

Yemen - in-year update December 2015

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Human rights abuses in Yemen continued on a large scale in the second half of 2015, including: intense conflict affecting the civilian population; the use of child soldiers; attacks on journalists and human rights defenders; arbitrary detentions; destruction of civilian infrastructure; and further damage to Yemen's cultural heritage. The security and humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate in much of Yemen due to the conflict. On 1 July, the UN declared Yemen to be a Level Three Emergency, making Yemen one of the four most severe, large-scale humanitarian crises in the world. The scale of humanitarian need in Yemen is vast, with 21.2m people – 80% of the population – in need of humanitarian assistance, according to the UN. The conflict has significantly impeded the ability of the Yemeni authorities to protect human rights. Yemeni civil society's ability to contribute to the upholding of human rights has also been affected.

Recognising the deteriorating human rights situation, the UK supported a UN Human Rights Council resolution in October 2015, which called on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to provide technical assistance to the government of Yemen, and assist a Yemeni National Independent Commission of Inquiry.

Conflict in Yemen continued, with intense periods of fighting. The government of Yemen, backed by a Saudi Arabian-led coalition, stopped further military expansion by the Houthis and forces loyal to former President Saleh. It re-took control of Aden in July, followed by areas of Lahj, Marib and other governorates. Control over Ta'iz remained contested, with multiple battle fronts across the governorate. UN-brokered peace talks in Switzerland from 15-20 December were a positive development, and led to some progress on humanitarian access. However, a nationwide ceasefire, which began at the same time as the talks, only produced an initial, minor reduction in the level of fighting. The UK continued to support the UN-led peace process both politically and financially, recognising that a political solution is the best way to end the conflict and bring long-term stability to Yemen.

The UK continued to support the Saudi Arabian-led military action, which has a clear and lawful basis in response to President Hadi's request to the UN Security Council, Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League. The UK has emphasised repeatedly with all parties, throughout the conflict, the importance of complying with international humanitarian law (IHL), and of protecting civilians. The UK has urged the Saudi Arabian government, and other members of the coalition, to conduct thorough and conclusive investigations into alleged violations of IHL.

The conflict has had a significant impact on civilians. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned that civilian suffering in Yemen had reached "unprecedented levels". Since the beginning of the current conflict, the UN report that approximately 2,800 civilians have been killed, and 5,500 injured. Approximately 2.5m people are internally displaced, 7.6m are facing severe food shortages, and 14.1m require access to health services.

Reports of civilian deaths resulting from airstrikes and fighting on the ground continued. The Houthis and anti-Houthi armed groups have continued to use schools and hospitals in Sana'a, Aden, Taiz and Sa'ada for military purposes. Amnesty International and other groups reported that Houthi and anti-Houthi armed groups used explosive weapons, including mortars and artillery in densely populated areas, killing and injuring civilians. The Houthis, according to Human Rights Watch and other sources, laid numerous landmines, including banned anti-personnel mines, in several governorates in the second half of 2015. Landmines and other explosive remnants of war reportedly killed at least 23 people.

Civilians were also the victims of terrorist attacks in Yemen. Daesh's Yemen affiliate claimed responsibility for bombing a mosque in Sana'a, killing seven, on 6 October, and civilians were also killed in Daesh attacks on the government of Yemen in Aden on 6 October, and in the assassination of the Governor of Aden on 6 December. FCO Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, Tobias Ellwood, condemned these attacks.

The UN reported that the use of children in armed conflict increased in the second half of 2015. It estimates that the rate of child recruitment is now five times greater than in March 2015, and up to one third of combatants in Yemen are under 18. The practice of child recruitment extends to the Houthis, armed extremist groups, and some militias which cooperate with government of Yemen forces. Human Rights Watch and other international NGOs have reported that the Houthis increased their recruitment, training, and deployment of minors – as scouts, guards, runners, and fighters. The UK has consistently urged the Houthis to put an end to this practice.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, reports of gender-based violence were twice as high in December 2015 as they were in March of the same year.

The conflict has severely inhibited humanitarian access to those in need across the country. The city of Ta'iz has been particularly badly affected, as Houthi and pro-Saleh forces have repeatedly denied access for humanitarian deliveries. There were increasing challenges and obstruction to the delivery of humanitarian assistance and movement of humanitarian personnel on the ground. Risks to the humanitarian community increased – 10 humanitarian workers were killed while delivering assistance in 2015.

The UK has urged all parties to facilitate rapid and safe access for humanitarian agencies to enable aid to reach all those in need. The UK welcomed the government of Yemen's announcement in October that all of Yemen's ports were open, and the subsequent improvement in aid and commercial supplies reaching Yemen. The UK will continue to monitor this closely, and will support the new UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) to speed up clearance processes.

The conflict has led to a shortage of fuel, electricity, and civil service salaries, which has affected the work of many state institutions, including the courts, affecting access to justice. Conditions in prisons and rehabilitation facilities have further deteriorated. Overcrowding is common. Prisoners lack sufficient food, electricity, water, sanitation and healthcare. Yemen's Ministry of Human Rights remains severely constrained in its ability to work due to the conflict and staff concerns for their safety.

There have been continued reports that the Houthis and forces loyal to ex-President Saleh have arbitrarily arrested, detained, and abducted government supporters and human rights defenders. Amnesty International reported that at least 27 NGOs have been raided or shut down since the Houthis took control of Sana'a, and threats against human rights activists have increased. Reporters Without Borders reported that the Houthis and Al-Qaeda-linked armed groups were holding around 17 journalists hostage, many arbitrarily. Other NGOs have reported that journalists have been killed by airstrikes or in crossfire.

The UK remains concerned by the ongoing detention of a member of the Baha'i faith in Yemen, an example of religious persecution.

UNESCO has expressed concern over continued damage to Yemen's cultural heritage following reports that buildings have been damaged by airstrikes, or used for military purposes. IHL requires all parties to protect cultural heritage, and the UK has reminded the government of Yemen and the government of Saudi Arabia of their obligations to protect cultural heritage.