



UK Aid and Arms in Yemen

Oxfam media briefing

The conflict in Yemen between the internationally recognized government backed by a Saudi Arabia-led coalition and Houthi forces has fuelled a huge humanitarian crisis which has left millions of Yemenis hungry, led to tens of thousands of deaths and forced almost four million people to flee their homes.

The United Kingdom has donated hundreds of millions of pounds worth of aid to Yemen since 2015, including lifesaving food and healthcare. And yet the value of that aid is many times less than the value of arms that the UK has licensed for sale to members of the coalition, principally Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

This briefing argues that the UK government's approach to Yemen has been illegal, immoral and incoherent. The government has said it will appeal the decision of the Court of Appeal in June 2019 that UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia were unlawful, and meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has been invited to the world's biggest arms fair in London this month. Oxfam is calling on the UK government to do everything it can to end the war in Yemen, by stopping arms sales to the parties involved and by pressing for an immediate countrywide ceasefire.

1 INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Yemen escalated in March 2015 when a coalition of countries led by Saudi Arabia and including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait and six other countries backed the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi against Houthi forces who had already taken control of the capital, Sana'a. In the more than four years since, the war has fuelled a huge humanitarian crisis which has left millions of Yemenis hungry, has led to tens of thousands of deaths, forced almost four million people to flee their homes and caused the destruction of houses, hospitals, farms and factories. In 2017 it led to the world's biggest ever cholera outbreak.

The United Kingdom has donated hundreds of millions of pounds-worth of aid in the last four-and-a-half years, including lifesaving food and healthcare. And yet that amount is eight times smaller than the value of arms that the UK has licensed for sale to members of the coalition, principally Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Since the conflict escalated in 2015, the UK government's approach to Yemen has been illegal, immoral and incoherent. The Court of Appeal ruled in June 2019 that UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia were unlawful, because of the government's failure to properly assess the potential risk that arms would be used to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), in the light of past attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. The government has said it will appeal the decision in the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has been invited to the world's biggest arms fair in London this month.

There has been a paradox at the heart of the UK government's approach to Yemen for over four years, as it has tried to play the role of both donor and arms dealer. There is clear evidence that civilians have been hit by all sides in the conflict, in contravention of international humanitarian law. The UK should be doing everything it can to end the war, both by stopping arms sales to any of the parties involved and by pressing for an immediate countrywide ceasefire.

2 THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN YEMEN

Before the escalation of conflict in 2015, Yemen was already one of the poorest countries in the world, heavily dependent on imports for essential items like food, medicine and fuel.

After four-and-a-half years of fighting, things are significantly worse. It is estimated that 80% of the population – 24 million people – need assistance.¹ The UN has warned that millions of Yemenis are one step away from famine.

The number of people without access to clean water is also staggering. Yemen is one of the driest countries in the world. Fighting has damaged some of the water infrastructure, like tanks and pipes, and fuel shortages and high fuel prices have hit those who rely on generators to pump water from deep wells.²

A lack of clean water and sanitation has contributed to the cholera crisis in the country,³ declared the world's largest outbreak in 2017. The increase in numbers of cases slowed down in 2018, only to pick up again earlier this year. More than a million people are thought to have contracted cholera in Yemen since the outbreak began.

Since July 2015, Oxfam, and its local partner organizations, have helped more than three million people in nine governorates of Yemen to get access to clean water and sanitation. We have given out cash and food vouchers to help people cope with a huge increase in prices – some basic foods are more than twice as expensive as they were before the conflict escalated.⁴ Many of the people we are helping have been forced to flee from their homes in Hudaydah, Hajjah and Taizz.

'We used to have our own work and farms...When the war started, we lost all our properties... They destroyed schools and left no properties for us and today we are displaced with no jobs'

– Ibrahim, father of four, Hajjah governorate

3 UK AID TO YEMEN

The UK is an important donor to aid programmes in Yemen. The government has said that in 2018/19 the UK will give £200m in aid to Yemen. In 2017/18, the figure was £190m and in total, since the escalation of fighting in March 2015, the UK has donated £770m.⁵

Of all the countries benefitting from UK aid in the current financial year, Yemen will receive the sixth largest amount. Only Pakistan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Syria and Bangladesh will get more.⁶

In 2018, the UK was the second largest donor after Germany to the UN's Yemen Humanitarian Fund, giving almost £40m to programmes through that system.⁷

Yet the scale of the suffering of the people of Yemen continues to dwarf the international aid effort. The UN has described the humanitarian crisis in Yemen as the biggest in the world. Setting out its response plan at the beginning of this year, the UN said it would require funding of \$4.2bn. Yet by mid-August, the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) warned that the response was only 34% funded, and that it would soon need to close life-saving programmes.⁸ It said it had already been forced to suspend most of its vaccination programmes for Yemen in May because of a lack of funds.

