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Yemen: Coalition Airstrikes Deadly for Children

UN Should Create International Inquiry, Return Coalition to ‘List of Shame’

(Beirut) – The Saudi-led coalition carried out five apparently unlawful airstrikes in Yemen since June 2017 that killed 26 children among 39 civilian deaths, Human Rights Watch said today. The attacks, which struck four family homes and a grocery, in one case killing 14 members of the same family, caused indiscriminate loss of civilian life in violation of the laws of war. Such attacks carried out deliberately or recklessly are war crimes.



People stand at the site of a Saudi-led air strike on an outskirts of the northwestern city of Saada, Yemen, August 4, 2017.

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These attacks show that coalition promises to improve compliance with the laws of war have not resulted in significantly better protection for children. This underscores the need for the United Nations to immediately return the coalition to its annual “list of shame” for violations against children in armed conflict. The UN Human Rights Council should respond to continuing violations by the Saudi-led coalition, Houthi-Saleh forces, and other parties to the armed conflict by creating an independent, international investigation into abuses at its September session.

“The Saudi-led coalition’s repeated promises to conduct its airstrikes lawfully are not sparing Yemeni children from unlawful attacks,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “These latest airstrikes and their horrible toll on children should galvanize the Human Rights Council to denounce and act to investigate war crimes, and ensure that those responsible are held to account.”

Since March 2015, the Saudi-led coalition has carried out military operations against Houthi-Saleh forces including unlawful airstrikes against homes, markets, hospitals, schools, and mosques. The UN secretary-general’s 2016

annual report on violations against children in armed conflict found that at least 785 children were killed and 1,168 wounded in Yemen in 2015, with 60 percent of the casualties attributed to the coalition. Houthi-Saleh forces have also committed numerous laws-of-war violations, including using banned antipersonnel landmines, indiscriminately shelling populated areas, and forcibly disappearing and torturing people.

Human Rights Watch interviewed nine family members and witnesses to five airstrikes that occurred between June 9 and August 4, 2017, interviewed staff at a hospital, and reviewed photo and video footage taken soon after the attacks by local residents or media outlets. The blast and fragmentation wounds of the victims and the damage patterns observed at the airstrike sites are consistent with the impact of large air-dropped bombs. Human Rights Watch did not identify military objectives in the immediate vicinity of any of the areas attacked, except for one low-ranking Houthi-Saleh fighter in his home.

On August 4, coalition aircraft struck a home in Saada, killing nine members of the al-Dhurafi family, including six children, ages 3 through 12.

The coalition denied targeting the house, but said it was looking into the “unfortunate incident.” An airstrike on July 18 in a contested area of Taizz killed 14 family members, including nine children, and the Yemeni government called for an investigation. On July 3, coalition aircraft struck another home in Taizz, killing eight of Mohammed Hulbi’s relatives, including his wife and 8-year-old daughter.

The laws of war applicable to the armed conflict in Yemen prohibit deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Attacks that are not directed at a specific military objective or cannot distinguish between civilians and military objectives are considered indiscriminate. An attack is unlawfully disproportionate if the anticipated loss of civilian life and property is greater than the expected military gain from the attack. Warring parties must do everything feasible to verify that targets are military objectives.

Individuals who commit serious violations of the laws of war with criminal intent – that is, intentionally or recklessly – may be prosecuted for war crimes. Individuals may also be held criminally liable for assisting in, facilitating, aiding, or abetting a war crime. All governments that are parties to an armed conflict are obligated to investigate alleged war crimes by members of their armed forces.

In response to international outrage over the large numbers of civilian casualties in the Yemen conflict, Saudi Arabia has claimed that the coalition has changed its targeting procedures and tightened its rules of engagement to



Saudi-led coalition aircraft struck three apartment buildings in Sanaa on August 25, 2017, killing at least 16 civilians, including seven children, and wounding another 17, including eight children. After an international outcry, the coalition admitted to carrying out the attack, but provided no details on the coalition members involved in the attack.

