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Will Donald Trump Escalate the Devastating War and Hunger in Yemen?

By Medea Benjamin
March 29, 2017

This week marks the beginning of year three of the Saudi-led military intervention in the civil war in Yemen, an intervention that has resulted in an epic tragedy of destruction and starvation. Tens of thousands of Yemenis marked the occasion by pouring into the streets of the capital, Sanna, to call for an end to the Saudi airstrikes that have been supported by the US military. But instead of pushing to jumpstart stalemated negotiations to end the conflict, the Trump administration seems anxious to get more deeply involved in the war by supporting an attack on the key port of Hodeidah and resuming halted weapons sales.

Greater US support for the Saudis, who intervened in Yemen to try to stop the Iran-friendly Houthis from coming to power, is part of Trump's "get tough" policy on Iran. But further escalation of the war in Yemen, particularly an offensive to seize Hodeidah from the Houthi rebels, will mean even more death and hunger for the Yemeni people. Jeremy Konyndyk, who was the director of foreign disaster assistance at US AID under Obama, said a serious disruption of the Hodeidah port could well "tip the country into famine."

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has requested for US support for the Hodeidah attack, a request that will reportedly come before Trump's national security advisors this week. The Obama administration, which had been helping the Saudi bombing campaign from the beginning with weapons and logistics, did not support this particular attack because they thought it would

exacerbate the humanitarian crisis since Hodeidah has been the main port of entry for humanitarian supplies.

On March 23, a bipartisan group of ten senators, including Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Marco Rubio (R-FL), urged Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to launch an urgent diplomatic effort to help avert a pending famine in Yemen and three other nations, and included a specific call to keep the Hodeidah port open to humanitarian aid.

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Yemen imports 90 percent of its food, and the war, including a Saudi naval blockade and a previous bombing of cranes at the Hodeidah port where all the large grain silos are located, has made it difficult to import sufficient food and humanitarian supplies. Food shipments into Hodeidah have already fallen precipitously, with only a few ships arriving each week, compared to dozens before the war, and more shipping lines are pulling out due to the growing risks.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) says speed is of the essence to prevent a tragedy of massive proportions. “Words cannot capture the extent of the suffering of the Yemeni people,” said ICRC Middle East director Robert Mardini. “Their resilience has reached a breaking point.” Twenty people are dying every day, many of curable diseases because only 45 percent of the health facilities are functioning.”

A UNICEF report shows over 400,000 Yemeni children suffering from severe acute malnutrition, and a child dying every 10 minutes from malnutrition, diarrhea and respiratory-tract infections.

Jamie McGoldrick, Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen put the tragedy in human terms. “Fisherman can’t fish, farmers can’t farm, civil servants don’t get paid...people having to make life and death decisions: Do you feed your children or do you pay for medical treatment for your child? And that’s a daily call for many families.”

UN and private relief organizations have been mobilizing to respond to the crisis. In February, the UN launched a humanitarian appeal calling for \$2.1 billion. As of March, however, only 7 percent of the appeal had been funded and the UN Refugee Agency has received less than half the funds it needs.

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President Obama supported the Saudis with massive weapons sales during his eight years in office. But just before leaving office in December 2016, when faced with increased pressure from human rights groups and lawmakers after a Saudi strike on a Yemeni funeral killed at least 140 people, President Obama put a halt of the sale of precision-guided munitions to the Saudis.

Trump's State Department already gave notice to Congress that they have approved a resumption of these sales. If there is no objection from Congress and President Trump signs off on the deal, the deal will go through. Amnesty International urged Trump not to sign off on the sales, saying that new US arms could be used to devastate civilian lives in Yemen and could "implicate your administration in war crimes."

This is not the time to escalate the war. Unless an urgent effort is made to find a political solution and get massive food aid into the country, almost 7 million people in this war-torn nation will face starvation. Stopping on attack on Hodeidah and making sure the port is secure for food shipments is a critical first step.