4 UK ARMS SALES TO COALITION MEMBERS

The UK is a major manufacturer and exporter of arms worldwide. In fact, the world's largest arms fair, DSEI,⁹ takes place in London from 10 to 13 September this year.

The value of the 1,697 arms export licences granted by the UK government to members of the Saudi-led coalition since the second quarter of 2015 is £6.2bn.

This figure doesn't include the 345 'open' licences granted which allow the holders to export an unlimited quantity of goods.

UK arms export licences to coalition members

Coalition members*	Value of licences granted by the UK since March 2015 (£)
<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	5.3bn
<i>United Arab Emirates</i>	660m
<i>Kuwait</i>	40m
<i>Bahrain</i>	71m
<i>Egypt</i>	85m
<i>Jordan</i>	43m
<i>Senegal</i>	270,000
<i>Sudan</i>	45,000
TOTAL	6.2bn

Source: CAAT UK Arms export licences dashboard, using data sourced from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills UK export licence database¹⁰

*Morocco and Qatar are not listed as they have left the coalition.

The value of these export licences (£6.2bn) is more than eight times the amount of aid (£770m) given by the UK to Yemen since March 2015. This amount – £6.2bn – could cover the shortfall in funding for the UN's response plan for 2019 (2.7bn) almost three times over.

Nor is it only recently delivered UK munitions that could be in use in Yemen. For example, the licence to supply Typhoon fighter jets was issued in 2007, and aircraft continued to be delivered until the final six entered service in Saudi Arabia in 2017. The UK supplied 500 BL-755 Cluster Munitions to Saudi Arabia, with deliveries finishing in 1989.¹¹ UK personnel maintained these weapons in a combat-ready state until the end of 2008, when the UK signed the Cluster Munitions Convention. They also trained Saudi personnel in the maintenance and use of the weapons, so that they continued to be combat ready after UK support ceased. In 2016, these illegal weapons were used in serious violations of IHL to attack farms in Yemen and put farmland beyond use.¹²

In its recent ruling that arms sales to Saudi Arabia were unlawful, the Court of Appeal explicitly noted the discovery of a fragment of a GBU-12 PAVEWAY II guided bomb – in other words, munition supplied by the United Kingdom – at the site of an attack on Abs Hospital in Hajjah governorate. Nineteen civilians were killed and 24 civilians were injured in the attack. MSF, which ran the hospital, regularly provided GPS coordinates to the coalition to avoid accidental attack.¹³

Edward Bell, head of the Export Control Office that processes arms licences, told the High Court that he believed that licencing of arms to Saudi Arabia should be stopped, but the Secretary of State did not take his advice.¹⁴

5 DESTRUCTION OF AID PROJECTS

Efforts to bring help to people in Yemen have been hampered by the repeated destruction of aid facilities, including hospitals supported by MSF and Save the Children. Several lifesaving clean water systems installed by Oxfam have been destroyed or damaged in airstrikes.

- On 18 April 2015, an Oxfam-rented warehouse in the northern Sa'ada governorate was bombed.¹⁵ It contained water, sanitation supplies and fuel to the overall value of £7,000, which Oxfam was using to build water networks. This led to the cancellation of the project that was maintaining water supplies to an estimated 70,000 people.
- In Spring 2015, newly displaced people fleeing from Sa'ada informed Oxfam that 19 of the 27 water supply systems Oxfam had constructed were not working. Although in some cases this was because of a lack of fuel needed to operate them as a result of coalition-imposed restrictions, in other cases this was as a result of airstrikes.¹⁶ Together, these systems provided clean water to more than 150,000 people. Extensive, indiscriminate bombing of Sa'ada governorate had led Oxfam staff to flee the governorate, along with an estimated 390,000 others.
- A solar-powered water scheme in Haradh district was extensively damaged on 9 June 2015. This was reportedly due to an airstrike, although Oxfam has been unable to verify this.¹⁷ All 114 solar panels that had harnessed solar power to pump clean water to 14 villages were put out of operation, cutting clean water supplies to 18,200 displaced people.
- A cholera treatment centre in Abs district in Hajjah governorate was hit on 11 June 2018 by an airstrike, after Oxfam had rehabilitated its water and sanitation systems. In their report, the Group of Eminent Experts said that MSF had reported the location 12 times to the coalition.
- An Oxfam-donated water supply system that provided clean water to 6,000 people was hit by an airstrike on 13 April 2018 in Al-Hamazat in the Sehar district in Sa'ada governorate.