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minimize civilian casualties. However, the coalition has presented no evidence to substantiate such claims, Human Rights Watch said.

The Saudi-led coalition's Joint Investigation Assessment Team (JIAT) has not announced investigations into any of the five airstrikes Human Rights Watch documented.

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The coalition has repeatedly failed to impartially investigate alleged laws-of-war violations in Yemen. It blocks access to parts of Yemen under Houthi-control for international media and human rights organizations, continues to undercut and undermine UN and other fact-finding efforts, and routinely issues blanket denials of any responsibility for well-documented violations. These actions highlight the need for concerned governments to support a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council in September for an international inquiry into abuses by all sides, Human Rights Watch said.

“Saudi Arabia pledged to minimize civilian harm, yet coalition airstrikes are still wiping out entire families,” Whitson said. “Yemeni civilians should not be asked to wait any longer for Human Rights Council members, including Saudi allies the US and UK, to support a credible international inquiry.”

Pledges to Reduce Civilian Casualties

In response to growing global criticism of its air campaign in Yemen, the Saudi government announced it had changed its targeting procedures and tightened its rules of engagement. In June, after US President Donald Trump announced US\$110 billion in arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the *New York Times* reported that, ahead of the deal, Saudi Arabia provided the United States assurances, including:

- 1) adhering to stricter rules of engagement;
- 2) considering estimates of potential harm to civilians in targeting – a practice US officials told the *Times* the coalition had not fully integrated into its operations;
- 3) allowing US military advisers to sit in the air operations control room in Riyadh instead of in a nearby office;
- 4) bringing the total number of locations identified as presumptively non-targetable on the “no strike list” to 33,000; and
- 5) starting a \$750 million, multiyear training program with the US for the Royal Saudi Air Force and other Saudi forces on topics including human rights and avoiding civilian casualties.

In the three months since the *New York Times* reported the changes, there has been no discernable reduction in unlawful coalition airstrikes. In addition to the five attacks reviewed, [Human Rights Watch documented an](#)

additional apparently unlawful strike in August in which coalition aircraft destroyed three apartment buildings in Sanaa, killing 16 people, including seven children, and wounding 17, including eight children. After an international outcry, the coalition admitted carrying out the attack, but asserted that the civilian casualties were the result of a technical error. The Yemen Data Project, which uses a range of open-source data to document the number of Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen and the targets struck, said it had recorded 427 attacks on military targets in June, July, and August, and 186 coalition airstrikes that hit civilian objects.

Members of the US Congress have proposed Yemen-related amendments to the annual National Defense Authorization Act, including new US government reporting requirements on the Saudi-led coalition's adherence to the "no strike list and restricted target list" and restrictions on US arms transfers to Saudi Arabia, including prohibiting the transfer of cluster munitions. A final decision on these amendments is expected in September, and US lawmakers should support them, Human Rights Watch said.

Five Unlawful Airstrikes Harming Children

Mahda area, al-Safra district, Saada, August 4, 2017

Casualties: At least 9 civilians killed, including 7 children, and 3 wounded

At about 5 a.m. on August 4, coalition aircraft struck a house in al-Safra district, Saada, killing nine members of the same family, including six children, and wounding three, according to two witnesses, the director of a local hospital, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose staff members visited the village soon after the attack.

Abdulrahman al-Dhurafi, the 40-year-old general director of the Education Ministry's office in Saada, told Human Rights Watch he had just finished his morning prayers when he heard "a loud blast that shook the house." A few minutes later, a friend called to tell him his nephew's home had been attacked.

Abdulla A'dayah, 33, who sells qat and lived near the home, said he was the first person to arrive after the attack: "Immediately... I heard the voice of Taha [al-Dhurafi's nephew] calling for help from under the rubble." A'dayah took the wounded man to the hospital after he and two other men had extricated him from the ruins of the house. "When I returned, I saw the [other men] took out others, but all of them were dead."

