

# Yemen: End Blockade, Avert Famine

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*The threat of mass famine in Yemen is as real as ever — in spite of the reopening of the port of Aden and the Wadega land crossing on the Saudi-Yemen border. This is not enough, according to the UN Office of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA). The blockade of all ports especially Hodeida should be lifted immediately. Most humanitarian aid goes through ports other than Aden.*

The government of Saudi Arabia had imposed a total blockade of all Yemen's seaports, airports and land crossings on the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 2017. This was in response to the firing of a missile from Yemen on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November that was brought down near Riyadh's international airport. The Saudi Heir Apparent, Muhammad bin Salman, the country's de facto ruler, has alleged that the missile was supplied by Iran and represents "an act of war." Tehran has denied the allegation.

However, Tehran does provide moral support to the Houthi rebels who control the capital, Sanaa, and most of Western Yemen. These rebels have been fighting against the government of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who is backed by Saudi Arabia, for a few years now. The Houthis are also linked to the former president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Salleh.

The Houthis who have lauded the firing of the missile insist that they had manufactured it. They justify the missile attack as retaliation for the Saudi bombing and killing of Yemeni civilians which has been going on since early 2015. The bombing has destroyed Yemen's water and sanitation systems. Hospitals and schools have been targeted. Farms and factories have also been subjected to aerial bombardments. Even residential areas have not been spared. Thousands have died as a result of the military action of the Saudi-led coalition. Earlier UN reports observed that children in particular have suffered a great deal, not just directly from the bombing but also indirectly from the rapid spread of communicable diseases such as cholera. In fact, 2100 people (including a lot of adults) have died of the disease since April 2017 and the number is expected to increase to 1 million by the end of December this year.

It is against this backdrop that chief of OCHA Mark Lowcock pleaded with the UN Security Council on the 8th of November to act with a sense of urgency. He warned that there will be a famine in Yemen, exacerbated by the blockade. He stated bluntly that,

"It will be the largest famine that the world has seen for many decades, with millions of victims."

Lowcock noted sombrely that the Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan tasked with addressing the crisis is only 57 % funded with just 1.3 billion US dollars out of the 2.3 billion needed to prevent millions from dying of starvation and disease.

Women and men of conscience everywhere should respond to this grim situation by persuading their governments to pressurise the Saudi leadership to end the sea, air and land blockade at once, without conditions. Humanitarian aid organisations should have free and unimpeded access to all segments of society in North and South Yemen. The UN should also at the same time revitalise its drive to collect more funds from not only member-states but also well-heeled corporations and philanthropic bodies right across the board.

Perhaps of all governments it is the US administration that has the greatest influence and impact upon Saudi Arabia. It is in a position to coax Prince Muhammad bin Salman to remove the blockade. It can ensure that aid reaches everyone through legitimate channels. If the American people also come forward to help the Yemeni people through fund-raising activities, it may prompt people in other countries to also reach out.

Of course humanitarian assistance however generous is not the real solution. Given the nature of the conflict and the crisis in Yemen, the various parties concerned will have to forge an enduring solution through mediation and negotiation. It is not just the various actors who are directly involved in the conflict that should come to the negotiating table. Saudi Arabia and Iran should also play their role. So should the United States.

There must be a willingness on the part of everyone to compromise, to make meaningful concessions. There must be a realization that there is no military solution especially since the whole world has witnessed what the use of force can lead to — the death and devastation it causes and the sorrow and suffering it engenders. Right from the outset, there was only one solution, a non-violent political solution.

And the only institution which is in some position to bring everyone to the negotiating table is the United Nations, specifically the UN Secretary-General. Antonio Guterres has been deeply concerned about the tragedy in Yemen from the time he assumed the office of Secretary-General on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2017. If he can end the bloody conflict and help formulate a solution, he will earn his spurs. The entire human family which yearns for peace in Yemen and elsewhere would be eternally grateful to him and to the UN.

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