Yemen on the Brink of Disaster

US President Joe Biden has lifted a series of sanctions against the Yemen Ansar Allah (Houthis) movement, which was listed as a terrorist organization by the former Donald Trump administration. The US Treasury recalled that former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced on January 11 that the Houthis had been designated as a terrorist organization and that the three leaders of the organization were “terrorists,” but the US Office of Foreign Assets Control lifted a series of sanctions against the Yemeni movement until February 26.

The fact is that six years of war between the US-backed Arab coalition and the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels have been a real disaster for Yemen. Most of its 30 million people rely on international aid to survive. The UN says 13.5 million Yemenis are already facing severe food shortages, a number that could rise to 16 million in the near future. At present, the Houthis rule the capital and the north of Yemen, where the majority of the population lives, forcing international aid agencies to work with them. The agencies depend on the Houthis to deliver aid, distribute it, and pay the salaries of those involved in aid programs. This is why, according to Western media, the rebels are widely involved in stealing aid and using access to aid to extort various privileges and money, as well as carrying out various human rights violations.

Houthis officials sharply condemn the policy of Washington, which has unscrupulously interfered in the internal affairs of this Arab country. In Iran, Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh stated that the US policy is
doomed to failure and the US will eventually have to negotiate with the Houthis. This policy, according to the Iranian, is part of a broader effort by Washington to isolate and damage Iran. It also shows support for its close ally Saudi Arabia, which leads the anti-Houthi coalition in the war.

In contrast, the Saudi Foreign Ministry welcomed the US decision, saying it hoped the policy would force the rebels to return to the negotiating table. Maged al-Madhaji, director of Yemen’s most prominent think tank, the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, said this turnaround in Yemeni politics, made by Joe Biden, would close the door on the Houthis’ attempts to gain international legitimacy as well as paralyze their finances and drain money from regional allies. But the move could simultaneously hinder UN mediation efforts and damage the peace talks by polarizing the positions of each side, said UN Secretary-General spokesman Stéphane Dujarric. The war in Yemen has taken the lives of nearly 233,000 people and reduced to rubble the country’s infrastructure, from roads and hospitals to water and electricity networks. It began with the Houthis’ takeover of the north in 2014, which sparked a devastating Saudi-led coalition air campaign to rebuild their Yemeni government.

The Houthis, according to Western experts, receive financial and military support from Iran, and have recently been trying to turn the tide of the war by constantly bombarding various Saudi cities with missiles and drone strikes. Their opponents say they are seeking to impose Iranian-style fundamentalist rule in Yemen under the leadership of the group’s religious and military leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi.

Already, the US, which is one of Yemen’s largest donors, has suspended millions in aid to Houthi-controlled areas after reports of theft and looting of humanitarian supplies. UN agencies have long complained about insurgents stealing and diverting food aid. In announcing some change in policy toward the Houthis, Washington has pledged to take steps to reduce the negative impact on humanitarian efforts. These include special US Treasury licenses that allow US aid to continue to flow into the country and aid agencies to continue to operate. Nevertheless, agencies and aid groups said the consequences could be catastrophic. Even with exceptions, the operation would be compromised, says Janti Soeripto, president of Save the Children. She criticized the “chaotic manner” in which the US made the decision, which she said caused agencies to struggle to figure out the consequences and how to deal with them.

Delays or confusion in the licensing process can slow or disrupt imports of food, medicine and fuel, while even minor disruptions have serious consequences. International banks are likely to refuse any deals with Yemen’s banking system, which is dominated by the Houthis. This will hurt aid agencies and NGOs that must use banks to move funds, pay salaries, and maintain operations. It could also hurt the main source of income for some Yemenis who receive transfers from relatives abroad. “Yemen’s shaken economy will be dealt another crushing blow,” said Mohammed Abdi, Yemeni director of the Norwegian Refugee Council. He said banks, businesses and donors may not be willing or able to take the risk of operating in Yemen. The World Health Organization, for example, plans to implement contingency plans to relocate its international staff, said its director in Sana’a, Adham Ismail. “This would definitely limit our ability to attract international expertise,” he said, “and make it difficult to get donations and medical services to Yemenis under Houthi control.” Peter Salisbury, a Yemeni expert for the International Crisis Group, said: “There is broad consensus that mismanagement can have devastating consequences for millions of ordinary Yemenis.” What is even less clear is the immediate impact this will have on the Houthis, who will have to starve.

UN Secretary General António Guterres has repeatedly warned that, along with South Sudan, northern Nigeria, and Somalia, Yemen is on the brink of starvation. “Since July, we have been warning that Yemen is on the brink of a catastrophic food security crisis,” said Lise Grande, UN Resident Coordinator for Yemen, in a report released on October 27, 2020. If the war does not end now, Yemen is approaching an irreversible situation and risks losing an entire generation of young children. Data that has been published confirms that acute malnutrition among children is at its highest level since the war began, with more than half a million cases occurring in the South. These grim findings were published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and others. Lise Grande’s report added that the biggest increase is in young children suffering from severe acute malnutrition, with a 15.5% spike during 2020, a quarter of a million pregnant and nursing women needing treatment as a result of malnutrition. The UN said it had received only $1.43 billion of the $3.2 billion needed for humanitarian aid to Yemen for 2020 by mid-October, and aid programs have begun to wind down because of US fault.

It is clear that the United States, which illegally imposed harsh sanctions on Yemen, should act immediately not only to lift the embargo, but also to allow international organizations to provide financial and other assistance. Moreover, it is absolutely essential that Saudi Arabia stop its armed aggression against its Arab neighbor, leaving the Yemenis to sort out their own internal affairs.