

UK cuts aid to Yemen as UN warns of country's "death sentence"

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Britain announced it is to reduce its grant aid to Yemen by nearly 50 percent as the UN pleaded at an international donor conference for an increase to stave off a humanitarian disaster.

James Cleverly, Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa, said that London would provide "at least" \$120 million, down from more than \$200 million last year. This is a pittance compared to the \$6 billion of weaponry sold to the Saudi Arabian military that has devastated Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country.

Cleverly justified the cut, saying "recent global challenges"—meaning the pandemic—had "meant a difficult financial context for us all," making no mention of the billions made available to big business and the financial institutions, including the arms manufacturers.

A few days later, leaked documents revealed that Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, who had earlier pontificated that Britain should be a "force for good in the world," is planning to slash the aid budget to other conflict and war zones. These include Syria, Libya, Somalia, Nigeria and the Sahel, where Britain has played a filthy role in pursuit of its geo-strategic interests.

Last year, the government announced the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) takeover of the Department for International Development. Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the House of Commons that henceforth the FCO would decide which countries would receive Britain's "help." He said, "For too long, frankly, UK overseas aid has been treated like a giant cashpoint in the sky, that arrives without any reference to UK interests."

Millions of starving Yemenis do not square with Johnson's plans to use the aid budget to explicitly boost Britain's business and military interests, rather than as a form of soft power. They are just so much collateral damage.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres

warned of a "death sentence" for Yemen as last week's aid conference yielded just \$1.7 billion, less than half the \$3.85 billion needed to prevent a devastating famine. He said, "Millions of Yemeni children, women and men desperately need aid to live. Cutting aid is a death sentence."

Oxfam put it more bluntly, saying, "The people of Yemen are not starving, they're being starved." This is a reference to the Saudi blockade of the Red Sea port of Hodeida that has prevented food and basic commodities reaching Yemen.

Since March 2015, the Saudi-led war against Yemen—waged with the full backing of Washington and London—has killed over 100,000 people, mostly civilians. The attacks have targeted food production, schools and hospitals. Food prices have rocketed in a country that imports 90 percent of its food, making an already impoverished people destitute and creating the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Around 80 percent of the country's 28 million people need humanitarian aid, including more than 12 million children. At least half the population are on the brink of starvation. United Nations agencies reported in February that nearly 2.3 million children under the age of five are projected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2021. Of these, 400,000 are expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition and could die without urgent treatment. This comes on top of the many thousands that have died of starvation, including at least 75,000 children under five, while the worst cholera epidemic in modern history has infected 1.2 million.

COVID-19 has begun to spread uncontrollably across Yemen, compounding the catastrophe. Large numbers of people are in need clean water, toilets and handwashing facilities. Barely half of Yemen's health facilities are functioning and many that remain operational lack basic equipment such as masks and gloves, let alone oxygen

and other essential supplies to treat the coronavirus. Many health workers are receiving no salaries.

The US Trump administration's designation of the Houthi rebels who govern territory containing 70 percent of Yemen's population, as a "foreign terrorist organisation" in January exacerbated the crisis. It was part of Washington's unrelenting "maximum pressure" campaign of punishing economic sanctions and continuous military provocations against Iran, which it has accused of backing the Houthis against Saudi Arabia and its puppet ruler of Yemen, a claim the Houthis have denied. The designation severely hampered the ability of aid agencies to respond to the humanitarian crisis as banks and other businesses refused to work with them for fear of falling foul of US sanctions.

While the incoming Biden administration revoked the designation last month "for purely humanitarian reasons," it warned that it may impose new sanctions, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken noting that the US was "identifying additional targets for designation."

The origins of the war lie in the 2011 Arab Spring, when mass protests broke out against the 32-year-long dictatorial rule of US and Saudi-backed president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who turned the military on the protesters. Following Saleh's resignation, Vice-President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi took over, promising reforms in an "election" without any opposition candidates.

Saudi Arabia, leading a military coalition with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other Arab countries, invaded Yemen six years ago after Houthi rebels in the north of the country rejected Hadi's cosmetic reforms and captured the capital Sana'a, forcing him to flee to Riyadh. Claiming that the Houthi rebels were Iran's proxies, the Saudis sought to reimpose Hadi, expecting a speedy victory. The coalition evaporated as the war proved far more difficult and costly than expected, with local or tribal militias operating in unstable and fluid alliances—some backed by Riyadh and some by Abu Dhabi.

The UAE pulled out of the war in late 2019 amid growing disagreements with the Hadi government and the fragmenting of Yemen into three areas. The first is controlled by the Houthis in the north. The second is controlled by the UAE-backed secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) in the south, and the Republican Guards on the western coast, led by former president Saleh's nephew. The third, in the eastern provinces, is controlled by Hadi's dwindling forces. Despite a US and French-brokered agreement in late 2019

for power sharing between the Hadi government in exile and the STC, the war has continued as the Houthis, with victory in sight, refuse to agree a ceasefire. The Saudis have continued their bombing campaigns against Houthi positions and on Sana'a.

The Houthis are engaged in a major campaign to take control of the northern governorate of Marib. This is Hadi's last major stronghold in the northeast of the country that is the gateway to the oil and gas production and processing facilities further east, supplying nearly all the country's domestic fuel and 10 percent of its energy needs. They are reportedly within 30 kilometres of Marib city, whose population has swollen from 300,000 to three million with people displaced by the war. A battle for the city would worsen the already dire humanitarian situation.

Before taking office, US President Joe Biden claimed that he would turn Saudi Arabia into a "pariah" and end arms sales to the kingdom. Since then, the State Department has insisted that Washington remains committed "to helping Saudi Arabia defend its territory as it faces attacks from Iranian-aligned groups," meaning the Houthis, and will continue to provide "defensive" weapons that will be used to attack Yemen. Saudi Arabia is a major purchaser of US arms, spending \$10 billion a year.

Biden's backhanded support for the Saudis, despite mass opposition to its war against the Houthis and barbaric murder of insider turned dissident Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey in October 2018, rests on Washington's reliance on Riyadh as its client along with Israel—to promote an anti-Iranian axis that threatens to push the region into a catastrophic new war.



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