A New Year Added to the Age of Bloody Conflict

Press Briefing on the Situation of Human Rights in Yemen, 2021

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Sana’a – Mwatana for Human Rights documented about 839 incidents of harm to civilians and civilian objects in Yemen in which more than 782 civilians were killed and injured between January 1 and December 31, 2021, Mwatana said today in its annual briefing on the human rights situation in Yemen.

Mwatana said that the scale of violations against civilians is increasing with each new year adding to the age of the war in Yemen. This disastrous situation did not come about as an arbitrary consequence of the war, but rather as a direct consequence of how warring parties ignore international humanitarian law and international standards governing armed conflicts, which is increasingly complicating Yemenis’ ability to survive. The warring parties have killed and wounded civilians, and exercised arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and torture, denial of humanitarian access, child recruitment, and occupied schools and hospitals, and attacked health and humanitarian personnel.

The parties to the conflict in Yemen– namely, the Iranian-backed Ansar Allah group (Houthis), the Saudi/UAE-led coalition, the forces of the internationally recognized government of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and armed groups loyal to it, the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), and the UAE-backed Joint Forces on the Western Coast, and Saudi ground forces. – all, have committed incidents documented by Mwatana across of the country during 2021. Many of these violations may amount to war crimes and serious violations of international humanitarian law.

The vote to end the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts (GEE) at the 48th session of the Human Rights Council in October 2021, represented a serious setback in Yemen’s overall accountability and redress efforts in an environment dominated by a climate of impunity. On December 2, 2021, Mwatana and more than 60 civil society organizations called upon the General Assembly to act expeditiously to “establish an investigative mechanism to collect and preserve evidence of serious violations of human rights and the laws of war in Yemen.” In a joint statement, the organizations said that “the international community cannot stand by and allow that vote to be the final word on accountability efforts for violations and war crimes in Yemen.”

Radhya Al-Mutawakel, the chairperson of Mwatana for Human Rights, said: “2021 was a witness to the failure of the international community for supporting accountability and redress efforts for victims in Yemen. It was obvious in the scandal surrounding the Human Rights Council’s decision to terminate the Group of Eminent Experts mandate on Yemen. Instead of giving the green light to the parties to the conflict to continue their violations, the UN General Assembly should establish an international criminal investigation mechanism to investigate serious human rights violations in Yemen.”
As Yemenis were racing against time to overcome the hardships of the war in 2021, hostilities have escalated and the scope of violence has expanded in the provinces of Marib, Shabwa, Al Hudeidah, Al Bayda, and Taiz, which led to the death of hundreds of civilians. The war has left hardships for the inhabitants of those areas, causing tens of thousands to flee, especially from Marib and Al Hodeidah. The escalating violence has also left widespread devastation on critical infrastructure, including hospitals and service facilities.

In early October 2021, Aden and its neighborhoods were the scene of many bloody events, which left civilians dead and wounded, including women and children. Acts of violence, including detonating explosive devices and car bombs, terrorizing the civilian population, and spreading a state of lawlessness and insecurity in the city, have worsened poor living conditions.

**Escalation of Violence in Ma’rib**

Since early 2021, the armed conflict in Marib province has intensified, as Ansar Allah group (Houthis) escalated their military operations towards the city. Mwatana documented ground attacks and airstrikes and landmine laying, committed by Ansar Allah (Houthis), Saudi–UAE-led coalition forces, and the internationally recognized government forces. In 2021, densely populated civilian neighborhoods in Ma’rib’s city were subjected to ground shelling with ballistic missiles launched by Ansar Allah group “Houthis”. Meanwhile, The Saudi-UAE-led coalition fighter jets launched booms on scattered areas of Ma’rib.

Warring parties have been implicated in committing multiple types of violations on the ground, including practices of enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention of civilians, the recruitment of child soldiers, and targeting humanitarian organizations with restrictions and harassment that affected their operations and necessary interventions towards civilians stranded in the midst of the escalating fighting.

