

# US-Saudi blockade threatens millions of famine deaths in Yemen

**Bill Van Auken**  
**10 November 2017**

Saudi Arabia's shutdown of all of Yemen's seaports, airports and border crossings announced on Monday threatens to unleash famine of world historic proportions, leading to the deaths of millions, the United Nations and major aid groups have warned.

"There will be a famine in Yemen," the UN's chief humanitarian officer Mark Lowcock told the UN Security Council Wednesday, unless steps are taken to assure the flow of humanitarian aid through all sea and airports.

"It will not be like the famine that we saw in South Sudan earlier in the year where tens of thousands of people were affected," he said. "It will not be like the famine which cost 250,000 people their lives in Somalia in 2011. It will be the largest famine the world has seen for many decades, with millions of victims."

Lowcock delivered a stark description of what he had witnessed in a trip to Yemen at the end of last month, stressing that 2 million children in Yemen under the age of five are "acutely malnourished and at grave risk of dying."

"In Hudaydah, I met seven-year-old Nora. She weighs 11 kg—that is the average weight for a two-year-old, not a seven-year-old," he said. The doctor at the hospital where she was being treated told him that the facility was turning away large numbers of severely malnourished children because it lacks the means to treat them.

Lowcock also pointed out that the Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan, which is supposed to deal with the worst humanitarian crisis on the face of the planet, is only 57 percent funded, with just \$1.3 billion of the \$2.3 billion needed to prevent millions from dying of starvation and disease.

In addition to mass starvation, Yemen is confronted with the worst cholera epidemic in living memory, with

more than 2,100 people having died of the disease since April and the number of cases expected to climb to 1 million by Christmas.

The mass hunger and spread of disease are the direct product of the savage Saudi-led bombing campaign that has targeted factories, farms, hospitals, schools, residential buildings, and water supplies and sewage treatment plants.

Riyadh announced its total blockade Monday in supposed response to the firing of a missile from Yemen Saturday that was brought down near Riyadh's international airport. The Saudi monarchy charged that the missile was supplied by Iran and represented an "act of war" by Tehran. Iran denied the charge. While Tehran has supported the Houthi rebels who control the capital of Sanaa and most of western Yemen, it has denied arming them.

For their part, the Houthis have insisted the missile was of their own manufacture and that its firing was justified retaliation for the relentless Saudi bombing of Yemeni civilians.

The UN Security Council, which heard a rabid denunciation by US Ambassador Nikki Haley of Iran's unsubstantiated role in the firing of a missile that claimed not a single life, made no condemnation whatsoever of the Saudi blockade.

Instead, the Security Council issued a perfunctory statement through its current president, Italian Ambassador Sebastiano Cardi, lamenting the "dire humanitarian situation in Yemen," and affirming "the importance of keeping all of Yemen's ports and airports functioning." Italy, like the UK and a number of other European countries, is competing with the US for multi-billion-dollar arms sales to the Saudi regime.

Riyadh has claimed that it is stopping all shipments into Yemen in order to block arms supplies to the

Houthis, but in reality the action is part of a two-and-a-half-year-old war against the country's civilian population and a deliberate attempt to starve it into submission.

This war is being waged by the Saudi monarchy and the other Sunni oil sheikdoms to prevent the emergence of any regime not under their thumb—and potentially aligned with Iran—on the Arabian Peninsula.

It continues only thanks to the indispensable military and political support of Washington, which began under the Obama administration and has only intensified under Trump. This involves not only massive arms deals, but also the US refueling of Saudi warplanes bombing Yemen, as well as intelligence and logistical aid. US Navy warships are deployed off the Yemeni coast, ostensibly to guard the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, but in practice as a reinforcement of the Saudi blockade.

Given the depth of the current crisis, aid organizations and medical professionals have warned that the tightened blockade can become the tipping point in which mass hunger—with 7 million people already facing “famine like” conditions and 17 million “food insecure”—and rampant disease turn into the cascading deaths of millions.

“If I have to compare Yemen to a person, I would say that this person is very sick, this person is very weakened, and is being drip-fed, so if you want to keep the patient alive, we need to reactivate drip-feeding as soon as possible,” International Committee of the Red Cross Regional Director for the Near and Middle East Robert Mardini told the Associated Press on Wednesday.

“If access shuts off entirely, even for a single week, then disaster will be the result,” Save the Children director Tamer Kirolos said. “This is the nightmare scenario, and children will die as a result.”

According to Reuters, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported on Tuesday that a shipment of chlorine tablets needed to provide safe water was turned away at the border by the Saudi forces. It also voiced fears that 50,000 vials of insulin for diabetics due to be delivered next week would be blocked.

Doctors in the capital of Sanaa told *Al Jazeera* that even before the Saudi announcement of a total blockade, critical drugs were running dangerously

short. Unless they are restocked, they said, many of their patients will die.

“We’re running dangerously low on medical supplies and won’t have anywhere near the necessary vials of pain-relief medication, insulin, and other specialist medicines for our patients,” Abdulrahman al-Ansi, a doctor at Sanaa’s al-Mutawkil hospital, told the news agency.

“Unless Saudi Arabia eases its restrictions and allows food and medical supplies, I could end up losing all of my cancer patients—even those suffering from diabetes [a treatable disease]—will die. Hundreds will perish in the next week alone.”

The immediate impact of the total Saudi blockade has been a 60 percent rise in the price of fuel and a doubling of the price of cooking oil virtually overnight. Food prices are soaring.

What is unfolding in Yemen is not only the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, but also one of its worst war crimes carried out by US imperialism and its reactionary Gulf State allies. Without any debate in Congress, and to the utter indifference of the US corporate media, Washington is pursuing its quest for hegemony over the Middle East through a war that threatens to kill millions.



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