Al-Dhurafi, who arrived soon afterward, said the house was "completely flattened:"

The first thing I saw when I arrived was a neighbor running out from... what remained from the destroyed house. ... He was carrying a baby girl in his arms. I didn't recognize who she was with the dust and the blood covering her face but she looked 2-years-old maybe. ... Later I knew that this baby girl was Batool, who is two-and-a-half years old, Taha's youngest child.

The two witnesses said that Taha al-Dhurafi, a 35-year-old farmer, lived in the house with his 27-year-old wife and their six children, ages 2 to 12, as well as his wife's parents and their 17-year-old daughter. The attack killed his wife, all six of his children, his mother-in-law, and her daughter. Rescuers, after recovering the bodies of five

children, searched “desperately” for hours for Fatima, his 3-year-old daughter, al-Dhurafi said. She was dead when they found her. He and his brother Ahmed, 28, were both burned and had fractured limbs.

Dr. Muhmmad Hajjar, the general director of Saada’s Jumhuri Hospital, said hospital ambulances went to the house immediately after the attack and that rescuers found six or seven bodies, “mostly very young children.” The hospital treated three men wounded in the attack, he said.

The witnesses said they did not know of any military targets in the area, which included primarily family homes and agricultural land. A military camp for special forces was about a kilometer east, and a passport administration building – a civilian object – was about a kilometer south.

In a Saudi Press Agency [statement](#), Col. Turki al-Maliki, who [replaced](#) Brig. Gen. Ahmed Assiri as the coalition spokesman on July 27, denied reports the coalition targeted the house, saying the coalition had completed an after-action review for operations conducted that day in Saada. He said the coalition was continuing to investigate in coordination with the government of Yemen and other international partners “on this unfortunate incident,” noting Houthi-Saleh forces store “weapons and explosives inside houses and civilian objects.”



Al-Ua’shira village, Mokha district, Taizz, July 18, 2017

Casualties: At least 14 civilians killed, including 9 children

At about 7:30 a.m. on July 18, coalition aircraft struck a cluster of homes in **Mokha district, Taizz**, said Hashem al-Buraiq, 32, who lived in the area with his wife and their five children. The attacks killed at least 14 civilians, including 9 children.

Al-Buraiq and his family had been living near the Khalid bin Waleed military camp in Taizz governorate. In April, Houthi-Saleh forces declared areas around the camp a military zone. So al-Buraiq and his family moved to a small area near al-Ua’shira village, about seven kilometers from the military camp, where about a dozen families had built homes. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [had](#) recorded the three families as

On July 3, the ninth day of the Eid holiday, coalition aircraft struck a home in Nobat ‘Amer village, Taizz, killing eight civilians, including five children under age 10. Mohammed Hulbi, who was about 100 meters from his house during the attack, said he ran home, but “nothing was left, everything was destroyed.”

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displaced, and the UN refugee agency released a statement noting that a number of the civilians killed in the July 18 attack were internally displaced people.

Al-Buraiq's parents and two siblings lived next to him, as did his cousin's widow, her eight children, and her father. The family chose the village "because we were sure that this area is safe... until they struck us," al-Buraiq said.

Al-Buraiq's daughter Manal, 3, and son Jawad, 9, had gone to their cousin's house to get some yogurt for breakfast: "The airstrike hit the part of the house where my cousin's family lives directly," he said. "The strike killed a whole family while they were eating breakfast."

Everyone in the house, including his daughter and son, were killed, as were three people in the neighboring house. In total, the attack killed 14 of al-Buraiq's relatives, including al-Buraiq's sister Aziza, 18, his brother Ahmad, 14, and his mother, his cousin's wife, six of her children, and her brother and father.

