

# Yemen in crisis: urgent action needed for peace

Saferworld's submission to the APPG on Yemen inquiry into the role of the UK government in the current conflict

Continuing UK support to the Saudi-led bombing and de-facto blockade of Yemen is helping to contribute to what is the most severe global humanitarian crisis in the world today. The UK's support for this counterproductive military campaign is driven by its close relationship with Saudi Arabia, and betrays fundamental contradictions in UK foreign policy. In this submission to the APPG on Yemen, Saferworld urges the UK government to take immediate steps to withdraw material and political support for Saudi Arabia's bombardment of Yemen, investigate whether UK weapons were used in alleged war crimes and support international efforts to investigate war crimes in Yemen, and make genuine efforts to bring about a political solution to the conflict that is having a detrimental effect on the fragile country and its civilians.

## The role of the UK in the current crisis

1. The UK government has recognised that a political solution is urgently needed to end the conflict in Yemen, and to address the dire humanitarian catastrophe that affects more than 80% of the population.<sup>1</sup> The Government has also committed a total of £75 million in humanitarian aid.<sup>2</sup> Its continued support, therefore, for the military campaign led by Saudi Arabia betrays fundamental contradictions in its foreign policy towards Yemen.
2. The coalition airstrikes, combined with an air and sea blockade that has prevented vital food and fuel supplies from reaching Yemenis who are in need, have exacerbated the fighting on the ground, decreased incentives for negotiation and created a desperate situation for civilians in an already fragile and vulnerable country. If the UK government wishes to create credibility and support for a political solution and prevent further deterioration of the humanitarian crisis, it must withdraw all support for the military intervention, provide support to the restoration of commercial shipping and push for all parties to the conflict to negotiate an immediate ceasefire.
3. Since the air strikes began the UK government has continued to supply precision-guided weapons and munitions to the Royal Saudi Air Force, and between 25 March and 1 July 2015 granted 37 export licences for military goods to Saudi Arabia.<sup>3</sup> In addition, UK personnel are based in Saudi Arabia to support the equipment supplied, and liaisons are based directly in the coalition headquarters. The UK government is supplying Saudi Arabia's participation in the conflict while asserting its support for United Nations (UN) efforts to bring an end to it; this stark contradiction raises the question of whether the UK government is prioritising its strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia over the worsening plight of the Yemeni population.
4. UK material support to Saudi Arabia is ever more pertinent to the UK's foreign policy when considering the UK's obligations under national legislation, the EU Common Position and the Arms Trade Treaty to ensure that no weapons are transferred where there is a risk of them being used to violate international humanitarian law (IHL). Since the bombardment began Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International

<sup>1</sup> Tobias Ellwood MP, 1 October 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-for-the-middle-east-calls-for-political-solution-to-yemen-conflict>

<sup>2</sup> Justine Greening MP, 27 September 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/urgent-action-needed-to-prevent-famine-in-yemen-warns-justine-greening>

<sup>3</sup> Parliamentary Question 30 September 2015 <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2015-09-16/HL2252/>

and Oxfam have provided evidence that the Saudi-led coalition has repeatedly violated the laws of war. The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs (and former Member of Parliament) Stephen O'Brien also stated that the airstrikes and other shelling were "in clear contravention of international humanitarian law".<sup>4</sup> The UK government, however, claimed it had seen "no credible evidence" of such violations.<sup>5</sup> It has since stated that it takes reports of alleged violations by all sides to the conflict "very seriously", but has taken no action other than to receive assurances from the Saudi Arabian government on its compliance with IHL.<sup>6</sup> In the face of mounting evidence to the contrary, the UK government must go further to address these allegations.

5. It should take immediate steps to cease any arms deliveries that are materially assisting the coalition campaign, reconsider the presence and role of the British advisors within the Saudi's military strategy units, and investigate whether its equipment to Saudi Arabia has been used in violations of IHL. Calls within Parliament for such an inquiry demonstrate the urgency of the matter, as well as the levels of public confidence in the UK's compliance with national legislation.<sup>7</sup> Refusal to do so also risks undermining the UK's credibility internationally, particularly when the Government is asserting the UK as a world leader in trade, aid, diplomacy and defence.
6. The UK must therefore also support international efforts to investigate war crimes in Yemen, as well as to bring an end to the conflict. Its agreement to weaken the resolution put to the UN Human Rights Council for an international, independent inquiry into abuses by all parties once again suggests the UK government is prepared to disregard the impact of the military intervention in Yemen in the interest of maintaining its relationship with Saudi Arabia – a relationship that is largely defined by the value of its defence exports as well as other security, intelligence and trade arrangements. It is also worth noting that public support from the UK ambassador to the UN in Geneva for the original resolution; this hints at strong disagreements within Government over its approach to the conflict.<sup>8</sup>

## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen O'Brien, 19 August 2015 <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-stephen-2>

<sup>5</sup> Parliamentary Question 20 July 2015 <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-07-13/6862/>

<sup>6</sup> Parliamentary Question 30 September <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2015-09-16/HL2252/>

<sup>7</sup> SNP calls for UK inquiry into alleged war crimes in Yemen, 6 October 2015 <https://theferret.scot/snp-calls-uk-inquiry-alleged-war-crimes-yemen>

<sup>8</sup> Saudis Seek to Fend Off U.N. Inquiry on Yemen, 24 September 2015 [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/25/world/middleeast/saudis-seek-to-fend-off-un-inquiry-on-yemen.html?ref=world&\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/25/world/middleeast/saudis-seek-to-fend-off-un-inquiry-on-yemen.html?ref=world&_r=2)