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The Republic of Yemen
The Ministry of Human Rights

Recruitment or Use of Children as Soldiers by Houthi Militias

Report Covering the Period September 21, 2014 to 31 July, 2019





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Introduction:

According to Paris Principles, a “A child associated with an armed force or armed group” refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers or spies.

With the increasing trend of violations perpetrated by Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen, children have become more susceptible to human rights violations including the violation of child recruitment. Child recruitment is one of the six grave violations perpetrated by this militia. Therefore, the UN Security Council acted and issued its resolution 2216 on Yemen under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter on 14 April. Article 1, paragraph 7, of this resolution demands Houthis to expeditiously terminate the practice of child recruitment and to release all child soldiers.



Legal description:

Recruitment or use of children as soldiers is one of the six grave violations prohibited under national legislations, including the Yemeni Child Rights Law, international conventions and agreements. The issue of child recruitment and engagement in armed conflicts has been an issue by international law and international organizations operating in this field. This resulted in a broad base of legal frameworks banning the use of children in armed conflicts in various legal forms. Notably, the Convention on Rights of the Child, Article 38, bans the engagement of children below 15 years in direct military operations. This is emphasized by the optional protocol of the same convention adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 2000. Article 2 of the protocol bans the engagement of children in armed conflicts and all activities of forced recruitment of children below 18 years by armed forces. These provisions are in line with the Convention 182 of the International Labor Organization. The latter expanded in the discussion of forced recruitment of children for the purpose of use in armed conflict and considered this practice as a worst form of child labor. At the same time, the Convention requires all states to take immediate and effective measures to ban and eliminate military recruitment of children. The International Criminal Court focused on the issue of child recruitment. Rome Statute stipulated that the recruitment of children below 15 years of age or using them effectively in hostilities is a war crime resulting in individual judicial prosecution.

In November 2012, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflicts, Ms. Leila Zerouki visited

Yemen and the northern province of Sada in particular. During her visit, she met with Houthi armed group and encouraged them to comply with international laws, protect and release children and refrain from any future recruitment activities.

On May 14, 2014, the Government of Yemen signed with the United Nations an Action Plan on the release of child soldiers in the government army. However, based on the UNSG Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflicts, Ms. Leila Zerouki, the practice of child recruitment and use has seen a noticeable increase and tripled in 2015 compared to the year before. Ms. Zerouki confirmed that 82% of the verified recruitment cases are the responsibility of Houthi militia. According to our estimations, this percentage has increased to 95% in terms of child soldiers recruited by Houthi group. Based on local information, observations and verification, the rate of child recruitment in 2016 is six times the past year.



Statistics:

The rate of child recruitment by Houthi Group has seen a 8-fold increase since 2018 resulting in thousands of child victims. The number of child soldiers amongst Houthi militia has reached terrifying levels with more than 30,000 active child soldiers. The Ministry has documented 11357 cases of child recruitment with 70% of those children still taking part in battlefields. The Ministry maintains a complete database containing information on those child soldiers, the party responsible for recruitment, the training camp and the status of the recruited child. The number of child victims killed in battlefield is 618 with 317 others have become disabled. Some 254 children were captured in warzones. Treatment, food and rehabilitation services have

been provided to them and the majority of them were handed over to their families by the legitimate government. However, 5,862 children are still active in the battlefield fighting with Houthi militia with scores of them being killed everyday and return to their families dead bodies or disabled.

The Province of Dhammar has occupied the first rank in terms of child recruitment for those who die in different battlefields. Militias recruited 921 children below 15 years of age and the majority of children killed in warzones belong to this province, followed by the provinces of Sadah, Amran, Hajja, Hodeidah, Ibb and Al Mahweet. In Al Mahweet province alone, 114 child soldiers have been killed out of 243 children recruited from this province. Children are recruited through luring them into joining training courses by teachers, sheikhs and social figures. Usually, these training courses are conducted in the areas of Al Ahjar or in Al Mahweet. Training camps also exist in Wadi Al Hassi, Malhan, and other camps exist in Al Haimah and Arhab districts.



