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Exclusive: Images reveal devastation in Yemen's hidden conflict in the north

The scale of the devastation caused by Yemeni and Saudi Arabian aerial bombardments of the northern Yemeni region of Sa'dah has been revealed in hundreds of images obtained by Amnesty International.

The pictures, given to Amnesty International by an independent source and taken in March 2010 in and around the town of al-Nadir, show buildings destroyed between August 2009 and February 2010 during the latest in a series of clashes between Yemeni forces and supporters of a Shi'a cleric.

Among the damaged or destroyed civilian buildings photographed are market places, mosques, petrol stations, small businesses, a primary school, a power plant, a health centre – and dozens of houses and residential buildings.

“This is a largely invisible conflict that has been waged behind closed doors. These images reveal the true scale and ferocity of the bombing and the impact it had on the civilians caught up in it,” said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa programme.

“This information has only now come to light through Yemenis who fled the conflict and have reached other parts of the country.”

International humanitarian law forbids the targeting of civilian objects, as well as indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilians, during conflicts. If such attacks are carried out deliberately, they are war crimes.

The bombardments came in the sixth round of fighting in the region since 2004 between Yemeni forces and the so-called Huthis – armed followers of a Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a Shi'a cleric from the Zaidi sect killed in September that year.

Government restrictions on access to the region combined with landmines and other security concerns mean that no independent observers or media are believed to have visited the area in recent months.

The pictures are consistent with testimony given by many witnesses who had fled Sa'dah to Amnesty International delegates in Yemen earlier this month.

These witnesses, interviewed separately, repeatedly said that Saudi Arabian air strikes, which began in November and were clearly different from earlier Yemeni military attacks, were of an intensity and power not experienced before.

They also said the strikes went on around the clock in the days leading up to their flight and the ceasefire in February 2010.

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, said in March that about 250,000 people from Sa'dah had fled the conflict, around 10 per cent of them ending up in camps. The rest are living with relatives or in derelict or half-completed buildings in the capital Sana'a and elsewhere in the country.

Unlike with previous rounds of fighting, families from Sa'dah fled further afield and, most say they are not planning to return because their homes have been destroyed and they fear the conflict will resume.

Background

Tensions in Sa'dah were originally sparked when followers of the late Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a cleric who had founded a movement in the 1990s to revive Zaidism, a branch of Shi'a Islam, organized protests against the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The protests focused on the Yemeni government's relations with the USA and were followed by arrests and detentions. In June 2004, the government ordered Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi to surrender. Armed clashes ensued between the security forces and Huthis until Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi was killed in September 2004.

The subsequent rounds of fighting in Sa'dah have resulted in hundreds, possibly thousands, of civilian casualties.

An agreement facilitated by the Qatari government in 2008 brought a short-lived lull in hostilities and some releases of prisoners on both sides.

However, the conflict resumed with new intensity in August 2009. The Yemeni government launched a military offensive codenamed "Scorched Earth" that included aerial bombing and deployment of ground troops.

In November 2009, the fighting spilled over the border with Saudi Arabia, which then deployed its army and air force inside Sa'dah.

All parties to the conflict are alleged to have committed serious human rights abuses, although Yemeni government restrictions on access to the area means that reliable information on abuses has been difficult, often impossible, to obtain. The government has accused the Huthis of killing civilians and captured soldiers.

Residents of Sa'dah have alleged that some Yemeni and Saudi Arabian attacks were indiscriminate and disproportionate, though it has not been possible to confirm this independently.

They have also said that attacks on markets, mosques and other places where civilians gather, as well as on large residential properties, have killed dozens of unarmed men, women and children.

Neither the Saudi Arabian nor Yemeni government has provided any explanation for such attacks. The Saudi Arabian government also denied refuge to people seeking to flee across the border to escape this new and more intense round of the conflict in Yemen.

Note to Editors

Please follow this link to access all images:

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