

**TESTIMONY PREPARED FOR**  
**THE TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF THE U.S. CONGRESS**  
**“Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen”**

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Good morning honorable co-chairs and members of the commission. Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Other colleagues have talked about how the conflict is driving hunger, depressing economic futures and causing immeasurable human suffering. I'd like to specifically discuss how this conflict, and the way it is being waged, are impacting Yemen's children.

Founded in 1919, Save the Children is a global movement that works in 120 countries across six continents. We have worked in Yemen since 1963 and are responding to the current crisis by providing life-saving assistance and support. We have reached over one million people, including over 650,000 children with cash and voucher distributions to purchase food. We are supporting 60 health facilities and operate seven mobile health teams. We also provide support for education, conduct Mine Reduction Education sessions and provide psychosocial support for children.

**Context**

The armed conflict in Yemen is devastating the lives of millions of children who are at daily risk of death and injury, are unable to access health, nutrition, education and other essential services, have been forced from their homes, and have barely enough food to survive. Over ten million children are in need of emergency humanitarian and protection assistance. Two million are out of school (at least 350,000 as a direct consequence of the conflict) and, of the 3.1 million internally displaced persons, 1.4 million are children.

We are now witnessing a cholera outbreak in Yemen. As of November 12, there were 4119 suspected cholera cases, of which 86 cases have been confirmed. The ongoing conflict has already stretched the capacity of the national health systems to the breaking point. And, when combined with high rates of child malnutrition, and threats from infectious diseases such as measles, children in Yemen now face a serious “triple threat” to their health and well-being.

**Grave violations**

As unacceptable as these conditions should be on their own, it is, sadly, the widespread and repeated cases of grave violations against children that make this conflict particularly terrible for children. The

UN Security Council has identified six categories of violations against children that it has termed “grave violations,” all of which we are seeing perpetrated against children in Yemen. These include:

- Killing and maiming of children;
- Use of child soldiers;
- Sexual violence against children;
- Attacks against schools and hospitals;
- Denial of humanitarian access for children; and
- Abduction of children.

### **Killing and maiming of children**

From March 2015 through mid-September 2016, the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism verified more than 3000 child casualties in Yemen and we are seeing a sharp escalation in civilian casualties since peace talks were suspended in August. Reports of child casualties continue to be received.

The UN has attributed 60 percent of child deaths in Yemen to coalition airstrikes, although ground attacks including shelling and small arms fire, landmines and unexploded ordnance are also responsible for child casualties. On August 9, 11 civilians, including seven children, were killed by an antivehicle mine in the western part of Taizz – two of the children were under 4 years old. The Taizz-based group, Against Mines National Organization, says that landmines have killed at least 18 people and wounded more than 39 in Taizz alone from May 2015 through April 2016.

Not surprisingly, children are particularly vulnerable to injury by explosive weapons during conflict. They are also injured and killed by the explosive remnants of war, from which the risks remain long after a war is over.

One little boy in Yemen described his experience to Save the Children as follows:

I was playing in the street and one of my friends found a strange thing on the ground. He took it and was playing with it when it started shooting fire. A few seconds later it exploded. We were all injured. People came to take us to hospital and later I found out that three of my friends had been killed, including my best friend... Now I hate everyone who uses weapons.

### **Attacks on schools and hospitals**

Since March of 2015 there have also been at least 248 attacks on schools and hospitals. And we are seeing an increased number of attacks against protected civilian objects across the board, with at least 41 incidents reported in August alone this year.

Children’s right to education has been severely compromised as a result of insecurity, damage and destruction to education facilities, use of schools as shelters, and the occupation of schools by armed groups. More than 1600 schools are currently unfit for use due to conflict-related damage, because they are being used to house IDPs or because they have been occupied by armed forces.

Recent attacks on schools include a reported airstrike on a school in Saada in August in which 10 children were killed and 28 injured and another unverified airstrike on a school in Sana'a in September in which one child was reportedly killed and two other individuals injured.

Hospitals have also been damaged and destroyed. A new survey by the World Health Organization finds that in 16 of Yemen's governorates that half of all health facilities are closed or partially functioning and that there are critical shortages of medical doctors in more than 40 percent of all districts.

### **Child soldiers**

From March 2015 to September 2016, more than 1000 cases of recruitment and use of child soldiers were recorded in Yemen (although real figures are believed to be much higher). The 2016 US Trafficking In Persons (TIP) Report found that, despite a law requiring members of the armed forces to be at least 18 years of age and a May 2014 UN action plan to prevent recruitment of children into its armed forces, credible reports indicate the acceleration of recruitment of children throughout the country. This is due to expanded military activity by government forces as well as Houthi, tribal, and other militias. As a result, Yemen is included on the US 2016 Child Soldier Prevention Act sanctions list.

### **Humanitarian access**

Finally, I'd like to say a few words about humanitarian access. The intensification of conflict in early August 2016, following the suspension of peace talks, has created additional challenges on this front including temporary suspensions on movement of humanitarian staff and interruptions to aid delivery in some parts of the country. Slow customs clearance is the norm at ports of entry and, as a result, essential supplies, including food, fuel and medical supplies are not getting through at the rates needed to meet needs.

Other persistent obstacles to the rapid and safe distribution of aid include bureaucratic impediments to securing visas, authorizations to travel and approval from local authorities to conduct assessments, denial of movement, lengthy deconfliction procedures, threats and harassment of staff by armed actors, and attacks on humanitarian workers and facilities. Between January and September of this year, Save the Children alone has experienced 35 security incidents that include threats, harassment, detention or attacks on our staff or facilities.

### **Recommendations:**

In order to improve conditions for children in Yemen and curtail the high rate of grave violations against children, Save the Children recommends:

1. Continued US engagement with and support for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and its investigations into human rights violations in Yemen. We believe that with adequate resources, including the addition of enough international experts, including child rights experts, and the full cooperation of all parties to the conflict, the process could help ensure accountability for violations of international law, including grave violations against children. That said, additional support to OHCHR must be accelerated and Yemeni authorities must facilitate OHCHR's work, including by issuing visas and permitting unrestricted access to all areas of the country. We need to keep a sharp eye on this process and, in the event that OHCHR's work is obstructed, consider alternative approaches such as UNSG, Security Council or HRC mandated commission of inquiry.

2. That the US conduct the promised review of its arms sales to the Saudi Arabia-led coalition. A thorough review was promised after the funeral bombings in October. In order to instil confidence that the review is, in fact, taking place, the Administration should formally set forth a public timeline, consult civil society organizations and be transparent about the outcomes of this review. All options should be on the table, including withholding logistical and intelligence support and suspending arms sales to Saudi Arabia until we see an end to indiscriminate bombings of civilians and civilian objects.
3. That the US, using its considerable influence with several of the parties to this conflict, continue to push, at the highest levels, for an end to the conflict. And, at the same time, the Administration should increase pressure on all parties to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, stress the importance of lifting bureaucratic impediments to aid delivery and prevent and end grave violations of children's rights. We hope Congress will support continued US diplomatic engagement at the highest levels during the remaining tenure of this Administration and into the next.

Finally, I would like to note that the kinds of grave violations we are seeing perpetrated against children in Yemen are not confined to Yemen. There is a de facto "war on children" taking place in conflicts around the globe and Save the Children would like to see the US take a stronger stand to protect children during conflict by:

- publically expressing concern for the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and reinforcing the urgent need for global leaders to address the issue; and
- by signing the Safe Schools Declaration, a voluntary instrument endorsed by 56 countries, which includes commitments to improving data collection on attacks against schools as well as endorsement of the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.

Thank you.