Causes for Increasing Trend of Child Recruitment:

Houthi-Saleh militia has taken advantage of harsh socioeconomic conditions and the intricate tribal situation in Yemen to attract and recruit children. In this respect, financial and job inducements are made to attract children. Poverty and dire economic conditions force families to send their children to join the militia against a monthly salary of around 50,000 Yemeni Riyals (i.e., USD 150) to assist their families secure the minimum level of daily needs for large families as the case in rural Yemen. This information is based on interviews conducted with child soldiers and their families. In addition to that, religious mobilization processes are conducted by Houthis in the province of Sada in the northern part of Yemen. Weekly classes are being taught to school students to promote the “virtue” of war and Jihad. Ideological propaganda films are displayed to children to motivate them to go to war. In the eyes of children, enemies are portrayed as “infidels” deserve to be killed.

The practice of child recruitment is a common feature of all armed militias such as Al Qaeda, IS and the Houthi. The tribal culture in Yemen contributes to feeding and nurturing the inclination of children to engage in armed conflicts under the notion to protect the honor of the tribe against external aggressions. These “heroin” acts attract children and adolescents under 18 years of age. Moreover, the possession of guns is a widespread phenomenon in Yemen.

recruitment of children and engaging them in hostilities. Tribal sheikhs are being forced by Houthis to bring children from areas they influence for further use by Houthis as fighters.

The majority of children used by Houthi militia are descending from poor families. Therefore, Houthis find it easy to exploit the need of these families and take their children to fuel their ongoing wars. Children are brainwashed to become more loyal and easy to control. Child soldiers with Houthi militia are indoctrinated to believe that they fight against Israel and America and that

this fight is the shortest way to heaven. This crime is not shamed in tribal areas in Yemen as tribes believe that the engagement of children in fighting is a source of pride. Houthi-Saleh militia exploited this situation fueled by the state of poverty and destitution in rural areas of Yemen. Dozens of thousands of children supposed to be in schools have joined training camps of Houthi militia in the provinces of Dhammar, Hajjah, Amran and other provinces. Some children are taken without the knowledge of their families and others are had their parents threaten and forced to accept sending their children to war. Some children are recruited because their families live in destitution and promised of a monthly income to help them with the increasingly difficult living conditions. In many occasions, children, and their families, are misled and told that they will not be deployed in battlefields but will only serve as guards or in checkpoints. As soon as children are recruited, they are subjected to ideological indoctrination for three weeks or one month and then sent to training camps for another month. After that, children are deployed to different battlefields. Children find themselves in a war they are not prepared, not qualified, for. The return becomes almost impossible and children fight till they return to their families as dead bodies.



Religious discourse for child recruitment

Houthi militia use multiple methods and tactics to recruit children from their homes and schools in the areas of Hajjah and Sada. Houthis storm schools in some provinces and deliver sermons and lectures encouraging students to fight. In Al Hadda district, Dharmar province, Houthis stormed a school and prevented the educational process from continuing. Students refused to repeat the Houthi slogans. Teachers have launched appeals calling for protecting the educational system against the sectarian ideology and indoctrination. Houthi militia is also working to sectarianize school curricula. During the last two years, it has been noticed that Houthi militia recruit children openly in schools and distributes to them conscription forms issued by the militia itself in some cases and by the Ministry of Defense, controlled by Houthi-Saleh militia, in other cases. Brainwashing is used by militias to recruit children in schools and educational facilities. The Ministry has reported cases of schools teaching students ideas of violence and fighting. Families of elementary and secondary students are in fear of Houthis deceiving and taking their children to frontlines to face death and return as so called “martyrs”.



Efforts of the Government of Yemen in Rehabilitating Child Soldiers in Houthi Militia

The Republic of Yemen has ratified various international conventions and enacted national legislations to protect children. Yemen enacted the Law on the Rights of Children. In 1991, Yemeni ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yemen also ratified the four Geneva conventions in 1970, the two additional protocols in 1990 and the optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on engagement of children in armed conflicts. Law No. 20 on 24.08.2004 was issued to ratify this protocol. This is in addition to the decrees of the President and the guiding principles that set the minimum recruitment age at 18 years. The state has also policies, strategies and plans to prevent the recruitment of children. This includes the Strategy on Combating Child Recruitment. The operation of this strategy was suspended due to the coup waged by Houthis. In this framework, the Government of Yemen invited the United Nations to update the 2014 Action Plan on the protection of children in armed conflicts. The government also invited the UNSG Undersecretary to visit Yemen. The invitation stressed that the Government of Yemen is ready to prepare, or to work together, to implement any plans, strategies or projects for the protection of children and prevention of any violations they might be subject to. It is proposed to establish a special center in the provisional Capital Aden to protect, rehabilitate children and reintegrate them in the society. Key programs and activities implemented by the Government of Yemen (Ministry of Human Rights) for rehabilitation of children:

- The Ministry of Human Rights conducted a workshop on the grave violations of human and child rights. The first meeting of the joint government-UN technical committee to implement the joint action plan signed with the government of Yemen in 2014 was conducted on 7, 8 and 9 July 2018. It was agreed to conduct the second training course on 22 July 2018 with participation from the government technical committee and the UNICEF.
- Several initiatives and measures for the rehabilitation of child soldiers used by Houthi militias in battlefields have been presented to focus on facilitating the return of children to their hometowns and families. Hundreds of child sol-





children recruited by militias have been released and medical care was provided to them. It has been observed that some children suffer psychological traumas. The government focuses on providing guidance to child soldiers, their families and community members so they resist future recruitment.

- The Ministry of Human rights conducted various activities including the monitoring of child recruitment processes. The process of monitoring and documentation has started to gauge the magnitude of the phenomenon, prepare special reports and to shed media light to raise awareness of the society. The Ministry works to have full understanding of the environment that led to the widespread recruitment of children by Houthi militia. Specific actions will be devised by the Ministry and will be recommended to the Prime Minister and the President for taking decisions.

- The Ministry of Human Rights assisted in the implementation of civil society campaigns on the rehabilitation of child soldiers. Rehabilitation centers were opened and training courses were conducted. Social programs were also provided.

- The Ministry of Human Rights operationalized the inter-ministerial technical committee to develop national actions plans to combat child recruitment and to establish a national database.

- The Ministry provided training for working teams and specialists to provide psychosocial support to children and to enroll displaced chil-

dren in schools.

- The Government of Yemen signed in October an agreement on safe schools as a result of the efforts and cooperation between the Government of Yemen and the SRSG Ms. Gamba.

- The special protocol on children in armed conflicts (protocol on the handing over of children captured in military operations by government forces to actors responsible for protection of civilian children) was distributed. The Government of Yemen gives full rights to children recruited by Houthi militia to enjoy the rights under general rules of the International Humanitarian Law and to receive special treatment as children in the case they are arrested or imprisoned until their release and return to their families. Captured children are allowed to share messages with their families and international organizations have full access to them. In accordance with International Humanitarian Law, the Government of Yemen holds Houthi militia responsible for children it recruited.

Rehabilitation and return of children to their homes

- The Government of Yemen, in cooperation with the Arab Coalition and the International Committee for the Red Cross and UNICEF, received 89 child soldiers in two batches (51 and 37 children respectively). These children were recruited by Houthi militia and deployed along the Yemeni borders with Saudi Arabia to fight and lay landmines.
- The Government of Yemen rehabilitated 31 children and returned them to their homes. Rehabilitation activities were implemented by international and national Yemeni organizations.

A key challenge facing the Government of Yemen in protecting the rights of children under the existing situation in Yemen is the continued practices of child recruitment by Houthi militias in areas they control. This represents a considerable burden and challenge before the government in accessing these children to rehabilitate them and take preventive measures to protect and provide the suitable environment for them until they are finally returned to their families. However, there are no guarantees to prevent the repeated recruitment of these children by Houthi militia.

Forcible Recruitment Campaigns

Forcible recruitment campaign swept the provinces of Al Mahweet, Hodeidah, Tehama areas, Hajjah and Dhammar. The forcible recruitment process for children from 12 years of age and above has been launched in all these provinces given the human losses Houthi suffered in different warfronts.

Educational leaders affiliated with Houthi-Saleh militia used schools to mobilize students in a compulsory recruitment process in the provinces of Al Mahweet, Hodeidah, Tihamma areas, Hajja and Dhamar. In the areas of Hibat, Bajel and Al Kadan, Houthi supervisors sent 30 children to training camps erected in Al Mahweet province in preparation for send-

ing them to warfronts. Ministry coordinators in areas still controlled by Houthi militia confirm that scores of children have been killed and that many schools lost their students with some of them still fighting with the Houthis while others have been killed or maimed. Ministry coordinators conducted documented interviews with teachers and educational officers.

Training Camps:

Ministry teams documented the existence of training camps for recruited children in areas still under the control of Houthi – Saleh militia. The Ministry maintains a detailed list of these camps, the officers in charge of the recruitment and lists of child soldiers captured in battlefields.

Houthi militia erected 52 camps for training of recruited children in different regions. Thousands of adolescents, children and jobless young people applied for recruitment in these camps. It has been witnessed that many school children were queuing around these camps seeking conscription.

Types of violations perpetrated by Houthi militia against recruited children and their families

- Child soldiers are subject to various forms of violations by militia members. They are also forced to use psychotropic substances and drugs so they can be easily controlled and used in the attempts to penetrate Saudi borders in Al Raboa area.
- Houthi group forced many Yemeni families to send their children to fight under threat.
- Children between 12 to 17 years of age are trained to use heavy weapons in military training centers. Children are extensively used in the frontlines making them at great risk of death or injury.
- Recruited children are extensively used in the laying of landmines and explosive devices.
- Houthi militia used children as human shields. Houthis take advantage of the vulnerability of displaced people and orphans and recruited them to fight.



- Children are being lured to battlefields without the knowledge of their families. Family members of recruited children raised their voices calling Houthis militia to release their children and return them to schools as they were taken to war without the knowledge of their families.





The International Position:

In the most recent report of the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, Ravina Shamdasani, the spokesperson of OHCHR, said that between 26 March 2015 and 31 January 2017, the United Nations have verified the recruitment of 1476 children, the vast majority of them were recruited by Houthi – Saleh militia. The spokesperson indicated that actual numbers are most likely to be much higher.

In turn, Amnesty International accused Houthi – Saleh militia of recruiting children of no more than 15 years of age and engaging them in hostilities in a violation to international laws. In its report issued on 28 February 2017, Amnesty International narrated the story of three child victims of Houthi militias. Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that Houthi militia recruited the four children, with six others, without the knowledge of their families. Family members knew later that those children were sent to fight along the Yemeni-Saudi borders.

The United Nations documented in its reports multiple cases of child recruitment by Houthi-Saleh militia.

Human Rights Watch also reported the use of children as soldiers and training them by Houthi forces in May 2015.

On March 1, 2017, France condemned the recruitment of children by Houthis in an international conference on the protection of children in war hosted by Paris.

Preventing impunity:

Houthi-Saleh group is still exploiting and using children and minors in the most horrendous forms in their wars in Yemen. Houthis disregarded all international appeals to stop this practice. Children recruited by Houthis are sedated and given psychotropic substances then forced to deploy in frontlines.

The Ministry of Human Rights demands urgent international trials for militia commanders. The rate of child recruitment has seen a 10-fold increase since the coup. Serious violations to International Humanitarian Law has been perpetrated and go unpunished. Houthis, and their ally Saleh, did not take any actions to investigate these serious violations committed by their forces. The engagement of children in wars and using them as human shields by Houthi group is a serious violation of international laws and conventions and a serious crime against the innocence of children.

