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Battle rages for Hodeidah as Yemen faces threat of mass starvation

A nightmare is unfolding in Yemen's Red Sea port city of Hodeidah, with civilians attempting to flee a siege mounted by US-backed forces led by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia as bombs and shells explode around them.

The plight of the city, where the United Nations warned that 250,000 could lose their lives to the onslaught, is overshadowed by the threat posed to the entire country by the shutting down of the port, which is the lifeline for food, fuel, medicine and other vital supplies upon which at least two-thirds of the country's population of 27 million depend.

With 8 million already on the brink of famine and 22 million dependent upon food aid, the paralysis of Hodeidah for any length of time threatens to claim millions of lives from hunger and disease.

Opening a three-week session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the head of the UN's human rights department, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, stated on Monday: "I emphasize my grave worry regarding the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition's ongoing attacks in Hodeidah which could result in enormous civilian casualties and have a disastrous impact on life-saving humanitarian aid to millions of people which comes through the port."

Even before the latest siege began, the UN had warned that given the existing conditions and the stranglehold imposed by the Saudi-UAE blockade, another 10 million Yemenis could be facing famine by year's end.

Efforts by United Nations special envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths to broker a ceasefire were scuttled Monday, after the foreign minister of the UAE, Anwar Gargash, rejected anything outside of an unconditional surrender by the Houthi rebels who hold the port and their immediate evacuation

“There can be no conditions in any offers to withdraw,” said Gargash at a press conference in Dubai. “If the rebels wanted to set conditions, they should have thought of that a year ago. ... Now is not the time to negotiate.”

The UAE ultimatum follows last week’s decision by the UN Security Council, meeting in secret session, to reject a call by Sweden, a non-permanent member of the council, for the body to demand an immediate ceasefire and a halt to the Saudi-UAE offensive. The proposal was killed by the US and Britain, both permanent members of the council with veto power, and both heavily involved in arming and supporting the Saudi-led forces.

A third permanent member of the Security Council is France. The French daily *Le Figaro*, citing senior military sources, reported on Saturday that French special forces are deployed in Yemen along with forces from the UAE.

The United States gave the green light for the offensive on the port city, despite warnings by aid organizations and the UN that the military action could lead to the starvation of millions. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a brief statement acknowledging that Washington had assured the UAE regime that it understood its “security concerns,” while urging it to maintain the “free flow of humanitarian aid.”

This is rank hypocrisy, given that the strategic aim of seizing Hodeidah is to cut off supplies to the territory controlled by the Houthis in order to starve the population into submission.

It has since been reported that US military personnel are working together with Saudi and UAE forces to select targets in the port city, supposedly to avoid civilian casualties.

The siege has already triggered a deepening of Yemen’s humanitarian catastrophe, with the UN reporting that nearly 5,000 families have been displaced by the action, with many of them fleeing villages south of Hodeidah into the crowded port city of 600,000, which itself faces imminent bombardment and has little resources to support internal refugees.

A local aid worker told the British daily *Independent* Monday: “People are trying to leave with rockets and mortars over their heads. Other people are besieged in their homes. They don’t know if their family members managed to escape or who survived. It’s hot and there is no water and we are scared. Please stop what is happening.”

In the Dubai press conference, the UAE foreign minister said, “Our approach is one of gradual calibrated and methodical pressure designed for unconditional withdrawal of [the] Houthis.”

Behind these words it is apparent that the ground force besieging Hodeidah, made up of UAE troops, Sudanese forces and Yemeni mercenaries, have made little progress in their attempt to take the city.

Yemen’s Ansarullah movement, as the Houthi rebels are officially known, dismissed reports that Saudi-led forces had seized Hodeidah’s airport and said that they were in retreat. The airport itself, however, has been completely destroyed by bombardment.

“A battle of attrition awaits the Saudi alliance which it cannot withstand. The Saudi coalition will not win the battle in Hodeidah,” Ansarullah spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam told the Lebanese-based *al-Mayadeen* TV.

Given the lack of progress on the ground, the Saudi-led force can be expected to place ever greater reliance on air power, raising the threat that Hodeidah will face a similar fate as Mosul and Raqqa, which were largely reduced to rubble by US bombs, missiles and shells, killing and wounding tens of thousands of civilians.

This air war against the Yemeni people would be impossible without US approval, in terms of political support, arms supplies, the mid-air refueling of Saudi and UAE warplanes and the Pentagon’s staffing of a joint command center in Riyadh that relays US intelligence for targeting airstrikes.

The Trump administration in the US and May’s government in Britain are, together with the reactionary oil monarchies that they arm and support, guilty of massive war crimes in Yemen.

For Washington, Yemen is seen as a means of countering Iranian influence in the region. US officials have claimed, without presenting any credible evidence, that the Houthis act as a proxy for Tehran and are armed and trained by Iran. In reality, both Riyadh and Washington oppose any government in Yemen that is not a servile puppet of Saudi and US interests.

To press its campaign against Iran and for US hegemony in the region, US imperialism is willing to sacrifice the lives of millions.