Al-Buraiq said he had understood why his cousin had been killed four months earlier while on a motorbike: the airstrike hit a military truck and he happened to be in the way. But, he did not understand this attack:

All people here are civilians, and if we thought that this place would be targeted we wouldn't have come here in the first place, but it was safe ... completely safe. ...

Where is the target? There is no target. ... Just us, no Houthis, no trucks, nothing. ...

OHCHR, which also investigated the attack, said that, "There do not appear to have been any military objectives anywhere in the immediate vicinity of the destroyed house." OHCHR called on the relevant authorities to investigate the incident. The Yemeni human rights minister, Mohammed Asker, called for a government investigation and described the attack as an "unfortunate incident," Reuters reported. The coalition has not announced if it will investigate the attack.

Al-Hamli village, Mawza district, Taizz, July 18, 2017

Casualties: At least 4 civilians killed, including 2 children, and 3 wounded

At about 8:30 a.m. on July 18, Saudi-led coalition aircraft struck a local grocery store in al-Hamli village, Mawza district, Taizz governorate, killing four civilians, including two children, and wounding three, two men who were at the shop said in separate phone interviews.

Ahmed Farid, 47, who owned the store, was outside the building with about six other people, including his 14-year-old son, Saleh, waiting for a late employee to come with a key.

Farid and Rashad Moqbel, a 25-year-old farmer, said the attack killed four people, including Saleh, a 16-year-old boy, and two other men, and wounded two others, including Moqbel. Two weeks after the attack, Moqbel remained in the hospital, suffering from fractured limbs and bomb fragments that had entered his body, his brother said. The shop was completely destroyed.

Both men left al-Hamli after the strike. They said they do not intend to return. “I don’t think it is safe for anyone to go there,” Farid said. “They may strike any moving thing.”

Coalition aircraft had carried out other attacks in the area during the weeks before the attack, but the nearest military camp was about 15 kilometers away, the two men said. Another airstrike hit a gasoline station about 2.5 kilometers from the grocery store about an hour earlier. A witness said he saw a couple of Houthi fighters hiding in the area after the attack on the station.

The coalition has not announced if it will investigate the attack.

Nobat ‘Amer village, Mokha district, Taizz, July 3, 2017

Casualties: At least 8 civilians killed, including 5 children

At about 10 a.m. on July 3, the ninth day of the Eid holiday, coalition aircraft struck a home in **Mokha district, Taizz**, killing eight of Mohammed Hulbi’s relatives, including five children under age 10.

That morning, Hulbi, 45, a farmer, walked to a well about 100 meters from his house. His uncle was sleeping next to the well when he heard planes overhead, followed by the powerful explosion from the attack: “My uncle fell from the chair where he was sleeping. I ran to the house, but nothing was left, everything was destroyed. My uncle and I carried the remains of our family [out of the house].”

The attack killed Hulbi’s wife, Saeeda, 35, and his daughter, Amani, 8. His uncle’s two wives and four children, two girls and two boys, all under 10, were also killed. One of his uncle’s wives was eight months pregnant. After the attack, a few men affiliated with Houthi-Saleh forces drove to the house on motorbikes, ordering people not to approach the house because coalition aircraft might attack again.

A witness photographed remnants of the weapon used in the attack. Human Rights Watch identified the remnants as being from a large air-dropped bomb that was equipped with a Paveway-series guidance kit.



Remnants of the weapons used in a coalition attack on Nobat ‘Amer village on July 3, 2017 that killed eight of Mohammed Hulbi’s relatives, including five children under age 10. Human Rights Watch identified the remnants as being from a large air-dropped bomb that was equipped with a Paveway-series guidance kit.

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Hulbi said he and his uncle “didn’t leave [the area] yet, because we don’t have a place to go, but we live alone now, just me and him.” The coalition has not announced if it will investigate the attack.

