

Saudi massacres of refugees: Mass murder by key US ally

Thomas Scripps
21 August 2023

Border guards in Saudi Arabia, armed and trained by the imperialist powers, especially the United States, have committed sadistic crimes against humanity, according to a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) released Monday. The report documents the systematic murder of hundreds of migrants, mainly from Ethiopia, at the Yemen-Saudi border between March 2022 and June 2023.

Based on eyewitness, video and satellite evidence, the report, headlined, “They Fired on Us Like Rain,” found that large groups of migrants were targeted with mortars, rockets and tanks, leaving “scenes of horror: women, men, and children strewn across the mountainous landscape severely injured, dismembered, or already dead.”

These attacks sometimes continued for days. Many with limbs torn off had to be abandoned, with survivors describing memories of the screams and the mental trauma of being forced to leave them behind.

Fourteen-year-old Hamdiya told HRW, “We were fired on repeatedly. I saw people killed in a way I have never imagined. I saw 30 killed people on the spot. I pushed myself under a rock and slept there. I could feel people sleeping around me. I realized what I thought were people sleeping around me were actually dead bodies.”

Sometimes upwards of 100 people were killed in a single assault. Mass killings continued as the victims fled back toward Yemen. Mass graves are being dug at crossing points along the border.

Migrants apprehended by border guards report being asked in which limb they would like to be shot before the maiming was carried out. Others were beaten with rocks and metal bars. This was sometimes the method used to deal with those who had survived attacks from a distance with explosive weapons.

“A 17-year-old boy described how Saudi border guards forced him and other survivors to rape two girl survivors after the guards had executed another survivor who refused.”

Survivors temporarily detained in Saudi Arabia before being expelled back into Yemen were beaten, kept in unsanitary, overcrowded conditions—fed once a day and held in sites flooded with sewage.

HRW writes cautiously that “the abuses may qualify as crimes against humanity, if there is now a Saudi state policy of

murder of civilian migrants,” but the evidence is overwhelming.

Between the start of the year and April 30, 2023, writes HRW, “UN experts reported receiving allegations of ‘artillery shelling and small arms fire allegedly by Saudi security forces causing the deaths of up to 430 and injuring 650 migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers.’ The report goes on to state that this ‘appears to be a systematic pattern of large-scale indiscriminate cross-border killings.’”

“They Fired on Us Like Rain” is based on 42 interviews with survivors, analysis of over 350 videos and photographs, and satellite imagery of hundreds of square kilometres. Photos and videos were analysed by members of the Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG) of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims.

This savagery is not merely the product of the barbaric regime in Riyadh, but of global capitalism, which relies on Saudi oil and the recycling of Saudi billions as a critical element in its world structure.

Global inequality, class societies dominated by obscenely rich despots, and regional and imperialist wars and intrigues have produced a hell on earth. Rape, torture and death are refugees’ reward for a harrowing journey out of the Horn of Africa, fleeing violence and hunger, and through Yemen.

Many will have been forced from their homes by the two-year Tigray war between the Ethiopian government and the northern region of the country, which formally ended in November last year. Between 300,000 and 500,000 people were killed by fighting, famine and lack of medical attention. Attacks on civilian locations, massacres and sexual violence were carried out by both sides.

Over 3 million are still internally displaced within the country and 9 million need food aid, with 40 percent of people in the Tigray region suffering extreme food shortages. The destruction of the war came on top of the worst drought on record in the whole Horn of Africa, threatening 50 million people with crisis levels of food insecurity. Ethiopia itself is host to nearly a million refugees, mainly from South Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea.

The journey to Saudi Arabia takes migrants through Djibouti and across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen. Smugglers frequently

torture migrants to extort money from their families. Women are often raped, with two interviewed by HRW becoming pregnant in this way.