Annual reports of the UN Secretary General on children and armed conflicts listed Houthis as a party that violates child rights during conflicts in different forms including the recruitment and use of children as soldiers.

The recruitment and use of children below 15 years of age by Houthis is a war crime under Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the international customary law. Commanders, who knew, or were supposed to know, about these violations and did not take any action must be prosecuted.

Incident of recruiting the child K. K. A. in Amran:

Child K K A is 14 years old. Like many people in Amran, his family was living in destitution. The child is deaf and mute so his father abandoned him due to the dire economic situation of the family. On March 4, 2015, this child was taken by a Houthis group member and sheltered him in a neighborhood center. Once, the child was seen with a machine gun in the same neighborhood. On April 7, 2015, the child was taken to attend a training and ideological course for one fully month. The family said that Houthis have taken the child without the permission of his parents. On May 7, 2015, the child returned to the same neighborhood in Amran with a new nickname (Abu Mohammed). On May 14, 2015, the child was taken to Al Sawadia area in Al Baidha province, 160km to the south of the Capital Sana'a. Al Sawadia was an area of very active armed confrontations. His family was assured that the child was taken to Al Sawadia to provide guarding services and that the majority of combatants sent to that area are from the same neighborhood of the child. The child stayed in this area for several months. On November 11, 2015, he was moved to Mukairas area to fight against forces loyal to the legitimate government. K K A and his colleagues were told that they are fighting against the Israeli army that is invading Yemen. Under this pretext, K K A and his friends were sent to fight in Mukairas frontline. One week later, he was moved, with other combatants, to Al Shuraijah area in Taiz province. In the morning of December 2, 2015, the child was delivering supplies to the Houthis in battlefield and was killed by an airstrike. On December 3, 2015, Houthis visited his father to tell him that his son become a "martyr" and promised him to bring the dead body.

The corpse of K K A was delivered to his family and was buried in Bait Al Fakih, Amran province. Houthis paid his family one hun-

dred thousand Riyals (equals to USD 450) and gave them a Chinese machine gun. Houthis congratulated the family for the martyrdom of their child and then left them looking for new children to recruit.



The incident of recruiting 17 children from the provinces of Hajjah, Capital Sana'a, Amran, Al Jawf, Sadah and Dhammar:

The committee has listened to the testimonies of those children recruited by Houthi militia and Saleh forces. The hearings were recorded and kept in the archive of the committee. The Committee listened to the testimonies of witnesses who saw the death of child A M R recruited by Houthi-Saleh militia to fight for them. Witnesses A M S and S B H, locals of Hajjah province, said that they were present when the family of the child A M R received the corpse delivered by Houthi-Saleh militia. The child was recruited by this militia and then killed in the battlefield. The two witnesses confirmed that Houthi militia in Hajjah province routinely takes children from their families, in exploitation of their poverty, and sends them to battlefields in different parts of the country.

The national army and the legitimate government released hundreds of child soldiers captured while fighting with Houthi-Saleh militia. Many of these children were rehabilitated to overcome the psychological effects of the recruitment and fighting period with the Houthis. Coordination was done with the Arab Coalition to release dozens of children captured while fighting with the Houthis along the Yemeni borders with Saudi Arabia.



Recommendations:

To the United Nations (Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflicts)

- To condemn the practices of child recruitment and engagement in war frontlines by the Houthi Group
- To lobby with Houthi-Saleh militia to release child soldiers and send them back to school
- The Ministry of Human Rights invites the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and her team to visit Yemen to verify the efforts of the legitimate government in protecting children.
- The Ministry of Human Rights requests the resumption of the implementation of 2014

action plan on protection of children in armed conflicts.

To international organizations and relief centers:

- To adopt psychological programs for the rehabilitation of children and sending them back to school.
- To assist the Ministry in implementing its plans to protection children, provide psychosocial support and establish centers for the rehabilitation of child soldiers.

To the Security Council:

- The Ministry of Human Rights calls upon the UN Security Council to implement its resolutions on Yemen, including resolution 2216 in particular.