Confidential U.N. Report Accuses Saudi Coalition of Killing Hundreds of Yemeni Kids

August 16, 2017

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Foreign Policy

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/16/confidential-u-n-report-accuses-saudi-coalition-of-killing-hundreds-of-children-in-yemen-conflict/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=Flashpoints>

A Saudi-led military coalition conducting airstrikes in Yemen committed “grave violations” of human rights against children last year, killing 502, injuring 838, according to a draft report by the U.N. Secretary General António Guterres.

“The killing and maiming of children remained the most prevalent violation” of children’s rights in Yemen, according to the 41-page draft report obtained by Foreign Policy. “In the reporting period, attacks carried out by air were the cause of over half of all child casualties, with at least 349 children killed and 333 children injured.”

Saudi Arabia and its allies have been trying since March 2015, with U.S. backing, to force Houthi rebels out of power in Yemen. But the coalition’s air strikes have been heavily criticized for killing civilians, hobbling infrastructure, and destroying the country’s architectural heritage.

The chief author of the confidential draft report, Virginia Gamba, the U.N. chief’s special representative for children abused in war time, informed top U.N. officials Monday, that she intends to recommend the Saudi-led coalition be added to a list a countries and entities that kill and maim children, according to a well-placed source. The decision will have to be taken by Guterres, who will make the final report public later this month.

The Saudi-led air coalition was responsible for inflicting the largest  number of child casualties, 683, with Houthi rebels killing or injuring 414. In contrast, the Islamic State was responsible for six child casualties and Al Qaeda one.

Coalition aircraft also destroyed 28 schools.

The Saudi-led coalition is the only force in Yemen with warplanes and helicopter gunships, making it the likely perpetrator of such acts.

The findings were included in a draft copy of the U.N.’s annual report of Children and Armed Conflict, which documented human rights violations of at least 15,500 children last year by government forces, terrorists and armed opposition groups in more than a dozen conflicts around the world. Four thousand documented abuses of children were attributed to governments, with the vast majority of remaining atrocities, 11,500, committed by terrorist organizations or insurgents.

Saudi officials have privately urged the U.N. to engage in further high level discussions before publishing the report. And they have enlisted the support of the United States, which has urged the U.N. not to list the Saudi-led coalition, saying it’s unfair to implicate all coalition members, even those who have not engaged in atrocities, according to two well-placed sources.In addition to Saudi Arabia, the coalition includes Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates.

Instead, Washington has pressed the UN to list only those  individual states directly responsible for atrocities, according to those sources. But identifying specific states is complicated by the fact that the coalition does not release information on which coalition members are engaged in specific operations, according to officials.

An official at the U.S. mission to the U.N. challenged that account, saying “we have not pursued such an argument [with] anyone at the U.N.”

The publication of the report, which is expected to be issued later this month, presents Guterres with a tough dilemma: if he shames the Saudi coalition he runs the risk of provoking a break with the U.N.’s most influential Arab governments. But if he doesn’t act, he is likely to face charges of undermining the U.N.’s commitment to human rights.

In February, Guterres sought a middle way, suggesting to his top advisors that the U.N. delay the report’s release by three to six months to allow the coalition incentive to improve its conduct. But the office of the U.N. advocate for children feared a delay would subject them to criticism. Guterres, who is expected to receive the final report later this week, has not indicated what he will do.

The current standoff has its roots in the 2001 adoption of U.N. Security Council [Resolution 1379](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N01/651/10/PDF/N0165110.pdf?OpenElement), which mandated a senior U.N. official to produce a report each year documenting attacks against children in armed conflicts, including an annex that serves as a blacklist of governments, terrorists and armed groups that kill and maim kids. But it has proven highly controversial among states, who resent being publicly singled out and placed on a list that includes some of the world’s most notorious terrorist organizations, including Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State.

The latest draft report reflects a drop in the overall number of documented casualties in Yemen. Gamba’s draft attributed the fall to a temporary ebb in fighting that followed the signing of a cessation of hostilities agreement in April 2016. But she also suggested the actual casualty count could be higher, noting that “the documentation of violations against children was constrained by access restrictions and insecurity.”

Gamba told FP that the contents of the final report, which is still being discussed with various U.N. offices, have “not been finalized,” and that for the time being there is no final decision on which countries would be included in the blacklist. She also said she was unaware of attempts by the United States to oppose the listing of the Saudi-led coalition. “None of what you indicate has reached me,” she said. And she would not confirm whether she had recommended the Saudi coalition be included on the list or nor.

Stephane Dujarric, the U.N. chief’s top spokesman, declined to comment on Gamba’s finding but he noted that the draft report obtained by FP “is not the final report.”

Last year, Saudi Arabia was included on the list on the grounds that the Saudi-led coalition was responsible for [more than half](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=s/2016/360&referer=/english/&Lang=E) of the 1,953 child casualties in the Yemen conflict.

In response, Saudi Arabia [threatened](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/07/saudi-arabia-threatened-to-break-relations-with-un-over-human-rights-criticism-in-yemen/) to stage a walk-out by Arab countries from the U.N. and slash hundreds of millions in aid to the international body’s anti-poverty programs unless the coalition was removed from a U.N. rogues list. Then U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon reluctantly agreed to temporarily delist the coalition, [citing](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/09/u-n-chief-says-he-went-soft-on-saudi-arabia-and-allies-to-avoid-aid-cut/) concerns that the loss of Persian Gulf money could imperil the lives of millions of needy children from South Sudan to Yemen.

But he insisted that the coalition would be put back on the list unless a joint U.N.-Saudi review of the coalition’s conduct demonstrated the allegations were unjustified or that attacks on children stopped. But the Saudis were never put back on the list, and the attacks never stopped.

About 600 children were killed and 1,150 injured in Yemen between March 2016 and March 2017, according to UNICEF.

The Saudi mission to the United Nations did not respond to a request for comment. But Saudi officials have privately contended in talks with the U.N. that they have taken steps to avoid child casualties, and that the documented number of deaths and injuries has fallen significantly since last year.

Outside groups say the drop is due less to the coalition’s restraint than to the fact that outside observers, including researchers from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have been [prohibited](https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/06/02/un-flight-ban-reduces-yemen-access-critical-time) from entering Yemen on U.N. relief planes. In July, the Saudi-led coalition barred the U.N. from delivering aid to the Houthi-controlled capital of Sanaa because three BBC reporters were traveling on the relief plan.

“Despite all the promises to show restraint that the Saudis have made to the U.N., the U.S. and the U.K., there haven’t really been any improvements in the lives of Yemeni children to brag about,” said Akshaya Kumar, the deputy U.N. representative for Human Rights Watch. “Schools are still being attacked, bombs are still being dropped, and children are still being killed.”