Once in Yemen, migrants must pass through a war zone and a second unprecedented humanitarian disaster. A nine-year civil war has flattened its society. Seventeen million Yemenis are food insecure, with 2 million children suffering acute malnutrition. Over 70 percent of the population rely on some form of humanitarian aid, and the UN estimates 377,000 had been killed by the end of 2021—70 percent of them under the age of five.

Both the rump Yemeni government, which is backed by Saudi Arabia, and Houthi rebel forces, who control more than half the country, have committed grave human rights abuses against migrants detained in appalling conditions, including violence and torture, sexual assault and executions. In 2021, HRW reported the burning to death of scores of migrants in Sanaa after Houthi forces fired weapons into a detention camp to suppress a protest.

Staging posts for the crossing to Saudi Arabia are set up in Yemen's northern Saada region—ramshackle camps sometimes housing thousands of people. The smugglers use the migrants least able to pay as cannon fodder to scout the dangerous crossings.

American imperialism has its fingerprints all the way along this bloody trail. Its close economic, political and military partnership with the semi-feudal Saudi oligarchy is known by everyone. As part of their alliance, the US facilitates the Saudi intervention in the Yemeni civil war, which involves systematic airstrikes against civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Ties between the two governments were reinforced by US President Biden in a visit to Saudi Arabia in July last year. Biden's trip reversed his empty campaign pledge to treat the country as an international pariah after its murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and was intended to line the Gulf States up behind the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. In Biden's words at the time, "I think we have an opportunity to reassert what I think we made a mistake of walking away from: our influence in the Middle East... I want to make clear that we can continue to lead in the region and not create a vacuum, a vacuum that is filled by China and/or Russia."

Significantly, the Human Rights Watch report, while repeatedly citing the Saudi use of "explosive weapons" against unarmed and helpless migrants, says nothing about which countries supplied those weapons, particularly the United States, Britain and France. The names of these countries do not even appear in the 73-page report. Instead, there is the carefully worded recommendation: "Concerned governments should suspend any transfers of arms and other military equipment to Saudi Arabia, including arms, training, and maintenance agreements and suspend any ongoing military training and cooperation with Saudi border guard units."

Human Rights Watch is an organization generally aligned

with American foreign policy. In the current US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine, HRW has published lengthy reports on alleged Russian atrocities, while making only the slightest mention of similar actions by the Ukrainian government. The group's occasional critiques of key US allies are generally related to internal conflicts within the US national-security establishment, or the desire of the State Department to pressure these allies when their actions run counter to US foreign policy considerations.

But whatever the reasons for the timing of the release, there can be little doubt that the evidence is genuine and the findings damning. The Saudi regime, one of the three main allies of American imperialism in the Middle East, along with Israel and Egypt, is drenched in blood.

Governments such as the US and Britain which maintain friendly relations with Saudi Arabia while claiming to sanction other states for human rights abuses are guilty of sickening hypocrisy. Even the most tokenistic "commitments" to international law dissolve on contact with the oil wealth of the Gulf states. The imperialist governments claim that their rapacious foreign policies are based on considerations of human rights and international law, but Saudi Arabia is irrefutable proof that these claims are lies.

Moreover, even the barbarity of the Crown Prince pales by comparison to the crimes of the imperialist governments, and particularly of the United States. Over the past three decades, no other government in the world has waged as many wars, killed as many people, or broken international law more flagrantly than the government that sits in Washington D.C.

As for the abuse and outright murder of immigrants, the US and the imperialist powers of Europe are all guilty of their own crimes, whether at the hands of the US-Mexico border force or the innumerable measures under the policy known as "Fortress Europe" that have led to mass deaths.

The crimes of the Saudi regime are one more demonstration of the necessity to mobilize the international working class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program. This is the only way to halt the threat of a nuclear world war, as in the NATO-Russia conflict in Ukraine, or to stop the savage treatment of the 100 million people already turned into refugees by war, severe poverty, climate change and the other consequences of the crisis and breakdown of world capitalism.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact