

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Yemen: Huthi armed group must end crackdown on human rights defenders and NGOs**

The Huthi armed group must allow human rights and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to operate freely in the areas of Yemen under their effective control, Amnesty International said today.

Amnesty International has spoken to 13 different NGOs in Sana'a, 12 of which are currently closed, who told researchers that over the past six months, they and other organizations have come under increased scrutiny and pressure from the Huthi armed group, which has raided and closed down at least 27 NGOs in Sana'a. Organizations which have continued to operate are in many cases exercising self-censorship and face constraints due to harassment and intimidation of their staff.

According to activists and NGO staff that were interviewed by Amnesty International throughout the months of May to November, the Huthi armed group has justified these measures by characterising NGOs as "foreign agents" of the West, "America" and international organizations. Out of the 27 NGOs raided and closed down, at least six were targeted as they have a perceived affiliation with al-Islah, a Sunni Islamist political party.

According to activists and NGO staff, restrictions on NGOs form part of a wider campaign against activists or groups that are perceived to be opposed to the Huthis. The year 2015 has also seen the arbitrary detention of scores of journalists, activists and political figures in the al-Islah leadership, which Amnesty International documented in May 2015.<sup>1</sup>

### **Raids and closures of NGOs**

Between March and June 2015 members of the Huthi armed group and its political bureau, known as Ansarullah, carried out a string of unannounced raids on NGOs in Sana'a, leading to the closure of at least 27 organizations.

Representatives of organizations subject to these raids told Amnesty International that the armed group demanded information about their finances and activities. In some cases files, office equipment and furniture were confiscated. Some office premises were

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<sup>1</sup> Yemen: Opposition targeted, detained arbitrarily and kidnapped by Huthis and Saleh-loyalists: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde31/1686/2015/en/>

occupied by the armed group and are now being used as bases for its operations.

Several NGOs reported that armed men from the Huthi armed group confiscated cash found on the premises during raids and refused to return it as they considered the funds to be “contributions to the war efforts in support of [Huthi] fighters on the ground.”

According to Ramy, an employee of a medical charity, whose organization was closed down in April 2015:

*“At 4pm on 21 April, seven armed members of Ansarullah arrived and led two guards of the organization to 14 October police station and interrogated them, asking whether they were affiliated with al-Islah Party. They were released only after five hours and they arrived at the organization to find members of Ansarullah had taken the offices over and looted all its contents. They confiscated 70,000 Yemeni riyals [US\$325] belonging to one of the guards and they told them that the charity will remain under their control. They spared nothing, they even took over our medical center and pharmacy. All we did was give free medical services to poor people and prisoners, on which hundreds depended.”<sup>2</sup>*

Mohamed, director of the social care unit at a development charity, told Amnesty International his organization was raided on 4 April:

*“On that day, at around 9pm, someone knocked on the office door and the guard opened it to find 40 armed men. When the guard called and informed us, we told him to let them in to search. Upon entering the offices, they started extracting the hard discs in computers, confiscating files and taking them to their cars, and then they proceeded to detain the guard for five hours in an unknown location. They also detained the person in charge of the storage unit for three days and he was only released after we made some calls to intermediaries. Three days later, they also raided our medical centre, and looted all its contents afterwards on 27 May.”<sup>3</sup>*

Activists that spoke to Amnesty International said that during interrogations and raids, the Huthi armed group warned NGOs to either operate under the auspices of the Huthis or be permanently closed. Members of the Huthi armed group have told NGOs during raids and interrogations that they should only document violations committed by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, and not violations perpetrated by the Huthis and their allies. One organization told Amnesty International that in order to continue their activities, rather than be closed down, they have decided to work under the auspices of the Huthi armed group, which monitors and approves all of their activities in advance.

### **Harassment and intimidation of NGO staff, activists and their families**

Harassment of NGOs which remained open has continued throughout July and October 2015. Several NGOs which had not been closed down told Amnesty International that they

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<sup>2</sup> Interview in Sana'a, May 2015. Name changed for security reasons.

<sup>3</sup> Interview in Sana'a, May 2015. Name changed for security reasons.

were concerned about their ability to operate effectively amidst the current climate of intimidation and threats they are facing from the Huthi armed group. A number said that they have decided to curtail or scale back their activities in order to be able to operate, some having to resort to working under ground.

Activists as well as employees and directors of NGOs have told Amnesty International that they fear for their safety and that of their families. Several said that they had received anonymous phone calls and messages 'advising' them to halt their legitimate activities. Some suspect that their movements and calls are monitored and office phone lines tapped. Some employees and directors have been arbitrarily detained.

In August, one human rights defender told Amnesty International that he was receiving threats to his family:

*"They told me that if I did not cooperate and work with them, they would kill me and my family. They said to me they knew how to reach my wife and they knew where my home was, if I did not stop my human rights activity. They have constantly threatened me with detention and during an interrogation they asked me about the activities of my organization, our links to the US, what intelligence we provide to the US, our links to Amnesty International and where we get our funding from. I am currently under house arrest and my organization was seized and closed down because I did not cooperate with them."*<sup>4</sup>

Abdullah, a human rights defender and a lawyer at an organization working on the rights of detainees, told Amnesty International in August that he had received messages and phone calls from individuals - apparently from the Huthi armed group - threatening his life if he did not halt his work:

*"They told me that they would execute me and hang me from Bab el-Yemen in the middle of Sana'a. All because they claim that I am a foreign agent of America."*<sup>5</sup>

Due to the threats, the organization stopped operating and Abdullah himself has fled Yemen.

