Who is Responsible for the Suffering of Yemen?

As noted by numerous commentators on the Middle East, the situation in Yemen remains very grave. The country has been devastated by the armed conflict being waged between the Houthis and the troops of ousted President Mansour Hadi, which in turn are being heavily supported by the air forces of the so-called Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia.

The ongoing airstrikes claim civilians lives, leave districts in ruin, and destroy the country’s infrastructure. Earlier this month at least three people were killed in an air raid on the hospital of Doctors Without Borders in the governorate of Saada. It’s been reported that hospitals are closing their doors, unable to operate under the current circumstances.

This is not the first medical facility to be bombed in Yemen - the so-called Arab coalition has even destroyed the Center for Care and Rehabilitation of the blind in the Yemeni capital Sana’a. Moreover, the international Human Rights Watch organization reported that the coalition was using cluster bombs to destroy certain facilities in Sana’a back in January.

One should note that massive civil unrest began in Yemen in 2011 as the direct result of so-called the Arab Spring, orchestrated by the US and its allies. In 2014, Shia tribesmen that are known today as the Houthis started fighting government forces and consequently managed to capture a significant part of the country due to the massive support that was shown for them by the Yemeni population. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched its first airstrikes against the Houthis, which were, according to various human rights organizations, badly coordinated and resulted in massive civilian casualties.

Concerned by the grave state of affairs in Yemen, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad al Hussein announced at a meeting of the UN Security Council back in December that it is the so-called Arab coalition that is responsible for the absolute majority of attacks on residential areas and civilian targets in Yemen. According to Reuters, the UN High Commissioner announced that he:

“observed with extreme concern heavy shelling from the ground and air in areas of Yemen with a high concentration of civilians and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools.”
It is curious to note that in pursuit of its criminal goals in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has been using weapons that were bought from the UK in 2012. Moreover, it keeps on restocking its supply of deadly British-made weapons. For this reason, at the end of last year, leading British diplomats and lawyers warned David Cameron that he was running the risk of facing an international tribunal for war crimes due to the fact that the weapons that his government supplies to Saudi Arabia are being extensively used against civilian targets in Yemen.

According to The Independent:

“Advisers to Philip Hammond, the Foreign Secretary, have stepped up legal warnings that the sale of specialist missiles to the Saudis, deployed throughout nine months of almost daily bombing raids in west Yemen against Houthi rebels, may breach international humanitarian law…. thousands of Yemeni civilians have been killed, with schools, hospitals and non-military infrastructure hit. Fuel and food shortages, according to the United Nations, have brought near famine to many parts of the country. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (HRW) and other NGOs, claim there is no doubt that weapons supplied by the UK and the United States have hit Yemeni civilian targets. One senior Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) legal adviser told The Independent: “The Foreign Secretary has acknowledged that some weapons supplied by the UK have been used by the Saudis in Yemen. Are our reassurances correct – that such sales are within international arms treaty rules? The answer is, sadly, not at all clear.”

Yet, The Guardian notes that Saferworld and Amnesty released a legal opinion from Professor Philippe Sands QC and a number of other lawyers, according to which the sales of British arms to Saudi Arabia in the light of its military intervention and bombing of Yemen violate national, European and international laws. The lawyers are pointing out that in the period of 9 months before July 2015 the UK supplied 9 million pounds worth of rockets and bombs, while in the next three months this number hit a staggering one billion pounds. Additionally, there’s clear evidence that those weapons were used against hospitals, schools, markets, warehouses, ports, and camps for displaced persons, turning Yemen into a nightmare. The Saferworld human rights organization is convinced that there’s a direct link between the increase in sales of ammunition and bombings in Yemen.

Many British observers, including those from The Guardian, have been pointing out that days after David Cameron’s statements about his attempt to “initiate a political process in Yemen,” and remarks that “there could be no military solution in Yemen,” the data released by the government showed that UK officials approved the sale of a billion pounds worth of bombs to Saudi Arabia.

Under these circumstances the only natural question is: Will international human rights organizations and the international community as a whole, all those who failed to say a resounding “NO” to Western military interventions in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, that were only profitable for arms sellers, carry on watching silently the destruction of Yemen? How many Yemenis do we need to see die before we start solving conflicts within a political framework? How many lives should be spared? Do we ever bring to justice those responsible for such massacres? Or will we rather allow politicians, the likes of Cameron, to call for peace, while selling huge amounts of deadly weapons behind our backs with impunity?

Martin Berger is a Czech-based freelance journalist and analyst, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”