

Yemen Safe Passage Group Update 13.1.16

Safe passage in Yemen's forgotten war

The beginning of a new year feels like a good point to review our activities and developments.

The 'core team' we put together in September (James Firebrace, Frances Guy and Phil Holihead) was very active in the period up to mid November. Highlights of this period included:

- Discussions with Keith Vaz (Chairman of the Yemen All Party Parliamentary Group) and his team, and our formal submission on blockade / safe passage issues. See <http://www.keithvazmp.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/APPG-on-Yemen-Report.-The-Forgotten-Crisis.pdf> for the full report to Parliament. The proposals we made featured prominently in the APPG recommendations.
- Meeting with Prince Turki Bin Faisal (Saudi 'elder statesman' and former Ambassador to both UK and US) and other members of that part of the Saudi Royal Family - at the time of the launch of the Arabic translation of 'Rebuilding Yemen' in Riyadh
- Lobbying senior contacts in the US, including an injection of ideas via David Milliband, who (through his organisation IRC) was coordinating the NGO response at the time of the UN General Assembly and meetings 'in the margins'
- Meeting with Sir Alan Duncan, UK's Special Envoy to Yemen, who wrote in forthright terms about Yemen's plight and spoke directly to senior figures in Saudi and the Gulf
- Meeting with Desmond Swayne, DFID Minister, an encouraging and frank discussion involving the DFID senior Yemen team, on overcoming the challenges of aid delivery in the midst of military conflict
- Meetings with Edmund Fitton-Brown, UK Ambassador to Yemen, who has proved generous with his time and sharing of key contacts.

We were among the very first to highlight the likely impact of the war, the blockading of ports and the difficulties made for ground access of supplies including fuel – dating right back to our first letter in The Times back in early May. Since then there have been many others clamouring for a change of policy and putting pressure on the protagonists to abide by international standards in the conduct of war and protection of civilians.

We judged our own angle had the best chance of influencing policy and changing actions, aimed at where it mattered most and stressing the extent that this was in *their* interests - to avoid a famine for which they would be clearly responsible, to minimise the economic degradation of Yemen which is already massively complicating Yemen's recovery, to avoid feeding the narrative of extremist groups, and to safeguard maritime trade in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Inevitably our pressure centred in large part on the UK government's ability to influence the Saudi-led coalition, given the closeness of the alliance and the extent of military cooperation - which could be extended to practical arrangements for efficient verification of shipments and responsible air targeting.

Other campaigns with a different emphasis have complemented our own. A number have raised concerns about the high toll of the armed conflict on civilians (and aid workers), on the use of banned armaments (such as cluster bombs in populated areas) and the legality of UK's continued arming of the coalition in the knowledge that such abuses are taking place. Others have stressed the damage being inflicted on Yemen's rich heritage and the bombing of archaeological and historical sites.

By November it seemed that this combined international pressure at all levels was paying off. Ships waiting in Hodeidah port (the key point of access for the populated Yemeni highlands) were finally being allowed to unload, and UNVIM (the international verification and inspection body to ensure arms were not being brought in with bone fide shipments) was eventually financed. Aden port, although still suffering serious delays on verification, seemed at last to be functioning at least a little better. The skyrocketing prices of basic commodities began to return towards more normal levels in most parts of the country, with the notable exception of front line conflict areas such as Taiz.

But eight months of severely disrupted supplies (both commercial and aid) had left the bulk of the Yemeni population severely weakened and highly vulnerable. 10 of Yemen's 22 provinces were classified as facing 'Level 4' food insecurity ('pre-famine'), and some 2 million people have been displaced. There are still real concerns about a widespread famine with Yemen remaining on an economic cliff-edge.

This earlier guarded optimism was reinforced by the preparations underway for peace negotiations and even practical talk of financing a reconstruction programme. But all this now feels rather far behind us. The December

'peace talks' in Switzerland did result in a lull in the fighting and a period of significantly better access, but they failed to result in a political breakthrough. It seems that for the moment at least both sides see more to gain by continued conflict than peace and compromise. Most recently the execution of a prominent Saudi Shi'ite cleric has led to a hardening of positions, and the next round of peace talks originally set for mid January have been put back.

Most alarmingly from our 'safe passage' perspective have been reports in the last few days that fuel, cement and steel is no longer being allowed into Hodeidah, and that the port has been declared a 'military zone'. Meanwhile Taiz remains in the eye of the storm, in a military deadlock and a state of semi-siege with much of the city now an evacuated ghost town. And Yemen continues to remain largely out of the news, too often eclipsed by the horrors of Syria where safe passage is also high on the agenda. The plight of Madaya and other Syrian towns under siege is not so different to what Taiz has been experiencing with its population trapped by months of fighting and indiscriminate shelling.

Our 'Yemen Safe Passage 'Group' will continue to exert influence as best we can when we can see opportunities or when it feels the timing is right. We remain a group of individuals with a history of support for Yemen and its people. Between us we have a wide network of contacts from senior international figures to our friends on the ground in Yemen who continue to suffer in ways scarcely imaginable from the relative security and comfort we enjoy here. We argue the case for a permanent and early end to the war underpinned by a sustainable political settlement, and in the meantime highlight that Yemenis must be allowed to earn their livelihoods (with fuel being critical) and have unhindered access to essential supplies and services, including medicines and water.

We work in the gaps between our 'day jobs' and have no secretariat, so we must chose carefully where to devote our energies. With this caveat, ideas are of course very welcome.

Kind regards and hoping for more positive outcomes in 2016

YSPG Coordinating Team

A few links for those wishing to delve further:

Yemen's 'horrible year' summarised by IRIN: <http://newirin.irinnews.org/yemens-horrible-year> including the November cyclones. <http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2016/01/yemens-unending-chaos/423327/> gives a graphic photo summary.

The latest UNOCHA summary of aid response by sector: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/yem_3w_2015_11.pdf

Damage to archaeological and historical sites summarised here: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/yemen-23-heritage-sites-destroyed-by-saudi-airstrikes-1529862>