Activists have reported to Amnesty International that in April, the Huthi armed group took the director of a charitable organization from his home and detained him for four weeks after raiding his organization's offices. A senior representative of the organization, Hasan, described the incident to Amnesty International:

*"On 4 April, they broke the door and walked into the organization. On 30 April, they raided the home of the executive director of the organization and detained him until recently. Initially, he was disappeared and we did not know where he was being held."*

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<sup>4</sup> Telephone interview, August 2015. Name withheld for security reasons.

<sup>5</sup> Telephone interview, September 2015. Name withheld for security reasons.

*They also raided and searched the houses of other employees.”<sup>6</sup>*

The director of a different organization, which was also raided and closed down by the Huthi armed group in April 2015, described how he was detained and interrogated:

*“On 15 April at around 10am, ten armed men arrived at the organization and introduced themselves as from Ansarullah. They broke the door of the organization and they squatted in the offices until 29 May. Then the owner of the building asked them to leave the offices. They closed up our offices and even though we tried to reach out to the Huthi leadership, no one allowed us into the offices. Following that, on 18 April at 1.30am, armed men belonging to Ansarullah raided my home and took me to al-Balbali police station. They held me for three days before they interrogated me. They mostly questioned me about the organization and its activities, but they did not formally charge me.”<sup>7</sup>*

### **Restrictions on activities August to October 2015**

Amnesty International has received information indicating that the Huthi armed group has taken steps to place formal restrictions on some NGOs which remain in operation.

An NGO which has documented human rights violations and abuses by all parties to the conflict told Amnesty International in September that it has faced restrictions to its activities. On 5 August 2015, the organization received a copy of a leaked letter sent from the Ministry for Education to all administrative districts in Sana’a, instructing the districts to stop cooperating with a list of NGOs, including their organization. Since receiving this letter, the organization’s researchers have been impeded from carrying out their work on the ground. On 27 August, another of their researchers was prevented from carrying out his work in Hajjah because individuals from the Huthi armed group said that they had received strict instructions not to allow the researchers from operating. The researcher was not permitted to visit an airstrike site to document it. On 14 September, one researcher was briefly detained by the Huthi armed group at a checkpoint in Ta’iz when they discovered who his employer was.

Amnesty International has also received credible information that indicates that the Huthi armed group has also attempted to restrict NGOs’ access to funding from international organizations. Amnesty International has received credible information from activists and NGO staff told Amnesty International that in August 2015 the Political Security Office (PSO), which is currently controlled by the Huthis, held a meeting with international donors, in which it demanded that all funds to a list of named organizations be halted immediately.

Amnesty International has also obtained copies of two leaked letters that place further restrictions on NGOs. The first undated leaked letter, which is from the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labour, lists 21 NGOs whose legal status has expired. Amnesty International

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<sup>6</sup> Interview in Sana’a, May 2015. Name changed for security reasons.

<sup>7</sup> Interview in Sana’a, May 2015. Name changed for security reasons.

also obtained a copy of a leaked letter that is dated October 2015 from the Yemeni Central Bank to banks operating in Yemen, in which the Yemeni Central Bank instructs all the banks to freeze the assets and bank accounts of all associations and unions whose legal status has come to an end. The letter clearly states that these instructions are a result of a decision taken by the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labour on 21 October 2015 to freeze all assets of associations and NGOs whose legal status has come to an end. It is unclear which NGOs or charities the letter is referring to.

### **Recommendations**

All parties to the conflict in Yemen are bound by relevant provisions of international human rights and humanitarian law, including those prohibiting violations to the rights to freedom of association and expression. Yemen is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the rights to freedom of association and expression.

Additionally, the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms was adopted by the General Assembly in 1998 sets out a number of rights of human rights defenders, including the rights to freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly; the right to seek and impart information on human rights; and the right to raise concerns on human rights violations and abuses.

In the current state of lawlessness and prevailing atmosphere of impunity across Yemen, serious human rights abuses have proliferated. The work of NGOs and the need for documentation on the ground is therefore all the more urgent, and will be key to holding all parties to the conflict accountable, and ensuring perpetrators are brought to justice in the future. An active civil society is fundamental if accountability is to replace impunity and such crimes are prevented from becoming further widespread and entrenched. Meanwhile, charities that provide free medical and social services as well as reparations for victims and their families should be able play a vital role in the current deteriorating humanitarian crisis.

The Huthi armed group must recognize the important role that NGOs play and create a space in which they can carry out their legitimate work without interference. Amnesty International is calling on the Huthi armed group to:

- Cease any activities, including intimidation and harassment, which would result in preventing Yemeni human rights defenders, activists and NGOs from exercising their rights to expression, association and peaceful assembly.
- Promote and facilitate a positive working environment for independent Yemeni human rights defenders and other NGOs.
- Publicly acknowledge that it is legitimate and lawful for human rights organizations to document abuses and violations by all parties to the conflict, without fear of threats, intimidations, restrictions or closures.

The internationally-recognized Yemeni government also has a responsibility and a duty to protect the rights of activists, defenders and NGO workers from violations committed by non-state actors. Amnesty International calls on the Yemeni government to thoroughly

investigate any cases of raids, closures, harassment or intimidation of NGOs and their staff and hold those responsible to account. Moreover, the national commission which was set up on 7 September 2015 should in the course of any investigations include these raids in its scope of activities.