

# Civilian casualties mount as Saudi-led airstrikes continue in Yemen

By Niles Williamson  
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Jet fighters from the Saudi-led coalition carried out at least 10 airstrikes inside Yemen on Friday, three days after a Saudi Arabian military spokesman announced the end of Operation Decisive Storm and the beginning of Operation Restore Hope.

Airstrikes that hit the central city of Taiz on Friday were reportedly targeted at members of the 35th Brigade of the Yemeni Army, a unit that is loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Saleh has been using his influence within the military and amongst the Yemeni Special Forces to back the Houthis' campaign to oust the US-backed president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who is currently in exile in Saudi Arabia.

While backing the Houthis, Saleh, who was ousted from power after mass protests in 2011, has also been seeking an accommodation with Saudi Arabia and the United States in his bid for a return to power. On Friday, the former longtime dictator sent out an email message calling for dialogue between Yemen and Saudi Arabia under the auspices of the UN.

The brutal aerial bombardment of the deeply impoverished Arab country has continued despite statements from the Saudi military that it would wind down airstrikes and move towards a political settlement with the Houthi militia that have taken control of most of Yemen's western provinces.

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) detailed Friday the devastating toll that the Saudi campaign has had on the Yemeni population. According to conservative UN estimates, at least 551 civilians were killed between March 26, when the airstrikes began, and April 22. Additionally, at least 1,185 civilians have been injured, including 172 children.

Behind the backs of the American population, the administration of President Barack Obama has given its

full support to the bloody and illegal war being waged against the Houthis. The campaign has as its aim returning the unpopular puppet government of President Hadi to power.

The Saudi-led airstrikes have so far done little to further the reinstatement of Hadi, with the Houthis maintaining control over most of the territory they have seized in the last several weeks. Hadi has little support amongst the various armed militias and military forces currently battling the Houthis.

The United States has played a vital role in facilitating and supporting the slaughter. The US military has been selecting and approving targets for airstrikes and is staffing a joint planning center in Saudi Arabia from which military operations are being directed. President Obama approved the refueling of fighter jets as they return from their bombing raids.

The US has positioned nine warships off the coast of Yemen to enforce a military and economic blockade of the country. The aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt was rushed to the Gulf of Aden this week on the basis of unsubstantiated claims that a convoy of Iranian ships was seeking to deliver missiles and other weapons to the Houthis.

After a tense standoff in which the US indicated it would consider boarding the vessels if they entered Yemeni waters, the Iranian convoy turned away on Friday and was reported to be sailing northeast towards Oman.

OHCHR spokesperson Rupert Colville reported that airstrikes in the wake of the official end of Operation Decisive Storm have resulted in mass civilian casualties. On Wednesday, an airstrike on a bridge in the city of Ibb killed 40 civilians. Among the dead were seven children.

An airstrike Tuesday in Sanaa, Yemen's capital,

killed 20 civilians and injured 120 others. That attack also damaged a building containing several UN aid agencies, blowing out windows at the offices of the OHCHR, the UN Development Program and the Department of Safety and Security.

Saudi airstrikes have also struck a refugee camp in the north and a dairy manufacturing plant in the western port city of Hodeida, all resulting in mass civilian casualties. Human Rights Watch accused Saudi Arabia of possible war crimes after it bombed a warehouse facility belonging to the aid organization Oxfam in the northern Houthi stronghold of Sada. The organization had provided the Saudi-led coalition with the coordinates of the facility, which contained material necessary for providing the local population with clean water.

Colville reported additional civilian deaths as fighting continued between the Houthi rebels and various local armed groups in the provinces of Abyan, Dhale, Aden and Lahj. "In Abyan Governorate on 21 April, at least 14 civilians were killed and another 14 injured, reportedly due to indiscriminate shooting. We have reports of killings by a sniper of a child in Dhale and four civilians emerging from a mosque in Aden," he reported.

The UN's children's agency, UNICEF, confirmed that at least 64 children have so far been killed in aerial bombings, but the total number is likely much higher. Children have also been killed in fighting on the ground between opposing armed groups, by unexploded ordnance and land mines, and by gunshots and artillery shelling.

The World Food Programme (WFP) reported that in one month of airstrikes, the number of food insecure people in Yemen has risen by more than one million, from 10.6 million to 12 million. Airstrikes have knocked out key electrical infrastructure, and the US and Saudi blockade has led to a shortage of fuel needed for cooking and transportation.

WFP spokesperson Elizabeth Brys said the organization's operations have been severely limited by the airstrikes and fighting on the ground. While WFP plans to provide food to 2.5 million people affected by the conflict over the next three months, it has been able to reach only 19,000 people in the last four weeks.

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