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Yemen: Sanaa's Old City at Risk

All Sides Should Avoid Battle at UNESCO World Heritage Site



A woman walks on a bridge in the Old Sanaa city January 10, 2014. REUTERS/Khaled Abdullah

(Beirut) – Parties to _____’s armed conflict should take all necessary measures to protect Sanaa’s Old City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. International humanitarian law provides special protections to buildings and other structures that are part of humanity’s cultural heritage.

Sanaa, Yemen’s capital, has been controlled for the past year by the forces of Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthis. In recent weeks, Yemeni forces loyal to the government of President Abd Rabu Hadi, backed by _____ from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, have been _____ on the town of Marib, 170 kilometers east of Sanaa, perhaps in preparation for an attack on the capital.

“Beyond the loss of civilian lives, it would be a terrible additional loss to humanity if Sanaa’s Old City, inhabited for 2,500 years, became a battlefield,” said _____, deputy Middle East director. “Both Houthi and coalition forces need to abide by international legal protections and keep the Old City out of any future fighting.”

Since late March 2015, a Saudi Arabia-led coalition of nine Arab countries has attacked Houthi-controlled cities and towns and imposed an economic blockade on the country. The United States has provided _____ . The fighting has caused the deaths of more than 2,100 civilians, _____ to the United Nations.

The coalition air campaign has been responsible for most of the civilian deaths, _____ to the UN. Many of these airstrikes on Sanaa, the Houthi northern stronghold of Saada, and other cities have been indiscriminate or used cluster munitions, in violation of the laws of war. The Houthis too have committed abuses, including indiscriminate rocket attacks, the mistreatment of detainees, and enforced disappearances of political opponents.

On October 2, the UN Human Rights Council _____ by consensus a deeply flawed resolution that ignored calls for an international inquiry into mounting abuses in the country. The Netherlands originally put forward a draft resolution that would have mandated a UN mission to document violations by all sides since September 2014. Several members of the Saudi-led coalition conducting military operations in Yemen – including Qatar, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates – openly opposed the proposed UN inquiry.



Houses in the old city of Sanaa, May 30, 2013. REUTERS/Mohamed al-Sayaghi

The Houthis have been moving into _____ since 2011, and placing any troops, weapons, or headquarters there would make them military targets. On June 12, an _____ in the Old City destroyed several buildings and killed five people. The coalition denied that the explosion was the result of an airstrike. On September 19, a coalition airstrike hit an apartment building in the Old City, killing nine members of a family, international media _____ .

After the June 12 explosion, UNESCO's director general, Irina Bokova, _____ all parties to protect Yemen's cultural heritage. "I am profoundly distressed by the loss of human lives as well as by the damage inflicted on one of the world's oldest jewels of Islamic urban landscape," she said. "I am shocked by the images of these magnificent many-storied tower-houses and serene gardens reduced to rubble."



A view of the side of a damaged house in the historical city of Sanaa March 24, 2013. REUTERS/Mohamed al-Sayaghi

The 1954 [Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property](#) and its 1999 protocol seek to protect “property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people,” by prohibiting parties to an armed conflict from using the property for purposes likely to expose it to destruction or damage. Hostile acts may not be committed against such property unless it is being used for military purposes and there is imperative military necessity for doing so.

The [Rome Statute](#) of the International Criminal Court makes it a war crime to deliberately attack historic monuments, among other structures, unless they are military objectives.

The Houthis should be redeploying their forces away from and not into the Old City, Human Rights Watch said. Coalition forces have an obligation to take the Hague Convention protections into account if they attack any Houthi forces there. The US, the United Kingdom and other countries backing the coalition should raise their concerns about possible damage to the Old City and Yemen’s cultural heritage.



People walk on a bridge in the Old Sanaa city, January 10, 2014. REUTERS/Khaled Abdullah

“The US and other coalition supporters should send a clear message to Saudi Arabia and others to do all they can to avoid fighting in Sanaa’s Old City,” Stork said. “In a year when so many of the Middle East’s greatest architectural wonders have been damaged and destroyed, it would be a terrible tragedy to add Sanaa to the list.”

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