launching attacks, then they will have to bear the consequences of what he described as a broader conflict in the region.

“But he said at the same time that the Houthis are still adamant on the need for the Israelis to stop the war if they want the Houthis to stop the attacks,” our correspondent added.

On Tuesday, Abdulsalam told Reuters news agency that the US-led naval patrol mission is “essentially unnecessary” – as all waters near Yemen are still safe, except for Israel-linked ships or vessels travelling to Israel.

The U.S. and British navies said over the weekend that their destroyers had shot down a total of 15 drones in the waterway. In the latest incident on Tuesday, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, said four small boats, each carrying four to five people, approached a vessel off the coast of Djibouti in a “suspicious” manoeuvre – but that no weapons were seen during the incident.

At least 12 shipping companies, including the Italian-Swiss giant Mediterranean Shipping Company, France’s CMA CGM and Denmark’s AP Moller-Maersk, have suspended transit through the Red Sea due to safety concerns. UK oil giant BP on Monday became the latest firm to announce it would avoid the waters.

About 12 percent of global trade passes through the Red Sea, which connects to the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal. Houthi attacks have effectively rerouted a significant portion of trade by forcing freight companies to sail around Africa, imposing higher costs and delays for energy, food and consumer goods deliveries.

Ahmed Helal, MENA director at The Global Counsel, told Al Jazeera the “cascading impact” of the crisis is on inflation. “Major central banks have been cutting interest rates to combat inflation and bring prices

down for consumers. But this disruption in a major global trade artery affects regular goods and energy, both oil and natural gas,” he said.

He added that because of the Houthi attacks, and the ongoing disruption of natural gas supplies to Europe as a result of the Ukraine war, “European natural gas prices jump by 12 percent, UK natural gas prices jump by 10 percent, and the price of oil also jumped by 4 percent in the past 24 hours”.

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