Al-Qoubari neighborhood, 50th Street, Sanaa, June 9, 2017

Casualties: At least 4 civilians killed, including 3 children, and 8 wounded, including 3 children

At about 12:30 a.m. on June 9, coalition aircraft struck the home of Tawfeeq al-Sa’adi in Sanaa’s al-Qoubari neighborhood, killing four civilians, including three children and wounding eight, including three children.

Al-Sa’adi, 36, who was not home at the time, said a neighbor called him to tell him the coalition had hit his house:

I replied to him, ‘Why would they bomb my house? What do we have to bomb?’ ... I was shocked and in denial... I walked slowly to the house saying ‘Ya Allah Ya Allah.’ I arrived and saw the gathering of ambulances and police. At that moment, I lost my mind completely.

The attack destroyed al-Sa’adi’s home. His wife, Ghaniya, 32, and 18-month-old daughter, Khadija, and were pulled from under the rubble.

Al-Sa’adi took his wife and daughter to five different hospitals, all of which said they could not treat them, either because the hospitals were full and did not have the capacity or because they only provided care to wounded fighters. One hospital finally admitted them. The attack had fractured Khadija’s skull. Ghaniya, who was eight months pregnant, had a fractured leg, a burned back, and a bruised skull. She said: “I lost the baby, he was a boy. We wanted to name him Hassan.” Her husband said they were trying to save money for an operation for Khadija, but “we don’t have enough money to feed ourselves.”

The attack destroyed five other homes, and damaged five more, al-Sa’adi said. Al-Sa’adi’s neighbor lost four of his relatives, including three of his children, ages 8 to 13, and his wife’s 70-year-old grandmother. Six other people in the neighborhood were wounded, including two children, he said. He provided Human Rights Watch their names and ages.

Al-Sa’adi said the area attacked was a poor neighborhood. There were no evident military targets in the vicinity, he said, although his neighbor was a low-ranking Houthi-Saleh soldier. The coalition has not announced whether it will investigate the attack.



A man sits on the rubble of a house of his relatives, destroyed by a Saudi-led coalition airstrike in Sanaa, Yemen, June 9, 2017.

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Undermining Accountability Efforts

JIAT, the Saudi-led coalition's investigative team, has largely absolved the coalition of any wrongdoing in about two dozen strikes it has investigated. Despite the coalition's promises to pay compensation in a small number of the attacks it has investigated, it has not made any payments or concrete progress toward creating a compensation system, numerous Yemeni sources said.

Even in strikes where JIAT has found fault, it has not identified the coalition forces responsible. Human Rights Watch was unable to determine which coalition members participated in the strikes most recently investigated. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan are current members of the coalition; Qatar withdrew in June. In July, the UN Panel of Experts expressed concern that coalition members "are deliberately hiding behind 'the entity' of the 'Coalition' to divert and shield themselves from state responsibility for violations committed by their own forces during airstrikes." Human Rights Watch has not been able to identify any steps JIAT or coalition states have taken to hold members of their own forces accountable for laws-of-war violations.

Saudi Arabia and its allies have actively worked to avoid accountability. In 2016, then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon listed the coalition, along with Houthi-Saleh forces and other groups fighting in Yemen, on his annual "list of shame" for violations against children in armed conflict. The UN had documented the coalition killing and maiming children and attacking schools and hospitals, but the secretary-general removed the coalition from the list after Saudi Arabia and its allies reportedly threatened to withdraw millions of dollars of funding from critical UN relief programs, such as those serving Palestinian refugees. Coalition attacks harming children continued in Yemen throughout 2016 and into 2017. The UN should relist it in its forthcoming report that covers attacks on children during 2016, Human Rights Watch said.

The Human Rights Council in 2015 and 2016 failed to create an international inquiry into Yemen abuses, instead endorsing processes that over the past two years have not provided the impartial, independent, and transparent investigations needed to address the gravity of violations in Yemen. On August 29, 62 Yemeni and international nongovernmental organizations wrote to members of the Human Rights Council to urge it to create an independent international inquiry into abuses committed by all parties to the conflict in Yemen.

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