

The Washington Post

In Yemen, a ray of light amid a war's darkness

Ishaan Tharoor

December 14, 2018

Millions of Yemenis received a lifeline Thursday. After a week of U.N.-brokered talks in a town outside Stockholm, two of the major parties in the country's ruinous war agreed to a cease-fire over the strategic port of Hodeida. The move was hailed as a major breakthrough in the grim conflict, which has raged for four years, caused the collapse of the already impoverished nation's economy and precipitated the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Under the deal hatched in Sweden, Yemen's Houthi rebels and forces fighting for the country's Saudi-backed government will withdraw from Hodeida, hopefully allowing for vital aid to be moved through to the rest of the country. The two sides also agreed to a prisoner swap involving thousands of fighters, the creation of a humanitarian corridor around the besieged city of Taiz, and on a framework for future talks, which may resume as early as next month.

"The agreements today mean a lot, not only for the Yemeni people but for humanity if this can be a starting point for peace and for ending the humanitarian crisis in Yemen," António Guterres, the United Nations secretary general, said as talks ended Thursday.

Those involved in relief work welcomed the announced pause in fighting — something that international organizations have been demanding for months — but warned that the real struggle was only about to begin. The country's infrastructure, woeful even before it was pounded by a relentless Saudi-led bombing campaign, is a mess. Ordinary Yemenis face shortages of food, medicine, water, electricity and much else. The ongoing Saudi blockade of the country and an inflationary crisis in which prices for basic goods have spiraled out of reach for most people have led to forecasts of an unprecedented famine potentially threatening up to 14 million Yemenis.

"This is just a first step," Abdikadir Mohamud, the Yemen director for the relief organization Mercy Corps, said in a statement. "The measure of the agreement will be taken in action on the ground, not words in a conference room. We need lifesaving supplies to reach the millions of people in need, and we need safe passage for the humanitarians who will distribute them."

Already, the war has exacted a hideous price. One aid agency estimated that at least 85,000 Yemeni children may have died of malnutrition. At an event hosted last week in Washington by the libertarian Cato Institute, Scott Paul of the international aid group Oxfam said that Yemeni "parents are making Sophie's choice every single day," compelled by their circumstances to decide "which of their children will live or die."

Paul added that there was clear evidence that Saudi bombing — and, to a lesser extent Houthi shelling — had "disproportionately damaged" food production facilities and hospitals. He faulted the United States for its "unconditional support" for Riyadh, a status quo that "communicated [that] anything goes and created a permissible environment for all factions" to carry out abuses.

Countless other miseries are piling up. “More women are being widowed by the war each day, left without the education or skills to support their families,” reported my colleagues. “Rape and domestic violence are increasing. Girls are being pulled out of school to be married off for dowry money. Children are falling sick from diseases that were long ago eradicated elsewhere in the world, and pregnant women and newborn babies are succumbing to starvation.”

All the while, a dizzyingly complex conflict grinds on. What began as political turf battles in a failing state took on the frame of a regional proxy war: The Saudis chose to intervene in 2015 to stop the Iran-linked Houthis from capturing most of the country. Years of grueling fighting — and thousands of Saudi and UAE bombing sorties — have pushed the Houthis back, but they still control the capital, Sanaa, and hold sway in Yemen’s populous north. Myriad other factions, including Islamist militants and secessionists in Yemen’s south, are jostling for control. As my colleagues reported last week, rival militias allied to the Saudi-led coalition have in some instances turned against each other.

There are many reasons to be skeptical of the current diplomatic breakthrough. In the past, Yemen’s warring parties have agreed to various cease-fires, power-sharing agreements, and other truces. “Often, these agreements were only prelude to a new round of fighting,” warned Gerald Feierstein, a former U.S. ambassador to Yemen, at a panel event in Washington on Wednesday. He added that the “fundamental challenges facing Yemen,” including “political disenfranchisement, economic marginalization and sectional rivalries” have “never been overcome.”

There is thin hope that the influence of outside powers may now tilt Yemen toward a more stable path. “Previous cease-fire agreements have collapsed quickly,” noted The Washington Post’s Kareem Fahim. “But there has been greater international pressure on the warring sides in recent months to de-escalate the fighting.”

Most notable is that the Yemen war has finally started to feature in proceedings in Congress, where lawmakers have been galvanized by the Saudi killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. On Thursday, a rare bipartisan group of senators voted to end U.S. participation in the Saudi-led war effort. It was a stunning, if purely symbolic (since a vote in the House is being obstructed), rebuke of an administration that gave Riyadh carte blanche in its campaigns against Iranian influence throughout the region. In a separate resolution, the Senate also condemned Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as responsible for Khashoggi’s death. It seems that widespread antipathy toward the reckless royal, who is still favored by the White House, fueled congressional action on Yemen.

The votes put “significant pressure on leaders in the House — where the president’s Saudi Arabia policy is a much more partisan issue — to allow members to cast a similar vote condemning the crown prince before the end of the year,” reported my colleague Karoun Demirjian, and “set the stage for broader strategic debates about Saudi policy when Congress regroups next year.”

For Yemenis, the political theater in Washington is a sideshow to their plight. At the Cato Institute event, Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.), an early campaigner on ending U.S. support for the Saudi involvement in Yemen, lamented how long Congress had taken to rise to action. The war is “a stain on the conscience of every person in power,” Khanna said. “It’s something all of us will have to live with.”

