

Yemen Safe Passage Group

Rt Hon Theresa May MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

15 December 2017

Dear Prime Minister

We urge the UK government to make an immediate and decisive intervention on Yemen

We follow the news on Yemen each day with ever greater trepidation. Yemen is already the world's biggest humanitarian crisis with more than 20 million people dependent on outside support. On top of a cholera epidemic affecting close to 1 million, the long-suffering Yemeni population now face an outbreak of diphtheria. An assault on Hodeidah by the Saudi led coalition will only make matters considerably worse.

This ever-escalating horror needs to stop. We are writing to you because the UK government has long argued that its relationship with the two key players in the Coalition, Saudi Arabia and UAE, gives it unique leverage and influence. The UK, more than any other power, also has an historic relationship with Yemen. Now is the time to use those unique links to make a decisive intervention.

The killing of former President Saleh has added further uncertainty to any political outcome, but the people of Yemen must not be condemned to suffer any more. It is widely recognised, not least by the UK government, that the Saudi backed Coalition cannot win this war, and that the strategy of using famine, disease and destitution as a weapon of war has been widely and forcibly condemned.

An assault on Hodeidah (or on Sana'a) will result in massive loss of civilian life both directly and indirectly. The loss, even temporary, of essential port and road infrastructure will further exacerbate the disruption to critical supply routes for food, fuel and medicines. Hodeidah is the lifeline to over 15 million people in Yemen's hinterland. This military escalation is taking place at a time of great vulnerability. It will not only lead to further devastation to a war-weary population and an economy in tatters, it will also result in a further ramping up of resentment and anger against the Coalition, the Hadi Government, and the West.

We believe the UK should lead the three major powers supplying arms to the Coalition, UK, US and France, in making it clear that they do not support a military solution and that they are no longer prepared to countenance the further use of their weapons in this conflict. This can be done by suspending licences for forthcoming arms transfers (and all associated training, maintenance and military advice) until the UK is fully satisfied that past equipment transfers will not be used in contravention of International Human Rights Law.

The key point now is no longer whether the UK government continues to argue that past risk assessments were realistic, and the legal conditions put on arms sales have been adhered to. We now face a more fundamental issue – potential British involvement in knowingly contributing to a predictable massive loss of innocent life is indefensible. Furthermore, the UK implicit involvement in the use of starvation as a weapon of war could yet be considered a war crime – it would surely be impossible to argue otherwise in the case of an assault against Hodeidah in the current circumstances.

To be truly effective the cessation of military support requires clear steps to be taken with key Western allies to push for an immediate ceasefire and inclusive political negotiation. We believe it is also in Saudi Arabia and UAE interests to find such a solution, and to look beyond current setbacks. Saudi Arabia is undertaking unprecedented radical reform at home and a serious rethink on countering terrorism. The UAE can proudly boast the success of a diversified economy into airlines and tourism. Both countries claim to seek stability in the region, but risk achieving exactly the opposite. The threat hangs over all, including Iran, of complicity in the serious abuses of this war. This threat will be magnified massively in the case of a ramped-up ground conflict against major population centres and the infrastructure vital for feeding millions surviving on the brink.

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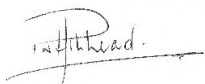
We take no side in this multi-dimensional conflict, where horrendous abuses have taken place on every side. What is clear is there can be no *sustainable* peace without involving all the major Yemeni political strands and all key regional players. The time has come for the UK to move away from its partisan approach and think afresh how to achieve an inclusive peace. A first practical step would be for the UK as penholder to introduce a new UN Security Council Resolution which effectively moves on from the now obsolete clauses of 2216, mandates an immediate end to any blockade of essential supplies, and encourages inclusive peace talks to commence without pre-conditions.

Yours sincerely

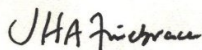
Yemen Safe Passage Group Coordination Team (following extensive consultation within the wider group)



Frances Guy, former British Ambassador to Yemen and Lebanon



Captain Philip Holihead RN Retd, former Defence Attaché Yemen, former Head of Western Indian Ocean Counter - Fracy IMO



James Firebrace, YSPG Coordinator, analyst and author on conflict and economy in Yemen

Cc:

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State for Defence

Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt MP, Secretary of State for International Development

Rt Hon Alistair Burt, Minister of State for the Middle East at DFID and FCO

Rt Hon Keith Vaz MP, Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group on Yemen

Simon Sherdiff OBE, British Ambassador to Yemen

Matthew Rycroft CBE, British Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Simon Collis CMG, British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia

About the Yemen Safe Passage Group www.yemensafepassage.org

The Yemen Safe Passage Group was formed in mid-2015 as an informal grouping of senior professionals, all acting in their personal capacity, who have worked in Yemen for substantial periods and who share a concern about the well-being of its people. The group brings together a wide range of expertise – international politics and diplomacy, security, trade and the economy, port operations, infrastructure and development challenges, and humanitarian operations – coupled with an understanding as to how this expertise might realistically be applied to the Yemen situation. The group has now grown to over 40 individuals comprising former British diplomats and defence personnel, including three former ambassadors; prominent British academics working on Yemen, including four professors; and senior development and community workers.

Responses to this letter should be sent to the YSPG Coordination Team at jf@firebrace.com