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Yemeni government force retreats from strait in major setback in war against Houthis

By **Mohammed Ghobari**

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Nov 15 (Reuters) - Yemeni government forces announced on Sunday they were withdrawing from the area near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to focus on a defence of their main base in Aden, in a major setback for the Saudi-backed campaign against the Iran-aligned Houthis.

The announcement signalled the apparent end of a six-week government counteroffensive to reclaim the coast near the mouth of the Red Sea, seized by the Houthis in September in a lightning advance that squeezed oil exports.

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Sunday's announcement of a government retreat raises the prospect of new Houthi advances towards Aden, and underscores the predicament faced by Saudi Arabia in trying to stop the Houthis' drone and missile attacks on the kingdom. The government forces have been based in Aden on the southern coast since 2015 after the Houthis seized the capital Sanaa.

Houthi gains in Yemen and attacks on Saudi Arabia and Red Sea shipping in recent months have strengthened the position of Iran in the wider Middle East conflict launched by the United States and Israel in February.

"The Southern Armed Forces announce the implementation of a redeployment operation for its forces from Dhubab Airport and the Bab el-Mandeb area, west of Taiz Governorate," the main military force fighting for Yemen's government in the south of the country said in a statement.

"This step is taken based on the priority of securing the capital, Aden, and the neighbouring governorates, as well as strengthening the front lines and addressing existing threats."

There was no immediate response from the Houthis, or from Saudi Arabia, the Yemeni government's main international ally.

HOUTHI GAINS

Yemen's decade-long civil war, which had been dormant since 2022, abruptly reignited this summer as a spillover from the Iran conflict. The Houthis made rapid gains to capture the coast along the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that controls access to it, while besieging government forces in Taiz, the country's third-biggest city, in mountains above the approach to Aden.

A view of a village on the coast of Bab el-Mandeb, Yemen April 2, 2026. REUTERS/File Photo Purchase Licensing Rights

A Saudi-backed government offensive last month rapidly retook key positions around the strait, notably Dhubab, but failed to drive the Houthis entirely away from the area or to retake the city of al-Mocha further up the coast.

The Houthis have responded by intensifying drone and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, grounding flights with strikes on its main airports as well as setting global energy markets on edge by targeting energy facilities.

They also made significant advances in the highland areas north of Aden, cutting off Taiz in early October and putting increased pressure on the disparate coalition of forces fighting for the internationally recognised government.

GOVERNMENT FORCES STILL TRYING TO PUSH HOUTHIS FROM COAST

Around Bab el-Mandeb the government forces have redeployed to al-Suqyah, just south of Dhubab and 150 km (95 miles) west of Aden, but are still trying to push the Houthis from coastal areas nearby, Yemeni military sources said.

In the highlands south of Taiz, the Houthis are positioned just outside the district of Tur al-Bahah in Lahj governorate, about 80 km (50 miles) from Aden.

The Houthi gains around Taiz, which has become the fiercest front of the civil war, undermined the government campaign around Bab el-Mandeb, the military sources said.

Fighting is still intensifying around the western region of Taiz, with humanitarian conditions worsening. The city, which hosts about half of the 300,000 people displaced across Yemen by the latest fighting, remains besieged. Aid supplies are unable to enter, and civilians are unable to leave.

The Houthis have meanwhile released 600 prisoners, the International Committee of the Red Cross said on Sunday.

Reporting by Mohammed Ghobari; Additional reporting by Reyam Mukhashaf in Aden; Writing by Nayera Abdallah and Angus McDowall; Editing by William Mallard and Peter Graff

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