

U.S.

Syrian Kurdish Fighters Tell U.S. They Have Withdrawn From Turkey's Safe Zone

Pence received letter Tuesday from Syrian Democratic Forces commander saying his forces had left safe area

By Jessica Donati

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WASHINGTON—Kurdish forces have told the Trump administration that they have completed their withdrawal from a safe zone along the Turkey-Syria border, a senior U.S. official said, as required under a temporary truce.

Mazloum Abdi, head of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, said in a letter Tuesday to Vice President Mike Pence that the withdrawal had taken place as defined under an agreement between the U.S. and Turkey last week.

The letter came hours before the expiration of the five-day truce, reached in a day of talks last week between Mr. Pence and Turkish President that Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Turkish officials didn't immediately comment on the Kurdish claim, but the senior U.S. official said Turkey would be entitled to use force if Kurdish forces were still within the safe zone.

"If the Turks can find any inside the safe zone ... the Turks will either let us know or they will shoot them," the official said.

The U.S. is fairly confident that the Kurdish forces are adhering to the agreement, the official said, but added the U.S. didn't have means to verify the information.

Most of the 1,000 U.S. troops who were allied with Kurdish forces in fighting Islamic State in Syria are leaving the area under orders from President Trump.

Turkey has been requesting confirmation that the Kurdish forces all have left, the senior U.S. official said.

Mr. Erdogan agreed to halt the military offensive he launched in northeastern Syria on Oct. 9 in exchange for a U.S. commitment to help drive Kurdish fighters away from the Turkish border.

In return, the U.S. said it would lift sanctions imposed against Turkey earlier this month as punishment for the assault.

An agreement between Mr. Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin in talks Tuesday in Russia could affect the status of the ceasefire and the Kurdish presence in the area. The Russian and Turkish leaders agreed on a further ceasefire and on joint patrols.

The U.S. official warned that Turkey would risk sanctions if it were to move beyond the area delineated under the agreement between Washington and Ankara.

The agreement with Washington covers only about a quarter of Mr. Erdogan's proposed 300-mile-long safe zone.

In addition to repelling Kurdish fighters, Ankara wants control over territories in northeastern Syria to relocate half of the nearly four million Syrian refugees living in Turkey.

"Any Turkish kinetic military operations that moves forward at the end of this 120-hour period... will lead to us concluding the Turks have violated our agreement, with the inevitable sanctions," the official said.

Mr. Trump imposed sanctions last week on three Turkish ministers and two ministries, defense and energy resources. He also increased steel tariffs by 50%, after lowering them from that level in May.

A major concern is the fate of Kobani, a large ethnic-Kurdish area in the northeast. The U.S. still has troops in the landing zone to the south of Kobani, the official said, adding that the Syrian Kurds have said they will not retreat further than the area covered by the agreement.

The official said the Trump administration was still reviewing options for the U.S. troop presence in Syria. In addition leaving some troops to protect oil fields mostly controlled by Kurds in the northeast, the U.S. has a garrison in southern Syria at Al Tanf.

A continued U.S. presence could help keep Syria's oil fields out of Russian hands and maintain a U.S. relationship with the Syrian Kurds, while exerting a modicum of influence in the region as Washington tries to encourage the Turks and the Kurds to maintain their shaky cease-fire.

Any U.S. troop presence would be protected by American air power, officials have said.

The U.S. is hoping the five-day ceasefire will evolve into a more permanent and stable halt in hostilities. Both sides have accused the other of ceasefire violations, but the truce largely has held in the safe zone, U.S. officials have said.

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