US-backed assault creating humanitarian disaster in Yemen

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The United Nations warned on Monday that ongoing fighting in Yemen combined with the Saudi-led campaign of airstrikes backed by Washington is taking an "intolerable toll" on children in the deeply impoverished Middle Eastern country.

UNICEF has confirmed that at least 74 children have been killed and another 44 maimed since Saudi-led airstrikes began nearly two weeks ago. The real death toll for children is likely much higher and is expected to rise as airstrikes continue to hit civilian targets in urban areas throughout the country.

"Children are paying an intolerable price for this conflict," UNICEF Yemen Representative Julien Harneis said in a statement Monday. "They are being killed, maimed and forced to flee their homes, their health threatened and their education interrupted."

Grant Pritchard, Oxfam's director in Yemen, cautioned that without a ceasefire there could be "a humanitarian disaster on our hands in the coming weeks and months." Even before the outbreak of fighting, 16 million Yemenis relied on humanitarian aid and 53 percent of the country's population, approximately 13 million people, lacked access to clean water.

Airstrikes began on March 26 after Houthi rebels, who had captured the capital city of Sanaa in January, advanced on the compound of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi in the southern port city of Aden.

Since then, the bombardment, as well as fighting on the ground between the Houthi militia and military elements loyal to Hadi and hostile tribal forces, has resulted in hundreds of casualties.

Hadi was installed as president in 2012 by the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council in a bid to quell the mass uprising against the Saleh government. Lacking any real base of support, Hadi fled the country for Saudi Arabia in the face of a Houthi assault on Aden, which has continued despite the widespread campaign of bombardment.

The Saudi regime has charged that Iran is attempting to expand its influence in the region by backing the Houthis. In reality, the Houthi rebellion was sparked in large measure by Saudi Arabia's own repressive influence over Yemen and its sectarian campaign against the Zaidi Shia Yemenis, who make up one-third of the country's population and are the majority in the north. While they have received some aid from Iran, they are neither controlled by nor a proxy of Tehran. In the ongoing fighting, they have also enjoyed backing from sections of the military still loyal to Saleh.

In less than two weeks of Saudi-led aerial bombardments and fighting on the ground more than 100,000 people have been displaced from their homes. Many people have fled to rural villages in hopes of avoiding the airstrikes which have pounded urban areas throughout the country, including Sanaa, the Houthi stronghold of Sadaa, the western port city of Hodeida and Aden.

Airstrikes have been launched by forces from a coalition of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt and Sudan. Though they have not been involved directly in the bombing, the campaign has been given support by the governments of Turkey and Pakistan.

This bloody campaign has been facilitated by the US government, which has provided the Saudi-led coalition with intelligence and logistical support. Stepping up its direct involvement, the Pentagon announced this week that it would begin refueling jet fighters taking part in airstrikes.

Army Colonel Steve Warren told reporters in Washington on Monday that the Pentagon had

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authorized tankers to refuel Saudi and other coalition aircraft outside Yemeni airspace. “It’s been authorized, assets are in place. The Saudis have not requested it. Any refueling will not take place over Yemen. Any refueling will take place over Saudi Arabia or other places,” he stated.

Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, on a diplomatic visit to the Saudi capital of Riyadh, told reporters that the Obama administration was expanding its support for the assault by accelerating the delivery of weapons to Saudi Arabia and other countries in the coalition.

“As part of that effort, we have expedited weapons deliveries, we have increased our intelligence sharing, and we have established a joint coordination planning cell in the Saudi operation center,” Blinken told reporters.

The “intelligence sharing” referred to by Blinken involves providing Saudis with intelligence from US surveillance flights over Yemen to determine what targets to strike, making Washington fully complicit in the ongoing slaughter of civilians on the ground.

The US-backed assault, approaching its third week, is severely worsening conditions in a country where food insecurity and malnutrition were already widespread amongst the most vulnerable segments of the population. According to the World Bank, more than half of Yemen’s population lived in poverty in 2012, and 45 percent were food insecure.

Airstrikes as well as fighting on the ground has knocked out electrical infrastructure, cutting off power in many urban areas and stopping the operation of crucial pumps that supply Yemen’s cities with drinking water. “We’re worried that this system will break down shortly; Aden is a dry, hot place, and without water people will really suffer,” UNICEF representative Harneis told reporters.

Aid workers have been unable to access many areas where fighting has taken place; hospitals are overflowing with casualties, while bodies have been left to fester in the streets. Hospitals and aid workers have also come under repeated assault; at least three health workers have been killed in separate attacks.

“Conditions are very dangerous right now,” Doctor Gamila Hibatullah, a UNICEF volunteer stationed in Aden said Monday. “Hospitals are overflowing, and even ambulances have been hijacked.”

Adding to the death toll on Tuesday, Yemeni officials reported that three students were killed in a Saudi airstrike that hit the Al Bastain School in Maitam, 100 miles south of Sanaa. The airstrikes were reportedly intended for the Al Hamza military base, a third of a mile from the school, which has been taken over by members of the Houthi militia. No casualties were reported at the base.

The International Committee of the Red Cross announced Tuesday that it had finally reached an agreement with Saudi Arabia to airlift 16 tons of medical supplies from Amman, Jordan into Sanaa by Wednesday morning, and a further 32 tons of supplies by Thursday afternoon. The no-fly zone and blockade enforced by Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners has effectively blocked the delivery of medical aid and supplies for the last two weeks, exacerbating the developing crisis.

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