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Saudi Royal Family: Protecting VIPs, While Letting Ordinary Pilgrims Die

By Vijay Prashad
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Saudi Arabia began its bombing of Yemen at the end of March. The assault continues. Every UN agency has lit the red light of caution – Yemen is a humanitarian catastrophe. Firm numbers of dead and wounded are hard to come by. The UN estimates that over 2100 civilians have been killed. That every Yemeni is in danger of death is clear.

In the UN Human Rights Council, the Netherlands called for an official investigation of the bombing in Yemen. But Saudi Arabia, with US backing, has preempted the Dutch resolution. The Saudis want the UN to provide technical assistance to the Yemeni authorities that they back. This is a deft maneuver to block any investigation of Saudi atrocities in Yemen. The US has rearmed Saudi Arabia during the carnage. It is implicated in the civilian deaths. No wonder there will be no UN mission to Yemen.

While the negotiations in Geneva continued and while Yemen burned, two columns of Hajj pilgrims ran into each other in Mina, Saudi Arabia, on the first day of the Id al-Adha. The Saudi royal family, known as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, is responsible for the well-being of pilgrims who come on what has become the largest annual migration.

These columns ran into each other because the police blocked off key roads. These roads are intended to manage congestion. At least a thousand pilgrims died in the ensuing stampede.

Why were these roads blocked? Early indications suggest that the authorities had closed the roads to facilitate VIP pilgrims. So much of Mecca, like Saudi Arabia in general, is designed for the VIP and the VVIP. The Custodian favours the powerful. It is they who go ahead in the queue. Construction across Mecca, as Ziauddin Sardar shows in his powerful new book *Mecca: The Sacred City*, is geared toward the wealthy. An “eruption of architectural bling” has inflicted the “barren valley” of Mecca.

Corruption is rife, so is neglect. In 1990, almost 1500 people were killed in a stampede near the very spot of this tragedy. The deaths came in a punctual fashion – 1994, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006. A few weeks ago, a crane fell into the Masjid al-Haram, killing over a hundred people. Are these deaths a natural facet of massive pilgrimages or are they indications of systematic disdain for the lives of ordinary people?

The Saudis are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on their futile war on Yemen. There is no political endgame and no sign of any military breakthrough. The only thing that has occurred is the further impoverishment of the poorest country in the Arab world. The oil wealth is being squandered on ill-fated military and diplomatic adventures.

Far better perhaps to use that oil wealth on making the Hajj as safe as possible not for the VIPs alone, but for the millions who save money over decades to make