

Yemen rebels announce support for Saudi cease-fire plan

Niles Williamson
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The Houthi rebels and allied armed forces in Yemen announced Sunday they were prepared to back a proposed cease-fire to begin Tuesday evening, even as jet fighters from the US-backed coalition headed by Saudi Arabia continued to carry out air strikes in the brutal military campaign that began on March 26.

The Saudi-led coalition intervened to push back the Houthi rebels after they seized control over most of country's western provinces and major urban centers, with the support of Yemeni armed forces loyal to former long-time dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. Saudi Arabia's stated aim is to reinstate President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who was forced to flee the country for Riyadh at the end of March in the face of the Houthi-led assault.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubeir and US Secretary of State John Kerry announced the proposal for a ceasefire to allow for the distribution of food and medical supplies at a joint news conference in Riyadh last Thursday. "No bombing, no shooting, no movement or repositioning of troops to achieve military advantage," by the Houthis and their allied forces was a precondition for the proposed pause in air strikes to come into effect, Kerry stated.

Announcing its support for the proposed cease-fire over the weekend, the Houthi leadership council declared that it would "deal positively with any efforts, calls or serious and positive measures that would help lift the suffering and allow aid, supplies and ships to move safely to Yemen."

Saleh struck a more militant tone Sunday after his compound in the capital of Sanaa was struck by coalition air-strikes for the second consecutive day, killing three people. He declared his open support for the Houthis and encouraged them to keep fighting, stating that the rebels "should continue carrying your

arms, ready to sacrifice your lives in defense against these belligerent attacks."

The former president also taunted the Saudi-led coalition, which has threatened a possible ground invasion since the outset of the air assault in March. "If you are brave enough, come and face us on the battlefield, come and we will be at your reception," he said. "Shelling by rockets and jet fighters cannot enable you to achieve any of your goals."

It remains uncertain whether the ceasefire will actually come into effect, as the Saudis have previously promised to halt their air assault only to continue it. The Saudis declared an official end to the bombing campaign and a transition to a political resolution of the conflict on April 21, only to resume and intensify their assault the next day. Coalition spokesman Brigadier General Ahmed Asiri warned that any violation of the cease-fire by the Houthis would result in a resumption of air strikes.

Sharaf Luqman, a spokesman for the section of the Yemeni army backing the Houthis, told reporters that they would interpret any attack by members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as a breach of the proposed cease-fire. "The army will retort strictly with any breach by Al-Qaeda elements and those who support or finance them," he said.

The US-backed campaign, now well into its second month, has taken a devastating toll on the population of a country that ranks among the most impoverished in the Arab world. According to UN estimates, more than 1,400 people have been killed and 6,000 injured since the Saudi air strikes began in late March. At least half of those killed and wounded have been civilians, including women and children. The UN also estimates that more than 300,000 people have been forced to flee their homes.

Approximately 80 percent of the country's population, or 20 million people, are going hungry as a result of the assault. The Saudi-led campaign has effectively destroyed Yemen's major airports and a naval blockade has severely limited the shipment of food and medical supplies to the country.

The UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, Johannes Van Der Klaauw, expressed concern in a statement released Saturday over the growing humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the effect of the indiscriminate nature of the coalition's bombing on the civilian population, particularly in the northern Houthi stronghold of Saada, which borders on Saudi Arabia.

"The targeting of an entire governorate will put countless civilians at risk," Van Der Klaauw warned. "The indiscriminate bombing of populated areas, with or without prior warning, is in contravention of international humanitarian law," he said, emphasizing the criminal nature of the US-backed military operations.

Friday night into Saturday, the Saudi-led coalition launched approximately 140 air strikes against targets throughout Saada. Saudi Arabia initiated the massive bombing campaign after the Houthis reportedly launched mortars and rockets against the Saudi border town of Najran.

Leaflets were dropped by the coalition a few hours in advance of the onslaught, notifying residents that the entire province, which encompasses more than 4,000 square miles and has a population of more than 830,000, has been designated as an enemy military zone. While thousands of families have scrambled to evacuate the province to avoid the onslaught, thousands of civilians still remain in what amounts to a massive free fire zone.

Saudi Arabia has admitted that it has been deliberately bombing schools and hospitals, with the claim that these facilities are being used by the Houthis and the forces allied to them to store weapons and launch attacks.

Llano Ortiz, medical coordinator in Yemen for Doctors Without Borders, denounced the indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets and the designation of Saada as a military zone. "The bombing of civilian targets, with or without warning, is a serious violation of international humanitarian law," Ortiz said. "It is even more serious to target a whole province."

Human Rights Watch has also documented the illegal use of cluster bombs by the coalition forces in Saada. The bombs, which drop small bomblets that deploy shrapnel across a wide area, were banned in 2008 by more than 100 countries that signed the Convention on Cluster Munitions. The United States and Saudi Arabia are among the countries that did not sign on to the agreement.



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