



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen

**Thursday, November 17, 2016
10:00 AM – 12:00 PM
2200 Rayburn House Office Building**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen.

I want to welcome our witnesses and thank them for their willingness to share their expertise and on the ground experience with us today. Amb. Jeffrey, let me also take this opportunity to thank you for your many years of dedicated service as a United States career diplomat.

During the 114th Congress, this Commission has devoted considerable attention to the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and their devastating consequences for the civilian population. We have consistently expressed our concern that these conflicts are being conducted in ways that undermine the norms of international humanitarian law, or IHL – that both the states and the non-state actors who are fighting these wars are purposefully targeting civilian populations and infrastructure, instead of protecting them as they are obligated to do under international law.

All of us have seen the pictures and heard the stories of people who live with constant shelling, or are being used as human shields, or are under siege and starving, or whose schools and medical facilities have been destroyed, and their doctors killed – shameful practices that are far too prevalent and systematic to be considered collateral damage, and that the development of IHL after World War II was meant to end.

Today we will look at another conflict that raises many of the same concerns, but has received much less attention: the 20-month old conflict in Yemen.

The Yemen conflict is over governance: it started in March 2015, when Saudi Arabia and members of a coalition it established launched a military operation to restore the rule of Yemen's internationally-recognized President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Prior to the start of hostilities, Hadi's government had been gradually supplanted by an alliance comprised of the Houthi movement and loyalists of the previous President, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The United Nations has estimated that through August 2016, this war had killed at least 10,000 people. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, there were 3,980 civilian casualties from the start of hostilities through September of this year. Of a population of 21.2 million, more than 3 million have been internally displaced.

Before the conflict Yemen was already a poor country. Today, 80% of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance.

I want to draw particular attention to hunger: UNICEF estimates that 14 million Yemenis are malnourished, and that 370,000 children are severely malnourished or starving, particularly in rural areas. According to the World Food Program, almost half of all children in Yemen are stunted in growth due to chronic malnutrition. This is a country that is completely devastated.

And once again, this horrible devastation is due in great part to the way the war has been conducted. In its most recent report on the human rights situation in Yemen, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights documented "substantial allegations concerning possible violations of international humanitarian law in the context of the conduct of hostilities in Yemen," including rocket and mortar attacks on residential areas, allegations of the use of land mines, and sniper attacks by the Houthi-Saleh forces. On the part of the Saudi-led Coalition, the High Commissioner documented attacks on markets, weddings, residential buildings, and public and private infrastructure, and allegations of the use of cluster bombs. The UN estimates that the majority of the civilian casualties in the war are attributable to Coalition forces.

The problem, of course, is that the Coalition is backed by the United States, which has provided a full range of security assistance to Saudi Arabia – everything from small arms and ammunition, to tanks and armored vehicles, to combat aircraft, bombs, and more. U.S.-provided equipment has been used to prosecute the war. The UN High Commissioner's report I just cited includes photos of remnants of cluster munitions with American markings. So there is growing concern here in the House and in the Senate that the U.S. could be in violation of our own laws prohibiting military sales or the provision of security assistance to countries that engage in gross violations of human rights.

This is what we are here to discuss today. I recognize that in the aftermath of the October 2016 Saudi airstrike on a funeral hall that killed between 130 and 150 people, the Administration announced that it was initiating a review of U.S. security assistance to Saudi Arabia; that was an appropriate step. But we don't yet know the outcome of that review, nor whether other steps we have taken on training and intelligence-sharing will be enough to change the conduct of the war, nor protect us from charges of complicity for the consequences of that conduct.

What I am convinced of is that the weakening of humanitarian norms that we've seen in the first years of this century does not serve our strategic interests, nor those of our allies. We must take steps to restore respect for the obligation to protect civilians.

With that, I would like to introduce our panel of witnesses.