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Saudi Arabia Kills Civilians, the U.S. Looks the Other Way

By SAMUEL OAKFORDAUG

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A food factory hit by a Saudi-led coalition, killing workers and destroying the building in Sanaa, Yemen, last week.

In the span of four days earlier this month, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition in Yemen bombed a Doctors Without Borders-supported hospital, killing 19 people; a school, where 10 children, some as young as 8, died; and a vital bridge over which United Nations food supplies traveled, punishing millions.

In a war that has seen reports of human rights violations committed by every side, these three attacks stand out. But the Obama administration says these strikes, like previous ones that killed thousands of civilians since last March, will have no effect on the American support that is crucial for Saudi Arabia's air war.

On the night of Aug. 11, coalition warplanes bombed the main bridge on the road from Hodeidah, along the Red Sea coast, to Sana, the capital. When it didn't fully collapse, they returned the next day to destroy the bridge.

More than 14 million Yemenis suffer dangerous levels of food insecurity — a figure that dwarfs that of any other country in conflict, worsened by a Saudi-led and American-supported blockade. One in three children under the age of 5 reportedly suffers from acute malnutrition. An estimated 90 percent of food that the United Nation's World Food Program transports to Sana traveled across the destroyed bridge.

An Obama administration official told me on the condition of anonymity that the United States included the bridge on a no-strike list of vital infrastructure, explicitly informing the Saudis that it was "critical to responding to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen." And yet the Saudi-led coalition obliterated the structure, either intentionally disregarding humanitarian considerations and the wishes of the United States, or out of sheer incompetence.

On Aug. 14, coalition airstrikes hit the school in the Saada governorate, a stronghold of the Houthi rebels. Saudi officials said the Houthis were running a training facility there for child soldiers. The United Nations' child welfare agency said it was a religious school.

A day later, warplanes attacked the hospital supported by Doctors Without Borders, or M.S.F., for its French name, Médecins Sans Frontières. It was the fourth coalition attack on a facility of the doctors' group since October. At least 19 people were killed, including an M.S.F. staffer.

M.S.F. said its hospitals' coordinates had been shared with all parties to the conflict, including the Saudis. The hospital should have already been on no-strike lists that the United States and Saudi Arabia insist the coalition maintains.

The American assistance for Saudi Arabia that Mr. Obama authorized last March includes aerial refueling for coalition jets, intelligence and targeting assistance. American tankers offload fuel to any coalition jet, no matter its target. This support comes on top of more than \$100 billion in arms deals with Saudi Arabia between 2010 and 2015, and recent deals made explicitly to "replenish" stockpiles spent in Yemen.

At the United Nations, Saudi Arabia and its allies have blocked investigations into the Yemen conflict and complained when the Security Council considered a resolution aimed at protecting

Yemeni civilians. Saudi Arabia has also warned aid workers to leave much of Yemen, ominously presaging M.S.F.'s Aug. 18 decision to pull out of two governorates in the country's north because of the coalition's "indiscriminate bombings." Without the group's presence, it will be more difficult to know the toll of future strikes in these areas.

In June, Saudi Arabia threatened to cut its funding to the United Nations after Secretary General Ban Ki-moon included the coalition on a list of violators of children's rights. While criticizing the Saudis for their bullying, Mr. Ban's office has also been accommodating out of a belief that it can't afford to lose Saudi money.

The Saudis are not the only negative force in Yemen. The Houthis and their allies loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh have waged a cynical war, and are responsible for human rights violations. But it is difficult to see what possible progress can be made when Saudi Arabia routinely bombs civilian sites.

Many in Washington see support for the Saudi-led coalition as necessary for maintaining American-Saudi relations after the nuclear deal with Iran last year. Saudi Arabia has used this leeway to carry out its Yemen campaign with abandon. Each fatal strike and subsequent implausible Saudi denial should test the limits of the Obama administration's support.

Instead, a spokesman for United States Central Command, which oversees American operations in the Middle East including support for the coalition, told me last week that the United States is not conducting a single investigation into civilian casualties in Yemen.

The recent uptick in airstrikes and fighting across Yemen follows the collapse of United Nations-brokered peace talks that were being held in Kuwait. The possibility of a resumption of full-scale war and all the suffering that accompanies it could have been an opportunity for the Obama administration to reflect on its axiomatic support for the Saudi coalition. But even after last week's string of outrageous bombings, the White House has still not done that.

The Obama administration has in recent days insisted that it wants all sides in Yemen's war to stop fighting. But as American tankers wait to refuel American-made fighter jets, loaded with American-made bombs destined for Yemen, the White House evidently doesn't realize that it is waging a war.