Osamah Alfakih, the director of Advocacy at Mwatana, said: “The suffering of civilians in Yemen continued during 2021 with the lack of concern of the conflict parties in Yemen. Their persistence in committing criminal acts in violation of international law is clear evidence of this. Yemenis deserve nothing less than justice, accountability, and redress. The international community can achieve that if there is a political will.”

Mwatana conducts in-depth investigations in the field, including direct inspections of attack and incident sites and interviews. During 2020, research for the documented incidents included at least 1585 interviews in Arabic with witnesses, relatives of victims, survivors, and doctors, in addition to the examination of documents, photos, videos, and other material evidence.
Air Attacks

The Saudi/UAE-led coalition’s airstrikes continued to kill and wound civilians and destroy civilian objects. Among them are a residential neighborhood, a service facility, farms, a water tank, warehouses, public roads, and civilian cars. In 2021, Mwatana documented at least 18 airstrikes. These airstrikes killed at least 17 civilians, including 7 children, and 2 women. At least 43 civilians were wounded, including 11 children and 8 women.

Ground Attacks

Shelling on populated areas has resulted in significant damage to civilian objects and severe civilian casualties. In 2021, Mwatana documented approximately 64 ground shelling that killed 49, including 31 children and 3 women, and injured at least 173 civilians, including 71 children and 32 women. Ansar Allah group (Houthis) bears responsibility for 43 incidents, while the Saudi border guards are responsible for 12 incidents, the UAE-backed joint forces groups are responsible for 6 incidents, while the government forces committed two incidents, and the UAE-backed Transitional Council forces committed one incident.

Landmines and Unexploded ordnance

In 2021, Mwatana documented approximately 36 mine explosion incidents, which killed approximately 23 civilians, including 10 children and 3 women, and injured 82, including 46 children and 16 women. The Ansar Allah (Houthi) group was responsible for planting all of the mines in the documented incidents. Also, Mwatana documented approximately 47 Unexploded ordnance incidents, which killed approximately 23 civilians, including 19 children and a woman, and injured 124, including 49 children and 10 women., Mwatana was unable to identify the violating parties.

Child Recruitment and Use

Mwatana verified the recruitment and use of at least 121 children, including at least one girl, during 2021. (Mwatana) found that 88 percent of these children were recruited by Ansar Allah group (Houthis). The percentage of children recruited by the government and pro-government forces was approximately 8 percent. The percentage of children recruited by the UAE-backed STC reached 2 percent, and the UAE-backed joint forces in the West Coast are responsible for the recruitment of 2 percent of the total. In 2021, it was noted that the rates of child recruitment among the parties to the conflict increased as a result of the high level of violence across the country.
Denial of Humanitarian Access

In 2021, Mwatana documented at least 86 incidents whereby the parties to the conflict obstructed access of humanitarian aid and basic materials to civilians. Ansar Allah group (Houthis) bears responsibility for 73 incidents including the detention of 6 aid workers, and UAE-backed STC is responsible for 7 incidents including the killing of an aid worker and wounding another, while government forces committed 5 incidents, and the UAE-backed joint forces committed one incident.

Attacks on Migrants

In a horrific incident, Ansar Allah group “Houthis” caused death and injury to dozens following a deadly fire in a detention center crowded with African migrants and refugees in Sana’a on March 7, 2021. After the outbreak of the fire, Ansar Allah group (Houthis) detained a number of wounded migrants, denied humanitarian access, and prevented family members of migrants from visiting their relatives.

Attacks on Schools

The increasing violations of the parties to the conflict have caused serious damage to schools and educational facilities in 2021. “Mwatana” documented at least 82 incidents of attacks on schools or their use for military purposes. Ansar Allah group (Houthis) bears responsibility for 72 attacks, while the UAE-backed STC forces bear responsibility in 5 incidents. The government forces and Ansar Allah group (Houthis) bear joint responsibility in 3 incidents: ground shelling and occupation. While the UAE-backed STC forces and government forces bear joint responsibility in one incident, the UAE-backed joint forces in West Coast and Ansar Allah (Houthis) committed jointly one incident: ground shelling and occupation. The number of violations against schools increased in 2021 due to the concentration on mobilization campaigns and child recruitment in schools.