Despite sending numerous letters and public reports to the UK government detailing airstrikes against Oxfam facilities, Oxfam has never formally been interviewed by the Ministry of Defence or the Saudi Joint Incidents Assessment Team investigators.

6 THE COST TO YEMEN OF FOUR YEARS OF WAR

Yemen was already one of the world's poorest countries before the conflict escalated in 2015. According to the World Bank, Yemen's GDP has contracted every year since, shrinking by over 43% from 2014 to 2018.¹⁸

The United Nations Development Programme has said that if the conflict were to

end in 2019, it would have caused a loss of US\$89bn to Yemen's economic output. (For comparison, the World Bank estimates Yemen's GDP in 2019 to be US\$26.9bn.) If the war continues for a further three years, the loss to the economy would rise to US\$181bn and by 2030, it would be US\$657bn.¹⁹ UNDP cites a 2016 damage and needs assessment which estimated the cost of damage to overall physical infrastructure, including schools and housing, to be between US\$4bn and US\$5bn. If we assume that damage has continued to be inflicted at a similar rate throughout the conflict, the cost would now be at least US\$12bn, or £9.8bn: one-and-a-half times the cost of UK arms to coalition members. Even if this is an overestimate, it is a stark fact that even in purely economic terms, Yemenis are paying a higher price for UK arms than the Saudis and their coalition partners. These figures don't account for the long-term cost of children left without an education, diseases left untreated and millions left homeless.

7 IMMORAL, ILLEGAL, INCOHERENT

The UK government has a moral imperative to do all it can to bring an end to the war in Yemen that is causing so much suffering. It has an opportunity to put the lives of Yemenis ahead of the arms trade and immediately stop the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen. Oxfam was an intervenor in the Campaign Against the Arms Trade case at the High Court in 2017, challenging the UK government's decision to continue to license arms sales to Saudi Arabia despite evidence of their use against civilians in Yemen. Although the government won the initial case, earlier this year the Court of Appeal overturned that ruling, declaring arms sales to Saudi Arabia to be unlawful because of the government's failure to properly assess the potential harm to civilians in Yemen.

The government has said it will appeal that ruling in the Supreme Court. Its unwillingness to accept the Appeal Court's ruling is disappointing.

What the UK has given in aid to hungry, homeless Yemenis is dwarfed by what it has gained in arms sales to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners. The cost of the war to Yemen and Yemenis is greater still and getting bigger by the day.

Oxfam is calling on the UK government to:

- respect the court judgement and stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia immediately;
- influence all the parties involved in the conflict to agree to a nationwide ceasefire;
- finance the UN's humanitarian response plan and urge all member states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to pay the money they have pledged to the fund;
- hold all parties to the conflict accountable for violating international humanitarian law.

NOTES

- 1 OCHA website: Yemen. <https://www.unocha.org/yemen/about-ocha-yemen>
- 2 UNICEF website: Yemen pages. https://www.unicef.org/yemen/activities_11440.html
- 3 L. Alles (2017). Yemen: Catastrophic Cholera Crisis. Oxfam. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/yemen-catastrophic-cholera-crisis-620328>
- 4 World Food Program (2019, May) Yemen Market Watch Report. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000106611.pdf>
- 5 UK Parliament website: written questions and answers. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-questions-answers/?house=commons%2cords&keywords=Yemen&max=20&page=3&questiontype=AllQuestions>
- 6 DFID website: Development Tracker. <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/>
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- 8 UN News (August 2019). Lack of funds forces UN to close down life-saving aid programmes in Yemen <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1044681>
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- 16 Oxfam (May 2015). Clean water runs dry amid conflict in Yemen. https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oxfam_media_brief_wash_final.pdf
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Cover photo: Airstrike destruction of civilian houses in Sana, 2019. Photo: Bassam Al-Thulaya/Oxfam in Yemen

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