Dispute Ruptures Between U.N.'s Ban Ki-moon and Saudi Arabia

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<http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/10/middleeast/un-saudi-arabia-ban-ki-moon/>

A diplomatic fight, usually kept behind closed doors, exploded in public Thursday as U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon accused Saudi Arabia and its military allies of placing "undue pressure" on the international organization.

A source told CNN earlier this week that the Saudis applied full court pressure with a threat to cut off ties with the U.N. if the organization did not remove the country from a blacklist of groups violating children's rights in the conflict in Yemen.The U.N. sourcesaid that a [threat of a "total rupture"](http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/09/middleeast/saudi-arabia-un-children/index.html) had been made, placing hundreds of millions of dollars to U.N. humanitarian agencies in doubt.

Saudi Arabia's U.N. ambassador Abdallah al-Mouallimi dismissed those allegations as "rumors" circulated by people who "try to damage our reputation."

Last month, the Saudi-led coalition was put on a blacklist over its role in the deaths of children in Yemen. The U.N. report, which annually shames the worst perpetrators, claimed that the coalition was responsible for 60% of the 1,953 children recorded as killed or maimed in the conflict in 2015.

The Saudis vigorously disputed the report.

The Saudi-led coalition -- made up of several Arab countries -- had begun a military campaign in Yemen in March 2015 aimed at preventing Houthi rebels allied to Iran and forces loyal to Yemen's deposed President Ali Abdullah Saleh from taking power. The Saudi ambassador had blamed the Houthis for the deaths of Yemeni children.

After much insistence from the Saudis, the U.N. dropped the coalition from the blacklist earlier this week. Human rights organizations roundly blasted the U.N., describing the decision as "caving" and "pandering."

On Thursday, Ban acknowledged those criticisms as "fierce reaction to my decision to temporarily remove the Saudi-led coalition countries from the report's annex."

In a press conference, Ban called his decision to remove Saudi Arabia from the blacklist as "one of the most painful and difficult decisions I have had to make."

The U.N. leader attributed his decision to the repercussions it would have on other U.N. programs.

"I also had to consider the very real prospect that millions of other children would suffer grievously if, as was suggested to me, countries would de-fund many U.N. programs. Children already at risk in Palestine, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen and so many other places would fall further into despair.

"There are so many, so many much more serious issues. Because of this, you cannot burn down whole house."

Al-Mouallimi disputed Ban's comments, calling them "outrageous." He denied any talks with the U.N. about de-funding its humanitarian agencies.

"This is so ridiculous. Why would we punish Palestinian refugees for a mistake committed by U.N. Secretariat? Why would we punish our brothers and sisters in refugee camps?"

Al-Mouallimi stressed that it was Saudi Arabia that was "bullied and threatened" by the inclusion of the country on the U.N. blacklist.

In a bid to cool tensions, Saudi Arabia and the U.N. agreed to discuss the conclusions of the report. But an agreement seems unlikely as of now.

Saudi Arabia said the de-listing is final, irreversible and unconditional. Meanwhile, Ban characterized the removal of Saudia Arabia from the blacklist as temporary.

The Secretary-General said the facts in the report stand, though there will be a review.