Attacks on Health Care

Throughout 2021, Mwatana documented 20 incidents that caused damage to the health care system, including 2 incidents of denial of access to medical assistance, one incident of ground shelling that damaged medical facility, 14 incidents of armed attack which killed 2 health workers, and occupation. And 3 incidents of arrests of 3 health workers. Ansar Allah group “Houthis” bears responsibility for 6 incidents, while government forces bear responsibility for 6 incidents, and the
UAE-backed STC is responsible for 6 incidents, while the joint responsibility in commission one incident is on government forces and STC. Extremists’ groups are responsible for one incident.

**Torture**

Mwatana documented 26 incidents of torture for 40 civilian victims including two children and one migrant woman during 2021. UAE-backed STC forces are responsible for 14 torture victims, including four who died in a detention center. While government and loyalist forces bear responsibility for 17 victims. While the Ansar Allah group (Houthis) bears responsibility for 9 victims and one of them died in the detention center.

**Sexual Violence**

In 2021, Mwatana documented 10 sexual violence incidents, including 9 cases of rape and one attempted rape. Among the victims of sexual violence were 4 girls, 5 boys, and a woman. Ansar Allah group (Houthis) bears responsibility for 6 incidents, government forces bear responsibility for two incidents, and the UAE-backed STC bears responsibility for two incidents.

**Enforced Disappearance**

Mwatana documented 41 incidents of enforced disappearance for 89 civilian victims during 2021. Ansar Allah group (Houthis) committed enforced disappearance against 30 victims, while the forces of the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council are responsible for forcibly disappear of 13 victims, while government forces and forces loyal to them bear responsibility for the enforced disappearance of 28 victims. While the Eritrean forces committed the enforced disappearance of 18 fishermen that they detain in the Red Sea.

**Executions**

On Saturday, September 18, 2021, following a trial lacking minimum fair trial requirements, Ansar Allah group (Houthis) executed nine people, one of whom is believed to have been a minor while in custody, in the case of the assassination of the group’s leader, Saleh Al-Sammad. The death sentence was carried out in the presence of a number of journalists and hundreds of attendees in Tahrir Square in Sana’a. Reprimanding was reinforced by cheering, chanting and dancing, in a terrifying attempt to normalize killing and turn it into something like a celebration.
**Arbitrary Detention**

In 2021, Mwatana documented 131 arbitrary detention incidents of 217 victims, including 8 children and 8 women. Ansar Allah group (Houthis) is responsible for detaining 86 victims, and government forces and affiliated groups have detained 83 victims. While the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council detained 41 victims. The joint forces on the West Coast are responsible for arresting 7 victims.

In 2021, Mwatana for Human Rights provided legal support to victims of arbitrary detention in 18 Yemeni governorates through 24 field lawyers by providing legal aid and advice in 610 cases. The team’s continuous follow-up aims to release victims of arbitrary detention, or improve detention conditions: “Detainee’s environment, medical treatment, etc.,” as well as pushing to move on with detention proceeding in accordance with national and international laws. 168 arbitrary detainees, whose cases were documented by Mwatana throughout the conflict, including detainees for whom Mwatana provided legal support, were released, while many victims are still in custody.

**Other Attacks on Civilians**

Civilians were killed and wounded by conflicting parties in other ways. In 2021, Mwatana documented 21 incidents in which civilians were run over by military vehicles, killing 13, including 7 children, and wounding 21 others, including 10 children and 4 women. Government forces are responsible for 3 incidents, while Ansar Allah forces (Houthis) committed 8 incidents, UAE-backed joint forces in the West Coast committed two incidents, while the UAE-backed STC committed 8 incidents. During 2021, Mwatana also documented 53 civilians killed by live ammunition, including 18 children and two women, and 142 civilians wounded, including 58 children and 18 women. Mwatana was unable to determine the liability of the violating parties in these incidents.

