

Conflict in Yemen Must End Now

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The war in Yemen has to end now. There is no time to lose. With every month, tens of thousands of Yemenis join the millions who do not have enough food to survive. In recent weeks, the figure has risen from 13 million to 20 million of Yemen's 28 million people. The UN estimates that 85,000 children have already died of starvation and disease.

UN agencies are calling for \$5 billion to provide food and medical aid for starving Yemenis. With each passing year, cost of humanitarian aid rises by \$1 billion.

On the humanitarian front, there has been no breakthrough to reverse the trend of increasing Yemeni dependence on external aid. Instead, conditions for Yemeni civilians continue to deteriorate. The World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organisation are set to release a report on December 13, detailing the worsening humanitarian conditions endured by Yemeni civilians, particularly those living in eight towns controlled by Houthi rebels, where about 2 million children under the age of five years are severely malnourished. At least 60,000 Yemenis have died due to fighting and bombing.

UN-mediated talks in Sweden taking place over the past week seem to hold some hope for military de-escalation, if not yet for a political settlement. Last weekend, the Saudi-sponsored government and Houthi rebels achieved two breakthroughs in their first encounter since 2016.

The first breakthrough involved face-to-face negotiations after three days of indirect talks with UN envoy **Martin Griffiths** shuttling between the sides. The second breakthrough was an agreement on a prisoner exchange. All captives, estimated to number 15,000, held since the beginning of the three-and-a-half-year war are meant to be released in stages over coming months. Those freed will include high ranking figures held by the Houthis, including a former minister of defence and relatives of UN-recognised **President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi**.

This round, convened in the rural village of Rimbo in Sweden, had originally been scheduled for the end of this month, but was brought forward by the looming crisis in Yemen. Civilians face both warfare and a lack of water, food, fuel and medical supplies.

On two key issues, meant to be confidence-building measures like prisoner releases, the sides have had major differences, making it difficult to reach accommodations. The first is reopening the international airport at Sanaa, the Yemeni capital held by the Houthis. The airport remains under blockade by the Saudi air force, preventing direct UN and other humanitarian flights from reaching the city. Consequently, Sanaa and other major cities under Houthi control are dependent for imported food and medical supplies on the Red Sea port of Hodeida, partially blockaded by the Saudis. The majority of Yemenis live in the north

and west of the country under the Houthis. This is the second issue.

They reject the government's demand that Sanaa airport, once the principal gateway for international arrivals of people and cargo, should be used solely for domestic flights and international traffic should be routed through Aden. Flights destined for Sanaa arriving from abroad would be subjected to inspections at Aden.

UN facilitator Griffiths has proposed a ceasefire deal for Hodeida Port. Under this arrangement, both sides would withdraw their forces and establish a joint committee with the government to manage the port with UN supervision. The Houthis are ready to declare the port a "neutral zone" and for the UN to take control, presumably after the withdrawal of their fighters, if the Saudis halt air strikes across the country.

For the Houthis, the smooth and apolitical operation of Hodeida is existential, as 80 per cent of Yemen's imports and 70 per cent of humanitarian goods flow through Hodeida.

The government rejects neutralising the port and insists it should be placed under the control of the interior ministry's police as a means of restoring the country's sovereignty to this area. The government is ready to accept a UN role, even peacekeepers, in Hodeida but not a long-term UN presence.

The delegations have also raised easing fighting around Taiz, 200 kilometres south of Sanaa, where 200,000 civilians are trapped and caught in cross-fire between Al Qaeda, other terrorist factions and local warlords.

US congressional and European governmental pressure to end the war has increased in recent months. However, US President Donald Trump's administration continues to provide full support for the Saudi-led coalition, encouraging the government to continue its military campaign to capture Hodeida, in the belief this would force the Houthis to surrender, the objective of the Aden-Riyadh alliance.

Yemen Peace Project Director **Will Picard** told Al Jazeera that the Trump administration is claiming Iranian support for the Houthis to justify US backing for the war.

The administration "has not blindly bought into Riyadh's narrative about an Iranian threat in Yemen, rather, it helped to create this narrative", he stated. "There is a powerful faction within the US establishment that is dead set on starting a war with Iran, and [its members] understand that continuing to back the coalition in Yemen is one way to make that happen."

Among Trump's appointees who belong to the anti-Iran clique are **Secretary of State Mike Pompeo**, **National Security Adviser John Bolton** and Iran envoy **Brian Hook**. Soon after taking office, former CIA chief Pompeo convinced Donald Trump to carry out his pledge to his voters to pull out from the 2015 deal, which provides for dismantling Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for easing sanctions. Pompeo also laid down a dozen conditions, most being unacceptable to Iran, to provoke withdrawal. This policy has angered other signatories to the deal: The European Union, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany.

Bolton has been in government since Ronald Reagan was president (1981-1989) and was involved in the Iran-Contra Affair, a scandal involving the sale of arms to Iran during the

Iran-Iraq war, despite of US support for Iraq, in order to transfer the proceeds to the leftist Nicaraguan Contras, who were fighting against their country's pro-US dictator. Bolton was a signatory of the Project for the New American Century letter to President Bill Clinton calling for regime change in Iraq. He lobbied for George W. Bush's disastrous war on Iraq.

Since his recent elevation, Brian Hook has adopted a tough line on Iran, and has been exerting pressure on European and Asian powers to end the purchase of oil from Iran and cut business deals with Iran. Hook had been a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the research arm of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, the official Israeli lobby, and had worked on Iran sanctions with Bolton during the George W. Bush administration.

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