

US-backed Saudi forces dropped cluster bombs on Yemeni villages

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5 May 2015

War planes of the US-backed, Saudi-led Arab war coalition dropped illegal cluster munitions on several groups of villages in northern Yemen, a report released this week by Human Rights Watch found.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) found remnants of BLU 108 canisters, fired from a CBU 105 Sensor Fuzed Weapon, in the al-Safraa area of Yemen's Sadaa province. Evidence of extensive cluster bomb use was discovered on a plateau less than one kilometer away from "four to six village clusters," inhabited by thousands of people each, HRW found. The alleged use of illegal weapons was corroborated by video footage, photographs and analysis of satellite imagery.

"These weapons should never be used under any circumstances. Saudi Arabia and other coalition members—and the supplier, the US—are flouting the global standard that rejects cluster munitions because of their long-term threat to civilians," according to HRW arms director Steve Goose.

"Saudi-led cluster munition airstrikes have been hitting areas near villages, putting local people in danger," he said.

The Sensor Fuzed cluster weapon system works by spreading four submunitions across a target area, each of which then automatically identifies and locks onto a potential target such as a vehicle or structure.

The bomblets themselves are geared to explode above ground for maximum effect. They are tailored to generate a downward explosive force that covers the target and surrounding area in hot shrapnel and flames. The US government has transferred the CBU-105 Sensor Fuzed Weapons to Saudi Arabia and UAE in recent years. The weapons were manufactured by an American firm, Textron Systems Corporation.

Cluster munitions have been banned by an international treaty called the Convention on Cluster

Munitions, signed in 2008 in Dublin by more than 100 governments. Saudi Arabia, the US and the recently deposed US- and Saudi-backed Yemen government were among the small number of governments that refused to sign the agreement.

In comments to AFP Sunday, Pentagon officials defended the sale of cluster bombs on the grounds that all states purchasing cluster weapons are required to sign agreements not to use the weapons in areas "where civilians are known to be present."

The Sensor Fuzed Weapons used against villagers in northern Yemen were first deployed by the US military during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Incendiary and chemical weapons such as white phosphorus, which was dropped on civilian areas indiscriminately during the 2004 US punitive assault against the population of the Iraqi city of Fallujah, and napalm, widely used in US imperialism's war against Vietnam, are typically deployed using cluster systems.

Thousands of tons of cluster munitions were dropped on Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos by the US Air Force and Navy during the 1960s and 1970s. The US dropped some 260 million bomblets on Laos between 1964 and 1973; some 80 million are estimated to have not exploded, remaining dispersed across the land. Civilians and especially children are regularly killed by explosives left over from the US war, including cluster bombs and mines, themselves frequently deployed via cluster systems.

US forces also dropped thousands of cluster bombs, including a total of more than 200,000 submunitions, during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. During and after the 2003 "Operation Iraqi Freedom," the US-led assault deployed more than 2 million submunitions against targets inside Iraq. The NATO powers also used the illegal weapons during the bombing of Yugoslavia

by the Clinton administration at the end of the 1990s.

Many cluster munitions carry a cache of hundreds and even thousands of smaller submunitions, which in many cases do not explode immediately and become effective land mines.

Cluster weapons often combine both “anti-personnel” bomblets (designed to kill and maim individual human targets) with “anti-armor” ones (designed to destroy tanks and armored vehicles). The widespread pattern of small explosions that the submunitions produce has earned the weapons the military nicknames of “popcorn” and “fire crackers.”

Cluster munitions were first deployed on a large scale during the Second World War, by both the Nazi regime and the “democratic” imperialist powers. Nazi forces used the so-called “butterfly bomb,” named for the shape of the container after it had released its submunitions, against both civilian and military targets. Cluster-type systems were used by the US and allied imperialist governments to blanket urban areas in Germany and Japan with flammable explosions, a tactic geared to produce massive firestorms.

Israel and the US are top producers of cluster bombs worldwide. As many as 30 countries may have received cluster munitions from the US. According to some estimates, Israel used as many as 4 million submunitions against Lebanon during the 1978 invasion and the protracted occupation that followed.

There are signs that the Saudis and the Gulf monarchies are further escalating their savage military actions against Yemen.

Saudi Arabia had vowed a ceasefire and political deal to end the war on April 21, but strikes by the coalition began again the very next day, and it has since greatly intensified its bombing runs against cities and towns across the country. New contingents of ground troops trained by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are reported to be in Yemen, where they are engaging in combat with the Houthis. The deployments may be the opening phase of a Saudi ground invasion.

Large areas of the country have already been laid waste by the fighting on the ground between militant groups and weeks of heavy bombing by the Saudi-led alliance. At least 1,200 have been killed and 5,000 wounded by the bombing campaign, according to World Health Organization statistics. Aid groups state that the real death toll may be much higher, but

conditions on the ground make it impossible to get an accurate count at present.

Saudi planes have carried out 70 percent of strikes against Yemen, according to a spokesman for the Saudi coalition. In this, the Saudis have received extensive and growing support from the US military, which has surveilled targets, providing logistical support in coordination with the Saudi-led coalition, in addition to providing billions of dollars worth of up-to-date US-made military hardware.

The Obama administration is working closely with sections of the Saudi, Gulf and Iranian elites in an effort to forge a comprehensive political settlement that will restabilize US imperialism’s hegemonic position in the Middle East. Yemen’s population is being treated as a bargaining chip in this process, with all parties seeking to utilize the growing bloodbath to strengthen their positions against rivals in the regional and global arenas.



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