**Violations against the press**

During 2021, the parties to the conflict continued to commit arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, inhuman treatment and torture against journalists. Mwatana documented 4 violation incidents that affected 5 journalists and media workers. The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council forces are responsible for arresting one journalist, and Ansar Allah group (Houthis) bears responsibility for arresting two journalists. While bear government forces arrested two journalists. Ansar Allah (Houthis) continues to arbitrarily detain 4 journalists, and the journalist Waheed Al-Sufi has been forcibly disappeared since 2015. The Four journalists are still facing the death penalty after being unfairly tried in the Houthi-held Specialized Criminal Court in Sana’a in April 2020.
Violations against Minorities

Ansar Allah (Houthis) continues to arbitrarily detain Libi Marhabi, a member of the Yemeni Jews minority. Marhabi was arrested in 2016 for allegations related to assisting in the passage of a Torah scroll from Yemen to Israel. Despite an appeals court decision of Public Funds Court in 2019, the appeal court supported the decision of the Public Funds Court (Court of First Instance); imprisonment with time served. Until now, Marhabi is still in prison unlawfully.

Restrictions on Freedom of Movement

In 2021, Mwatana documented 5 incidents of restrictions on the freedom of movement of civilians in different areas of Yemen. Ansar Allah group (Houthis) is responsible for two incidents, while the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council committed two. And government forces committed one incident.

Mwatana documented the killing of Abdul Malik Al-Sanabani (30 years old) at the hands of armed elements affiliated with the UAE-backed STC after his arrest at the Al-Farsha post of theTor Al Baha district in Lahj province, on Wednesday morning, September 8, 2021, while he was on his way to visit his family in Sana’a after arriving at Aden International Airport from the US, where he has been living for seven years.

Attack on Peaceful Assembly

During 2021, Mwatana documented 2 incidents of assault on peaceful assembly. On February 18, government forces arrested 15 protesters in the city of Mukalla. In another incident, on November 16, the Southern Transitional Council forces arrested 3 protesters in Lahj.

Attacks on Women’s Personal Freedoms

During 2021, violations of women in areas controlled by Ansar Allah group (Houthis) have grown more acute. The armed group has become engaged in multiple and systematic patterns of abuse, which perpetuates the dominance of the group and threatens rights and freedoms in general. On January 23, 2021, Ansar Allah group (Houthis) gunmen broke into a restaurant in Sana’a, expelled women workers from it, and searched it without producing any written legal search warrant. The gunmen took some workers and one of the restaurant’s managers to the police station, where the official was forced to write a pledge “not to hire women in any branch of the restaurant.”
incident threatened the income means of 30 women. Some were back to their jobs at different times later on.

On January 24, 2021, the Ministry of Public Health and Population of the Ansar Allah group (Houthis) issued a decision to prohibit the use of “family planning methods” as consistent with what it called “faith identity.” During 2021, Mwatana for Human Rights had access to 11 incidents, in just two days, restricting women’s freedom of movement in the province of Hajjah, all under the pretext of a circular prohibiting the travel of women without a *mahram* (*male relative*), especially in aid organizations’ cars; a restriction on the right of movement and a violation of women’s right to work.

Mwatana obtained a document issued by entities and prominent dignitaries affiliated to Ansar Allah “Houthis” group on September 12, 2021, prohibiting girls from carrying smartphones, and wearing makeup as they go to events such as weddings and parties. The document also prohibits any woman from taking a car without a *mahram*. Those who violate this order may be fined a heavy financial penalty, let alone denying girls entry into employment with relief organizations.

**Background to the armed conflict in Yemen**

The armed conflict in Yemen began in September 2014, when the Iranian-backed Ansar Allah group (Houthis) and forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh took control of the capital, Sana’a, by force of arms. The pace of the conflict intensified in March 2015 when the Saudi - UAE led coalition launched its military operations against the Houthi and Saleh forces in support of the internationally recognized government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi.

The statistics contained in this annual briefing are preliminary and are intended to provide an overview of the high-profile patterns of violation of civilians during 2021. “Mwatana” continues to document a number of other incidents that occurred during 2021 in order to issue a detailed annual report on the human rights situation later in 2022.