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The Latest Attempt to Whitewash the Saudi-Led Coalition's Crimes in Yemen

By Daniel Larison
June 6, 2016

The U.N. has made a humiliating, disgraceful reversal ^[1] in its reporting on the Saudi-led coalition's crimes in Yemen:

The United Nations said on Monday it had removed the Saudi Arabia-led coalition fighting in Yemen from a child rights blacklist pending a joint review by the world body and the coalition of the cases of child deaths and injuries.

The U.N. report on children and armed conflict – released last Thursday – said the coalition was responsible for 60 percent of child deaths and injuries in Yemen last year, killing 510 and wounding 667, and half the attacks on schools and hospitals.

Following a complaint by Saudi Arabia, however, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon agreed to a joint review by the world body and the coalition of the cases cited in the annual report of states and armed groups that violate children's rights in war.

The Saudis and their allies have been very effective in getting their way at the U.N. on Yemen, and they have been helped in this by the reliable diplomatic support that the U.S., Britain, and others have provided to them. When the Netherlands pushed for an independent inquiry into war crimes and abuses in Yemen by all sides last year, the Saudis were able to scuttle the Dutch resolution with tacit U.S. backing and propose instead that the Saudi-backed Yemeni

government-in-exile would be responsible for investigating the coalition's wrongdoing. This amounted to having the Saudis' client put in charge of investigating the Saudis. That was always intended to cover up what the coalition was doing, and it has aided them in covering up and whitewashing their abuses.

Last week, the U.N. added ^[2] the Saudi-led coalition to a blacklist that includes states and groups (including the Houthis) that violate the rights of children in conflicts around the world. The listing of the coalition was based on the fact that it has been responsible for more than half of child deaths and injuries in the conflict since last March. The Saudis have carried out an indiscriminate bombing campaign and used cluster bombs in civilian areas, and the campaign has included strikes on schools and hospitals. That is why the coalition was added, and the report's findings are consistent with the evidence provided by aid groups and human rights organizations working in Yemen. This isn't seriously disputed by anyone except the governments implicated in the wrongdoing. It should also be added that the Saudi-led blockade of the country has had an enormously destructive effect on the well-being of Yemen's children by causing a huge increase in malnutrition and the creation of near-famine conditions in the country. Millions of children are being starved because of the Saudi-led blockade. This ^[3] is the story of one such child.

The Saudis and their allies are eager to keep their war in Yemen from receiving too much public scrutiny and criticism. Now they have used their influence at the U.N. to get the organization to start an absurd "joint review" of the charges in the report. This is the same as having the suspect of a crime involved in investigating himself. As appalling as that is, the Saudis' gambit may have backfired on them in this case. The sudden reversal by the U.N. reeks so strongly of blatant political interference on behalf of the coalition that it has drawn that much more attention to the report's findings. Here were some of the reactions to the news:

Shocking flip flop by the UN now removing Saudi from list of shame for violations against children in Yemen. Naked politicization.

— Philippe Bolopion (@Bolopion) June 6, 2016 ^[4]

Human Rights Watch says Ban Ki Moon's decision this afternoon to delist Saudis "taints the Secretary-General's legacy on human rights."

— Samuel Oakford (@samueloakford) June 6, 2016 ^[5]

.@secgen ^[6] ought be ashamed of the organization he represents #SaudiArabia ^[7] #Yemen ^[8]
<https://t.co/nPA39TkAOw> ^[9]

— Daniel DePetrìs (@DanDePetrìs) June 6, 2016 ^[10]

If the Saudis and their allies were looking to avoid embarrassment, they probably would have done better to ignore the report. As it is, they have practically confirmed their own guilt by pressuring the U.N. to alter its position. The U.N. decision to cave to their pressure is shameful, but it is in keeping with the generally shameful way that the U.N. as an institution and its member states have responded to the Saudi-led war on Yemen.