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'Yemeni top brass dragged Saudis into conflict'

Regime is causing serious crises in sa'ada and south of the country, Yemen's sectarian leader says

Beirut : A Shiite rebellion in the northern province of Sa'ada is raging and a southern secession movement, of late, has gained momentum.

Gulf News spoke to Ali Salem Al Beidh, leader of the former South Yemen republic and also former vice-president, about the conflicts in the north and south of the country and possible solutions. Following are the excerpts from the interview:

Gulf News: How do you see the current conflict in Sa'ada? Do you see an end soon?

Ali Salem Al Beidh: The situation in Sa'ada has gone out of control. But the war, which has been going on for five months, is not being given due attention, especially at the humanitarian level which is catastrophic. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced, villages destroyed, crops and fields burned down in addition of course to the thousands of innocent people who lost their lives from all sides of the conflict.

The economic losses are significant; we lost several billions of dollars which would have been used instead to develop the country. Anyway, the situation should not have been like this, but it is the responsibility of the party that started the fight [the government]. The government in Sana'a didn't know where the conflict was heading to. And instead of reconsidering its position and trying to solve the conflict, it went ahead with the impossible task, a military solution. Now the government is stuck in the mud and will try to drag the region and the entire world into it.

If this war has proven anything it is that military solution for political problems are not possible, especially when both parties seem to be able to fight it out endlessly. Here, I would like to warn the Arabs and the rest of the world that the Sana'a regime, through its repeated adventurism, is causing serious crises in this vital and resourcefully rich region, will explode if it goes unchecked.

Do you think there is an Iranian hand in the war as many suggest?

This point has been first raised by the regime in Sana'a. It tried to play it up in the hope it would win it some points in the public opinion and incite the Yemeni street against Al Houthi group by connecting it to Iran on the one hand and extracting financial assistance from some Arab and international parties.

The regime has been trumpeting up this Iranian card in a strange way, but it can no longer sustain the trick because the outside world has figured it out. The world now understands that Sana'a plays up this card whenever it feels powerless militarily and secondly, until today, the regime has not offered any evidence on the alleged Iranian role in the war nor has it accused Tehran officially of interfering in the war.

The regime says it has captured many Al Houthis and seized weapons, the question is then; why Sana'a is not able to offer one shred of evidence of this alleged Iranian support to Al Houthis? I believe the accusations are fabricated, just like the arms ship which Yemen said it had captured recently and accused Iran of sending arms to Al Houthi group. We don't hear anything anymore about this ship, do we?

The Saudis have entered the war recently to defend their territory as announced by Riyadh. What is your take on that?

Saudi Arabia says it has entered the war after its territory was attacked and infiltrated by Al Houthi fighters. I don't have enough information about this. But I believe that some sort of cross-border exchange happened since the early days of the war due to some factors, especially the complicated nature of the geography in that area. For example, one part

of Jebel Dukhan is in the Yemeni territory and the other is in Saudi Arabia, so it is possible that shells would fall here and there.

I have information that the Yemeni team which is leading the war effort had planned to drag the Saudis into the war. This plan started when the regime realised it cannot crush Al Houthi group militarily. Informed sources in Sana'a tell me the government is quite happy today that it managed to turn the war into a regional one after the involvement of Saudi Arabia. I regret that we have reached this point, and it saddens me to see our brothers on both sides fighting. On the short and long terms, this war is not in the interests of anybody. Saudi Arabia is a key state in the region and it is unfortunate it got involved.

Is there a realistic and practical solution to the conflict?

The only way out of this conflict is political. We said this from the beginning. I think the Arab League can and should play a leading role in extinguishing the fire before it rages in other areas. It is not the interest of anybody to create a chronic tension spot in this vital and sensitive area. I call upon the Secretary General of the Arab League Amr Mousa to launch a peace initiative that would put an end to the war and lead to a comprehensive settlement.

I would also like to tell the Arab brothers to beware of the attempts of the Sana'a regime to stir a sectarian sedition by portraying his aggression on our brothers in Sa'ada as a sectarian conflict.

You are leading a separatist movement that wants to divide Yemen again. Isn't that against the aspiration of the Yemeni people?

The southern movement is in a good condition and growing. It is going on the right track defined from the start, which is a peaceful struggle to realise the goal of the people of the south of self-determination, and to regain their independent state with its capital in Aden. As you see, the people have been demonstrating regularly to express their objection to the status quo which was based on the results of the 1994 war, launched by the Sana'a regime against the south. This status quo ruined the unification project and turned the south into a spoil of war and excluded its people from the power and wealth.

Where are you going from here?

The goal is to allow the southerners decide their fate by themselves without pressure or coercion. There are ongoing contacts to get a resolution from the United Nations Security Council to conduct a referendum in the south on this issue, based on resolutions 924 and 931 which were issued during the 1994 war and said clearly that the unification is a contractual matter between two parties and cannot be imposed by force.

Recently, you organised meetings with southern leaders to "unify the leadership." What are the results and is the southern movement united?

I deliberate in all matters with all southern national leaders, inside and outside the country. We discuss all issue concerning the future of our people and our cause. We work together to reach an understanding that takes into account the common denominations, aimed at realising our ultimate goal: to restore the southern state.

I want to stop here at the recent meeting with former prime minister Haidar Abu Bakr Al Attas and former minister Mohammad Ali Ahmad and Saleh Obaid. It was a good chance to go over the situation in the south from all aspects since the declaration of separation I announced on May 21, 2009. We also discussed the current developments and future plans and the strategies we have to follow to confront the regime's plan to crush the peaceful struggle of the south.

We also went over the overall Arab and international conditions which we hope will support the southerners to restore their state and pay attention to the dangers of the regime's plans to resort to force, which we believe will only lead to another explosive conflict in the region and become a catalyst for foreign intervention.

As for within the south, I am proud of the ability of the movement to self organise despite the limited resources. In a short period of time, the inside movement has matured politically enough to formulate and implement a political vision. The message of the south has been delivered to all those concerned through the movement's determination to escalate its peaceful struggle to realise the second independence.

Some reports spoke of an increasing presence of Al Qaida in the south? How do you see this dangerous trend?

I have already spoken about this issue and said that the Sana'a regime will play this card too to distort the image of the peaceful movement in the south, which has nothing to do with Al Qaida whatsoever. I hereby stress that the south has never been a land that would tolerate an ideology such as Al Qaida's. On the contrary, this terror network has built a strong alliance with the regime in Sana'a, engineered and supervised by a leading member of the ruling regime. This is known by regional states, Egypt and the United States. I don't exaggerate when I say that some leaders of Al Qaida are in fact officers in the Republican Guard.

Our movement is a peaceful one; it is an independence struggle that has denounced violence since its inception. We refused to follow the path of violence despite the attempts of the regime to provoke us. But I also want to stress that even the attacks blamed by the Sana'a regime on Al Qaida are fabricated by the regime itself, hoping it will succeed in portraying the southern movement as a terrorist movement. This will not succeed.

Biography: Living in exile

Ali Salem Al Beidh was the leader of the former south Yemen republic. He was also former vice-president under president Ali Abdullah Saleh from 1990-1994 after they signed the unity agreement on May 22, 1990.

Al Beidh left the country after he declared secession of south from north in 1994, the main reason behind the 1994 war between south and north. But Al Beidh was defeated and got asylum in Oman.

After 15 years of living in exile, Al Beidh resumed his political career on May 21, 2009.

Omani citizenship from Al Beidh.Following his announcement to return to the political activity, Oman announced withdrawal of the

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