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Yemen: Abyan conflict a human rights ‘catastrophe’

A raft of gross and deeply disturbing abuses committed by an al-Qa’ida affiliate and Yemeni government forces during their struggle for the control of the southern region of Abyan in 2011 and 2012 must be the subject of impartial, thorough and independent inquiries, Amnesty International said in a new report out today.

[Conflict in Yemen: Abyan’s Darkest Hour](#) documents violations of the rules of war during the armed conflict between government forces and Ansar al-Shari’a (Partisans of al-Shari’a), an Islamist armed group affiliated to al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula.

It also details horrific human rights abuses committed in the governorate of Abyan and other areas in the south of Yemen during the rule of the Islamist group between February 2011 and June 2012, including public summary killings, crucifixion, amputation and flogging.

“Abyan experienced a human rights catastrophe as Ansar al-Shari’a and government forces vied for control of the region during 2011 and the first half of 2012,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s director for the Middle East and North Africa.

”The Yemeni authorities must ensure that a commission of inquiry announced in September 2012 covers the truly shocking abuses committed. The tragedy of Abyan will haunt Yemen for decades to come unless those responsible are held to account and victims and their families receive reparations.”

Ansar al-Shari’a rapidly established control of the small city of Ja’ar in the governorate of Abyan in early 2011, at a time when the Yemeni authorities were brutally repressing protests calling for President Ali Abdullah Saleh to quit.

The armed group successfully attacked government forces and officials, looted banks and seized ammunition, heavy weapons and other military equipment from abandoned Yemeni military and police stations.

It quickly gained territory and by mid-2011 it controlled most towns and villages in Abyan, including the governorate’s capital, Zinjibar.

During its rule, it was responsible for widespread and disturbing human rights abuses including via “religious courts”, set up as part of the organization’s governing structure. These frequently imposed cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments on alleged criminals, suspected spies working against Ansar al-Shari’a and people who transgressed cultural norms, including summary killings, amputations and floggings.

Saleh Ahmed Saleh al-Jamli, 28, was found guilty by a “religious court” in Ja’ar of planting two electronic devices in two vehicles carrying Ansar al-Shari’a commanders.

The ruling obtained by Amnesty International said the devices had enabled US drones to kill the

commanders in Zinjibar and claimed Saleh al-Jamli “confessed” to a judicial committee.

The “religious court” ruled that Saleh al-Jamli be killed, and his remains crucified.

Amnesty International was also able to confirm that Ansar al-Shari’a had amputated the hand of at least one person suspected of theft – a young man the organization met whose left hand had been amputated between June and September 2011 in a public square in Ja’ar.

He was arrested along with a couple of his friends by members of the armed group who accused them of stealing electric wires. The friends were eventually released. The youth, who is a member of a marginalized community widely referred to as al-akhdam (servants), said that his hand was amputated after he was tortured for five days without access to a lawyer or his family, without attending trial and without prior knowledge of the punishment.

Residents told Amnesty International that the amputated hand was suspended by a rope in the town’s market for all to see.

As these events were taking place Ansar al-Shari’a sought to tighten its grip on power through threats, intimidation and the enforcement of a highly repressive social and religious code.

The rights of women and girls in particular came under attack and severe dress codes were imposed, as was a strict separation of the sexes and restrictions at work and in schools.

A schoolteacher told Amnesty International that Ansar al-Shari’a had one female representative for each school to supervise the implementation of the armed group’s instructions.

Almost immediately after Ansar al-Shari’a took control of Abyan and extended its reach to other areas in the south, the Yemeni military launched several attacks to regain control, culminating in a major offensive on 12 May using air power and artillery. By the end of June 2012, government forces succeeded in driving the group out of Abyan and surrounding areas.

The toxic mix of fighting and human rights abuses meant an estimated 250,000 people from the southern governorates, particularly Abyan, were displaced.

Ansar al-Shari’a meanwhile used residential areas as its base, particularly in Ja’ar, recklessly exposing civilian residents to harm.

Scores of civilians, including children, were killed and many more injured as a result of air strikes and artillery and mortar attacks by government forces.

Yemeni government forces used inappropriate battlefield weapons such as artillery in civilian residential areas. In other attacks government forces appeared to fail to take necessary precautions to spare civilians.

While Ansar al-Shari’a were driven out of the cities and towns they controlled in June 2012, there remains a danger the group will re-emerge and that the armed conflict will resume.

About this report:

This report is based on the findings of an Amnesty International fact-finding mission to Yemen in June and July 2012. Amnesty International interviewed residents, activists, journalists, witnesses, victims and relatives of victims from Abyan governorate, mainly in Aden and Ja’ar, and visited areas affected by the conflict, including Ja’ar, Zinjibar and al-Kawd.