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Yemen: Death of 15 civilians in airstrike underscores serious lack of accountability

The confusion over who was responsible for an airstrike that killed 15 men on their way to a wedding in Yemen on Thursday exposes a serious lack of accountability for scores of civilian deaths in the country, Amnesty International said.

Local security officials reportedly said the wedding convoy had been mistaken for al-Qa'ida operatives, but did not identify the type of aircraft used in the attack. Local media and tribal officials allege that a drone was used – if true, this would point to US involvement in the attack.

“Even if it turns out that this was a case of killings based on mistaken identity or dodgy intelligence, whoever was responsible needs to own up to the error and come clean about what happened in this incident,” said Philip Luther, Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

“The appalling lack of transparency over civilian deaths in Yemen means that when violations occur, the victims and their families have no effective access to redress or reparations. The utter lack of accountability for these killings must end.”

According to local reports, at least 15 men were killed and a number of others wounded on Thursday when three missiles targeted a convoy of cars in Rada', al-Bayda Governorate – around 170km south-east of the capital Sana'a. Three of the 15 bodies were completely unidentifiable as they were blown into pieces in the attack.

The 15 men killed in the airstrike ranged in age from 20 to 70 years old, and the wounded included the area's two main tribal leaders.

Spate of civilian killings

Yesterday's airstrike in Rada' is just the latest in a string of recent incidents that have resulted in Yemeni civilians being killed with impunity.

The same day in Ta'izz, some 240km from Rada', local media reported another wedding convoy coming under fire at an army checkpoint. A five-year-old child was killed and three women and one man were injured.

In two separate airstrikes since September, missiles believed to have been fired by US drones reportedly killed 11 people in Rada' – including a family of three – as well as at least three unnamed individuals traveling in a car in Hadramawt in eastern Yemen. US authorities alleged the three men in the second attack were al-Qa'ida members.

Despite Amnesty International's repeated calls, the US authorities have failed to confirm or deny their role in a December 2009 cruise missile strike using cluster bombs that resulted in the deaths of 55 people, including 14 women and 21 children, in al-Ma'jala in Yemen's southern Abyan region.

Amnesty International and other international human rights organizations have decried the secrecy surrounding lethal US strikes in Yemen and elsewhere. In a report released on US drone strikes in Pakistan in October, the organization documented how civilians there lived in constant fear of drone strikes. Nobody was held accountable for the deaths of civilians, including in drone strikes that may have amounted to war crimes.

Further bloodshed

Violent incidents have haunted almost every corner of Yemen in recent weeks.

Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula has claimed responsibility for an attack on the Ministry of Defence in the capital Sana'a on 5 December, which killed at least 56 people, including civilians, and injured more than 200.

Fighting has been raging between armed groups around the town of Dammaj in the north, causing problems for the local population to access essential items such as food, water and fuel. In the south and east, suspected members of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula have assassinated military and security officers and kidnapped foreign nationals.

On 2 December, Sheikh Saad Ahmad bin Hebrish al-'Aleyi, a prominent tribal leader in Hadramawt, eastern Yemen, and two of his guards were killed together with a number of security officers when they exchanged fire at a security checkpoint. The killing led to large demonstrations demanding the army and security forces withdraw their troops from the region.

Less than a week later in Sana'a, there was a failed assassination attempt on Yaseen Nu'man, a leading opposition figure in the past and currently an advisor to the Yemeni President.

"The lack of transparency and absence of independent and impartial investigations into killings and other abuses, no matter who is responsible, means public trust in the country's institutions has been seriously eroded," said Philip Luther.

"It is entrenching impunity and fuelling a cycle of violations and abuses."