

UN official condemns Saudi-led coalition for Yemen attacks

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People gather at the site of a deadly Saudi-led coalition airstrike on Thursday in Yemen's Saada. (AP Photo/Hani Mohammed)

United Nations: The UN humanitarian chief condemned a Saudi-led coalition on Friday for carrying out two major airstrikes in Yemen in the last two weeks that killed dozens of civilians. Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock said he echoed Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's call for "an impartial, independent and prompt investigation into these most recent incidents."

He said a coalition airstrike on Thursday killed at least 22 children and four women fleeing fighting in Al Durayhimi district in Hodeida governorate. An additional airstrike in Al Durayhimi on Thursday killed four children, he said.

On August 9, coalition airstrikes hit a bus in a busy market in Saada governorate in Yemen's north, killing at least 51 people including 40 children. The attack drew broad international condemnation and the coalition said it would investigate.

Henrietta Fore, executive director of the UN children's agency, UNICEF, said she hoped the Saada attack "would be a turning point in the conflict," but Thursday's attacks "indicate that it was not."

"I will once again call for the warring parties, those who have influence over them, the UN Security Council and the international community to take action and end this conflict once and for all," Fore said in a statement. "The lives of thousands of vulnerable children across Yemen must be a priority for all."

The conflict in impoverished Yemen began with the 2014 takeover of the capital of Sanaa by Houthi Shiite rebels, which toppled the internationally recognized government. A Saudi-led coalition allied with the government has been fighting the Iranian-aligned Houthis since 2015.

Civilians have borne the brunt of the conflict which has pushed Yemen to the brink of famine, crippled the country's health system, and killed over 10,000 people.

The Houthis had blamed Thursday's attack in Hodeida on the coalition. But state media of the United Arab Emirates, a key coalition member, disputed the claim and said the rebels launched the attack, killing one child and injuring dozens.

Neither side's claims could be independently verified, but Lowcock's statement put the blame on the coalition. Lowcock's condemnation of the recent coalition airstrikes follows the release earlier Friday of a 90-page report by Human Rights Watch accusing the Saudis and others of failing to conduct credible investigations into alleged war crimes committed in Yemen or redress the toll on civilians.

He stressed that the humanitarian operation in Yemen is currently the largest in the world, with three-quarters of the population in need of aid. In 2018, he said, the UN and its partners assisted more than 8 million people. Lowcock expressed deep concern at the proximity of attacks to humanitarian sites including health facilities and water and

sanitation operations.

“The parties to the conflict must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and those with influence over them must ensure that everything possible is done to protect civilians,” he said.

Frank McManus, Yemen country director for the International Rescue Committee, a New York-based humanitarian organization working in over 40 countries, warned that attacks like those in Saada and Hodeida “will undermine the potential for progress” in peace negotiations in Geneva between the Houthis and government scheduled to start on Sept. 6.

“The international community must demand action _ an immediate ceasefire should be agreed upon and a full, independent investigation into these events must be undertaken,” McManus said in a statement. “But thus far, international silence in response to violations in Yemen has been deafening and it is allowing wanton disregard to civilian life to become the new normal in conflict.”

He urged the United States, United Kingdom and France to use their leverage to alleviate suffering, saying “Yemen, and Yemenis, cannot wait.”

- AP