U.N. Fails to Agree on Independent Inquiry of Human Rights Abuses in Yemen

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Good news for the Saudis and not-so-good news for the civilians of Yemen: The United Nations Human Rights Council voted Thursday to establish a national inquiry into human rights abuses in Yemen with the help of a U.N. technical assistance team.

The decision is a major blow to the attempt, led by the Netherlands, at a resolution that would instead require an international inquiry into the atrocities unfolding in Yemen. This is the second year in a row that the council managed to agree only on a national inquiry, which tends to be one-sided and ignorant of the degree to which people are suffering.

The Netherlands withdrew its text on Yemen during the deliberations on Thursday and instead compromised on the draft resolution, which called for the national inquiry and was put forward by the council’s group of Arab states.

This decision comes as a relief to Saudi Arabia and the Arab states, which want to avoid international meddling into a conflict that they have a major stake in.

A Saudi-led coalition has been [targeting Houthis](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/09/yemen-saudi-arabia-obama-riyadh/501365/) in Yemen since March of 2015 after it helped run the country’s president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, into exile. It has mercilessly [bombed](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/15/saudi-led-air-strike-yemen-hospital-kills-at-least-seven) civilian-heavy areas in the country, most recently targeting medical facilities and schools.

The Houthis, who are supported by Iran, aren’t innocent either. They’ve also been accused of repeated [human rights violations](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/05/un-report-says-saudi-led-coalition-and-houthis-violate-human-rig/), including the use of humans as shields during attacks.

Meanwhile, the team from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights working on Yemen is “disappointed” in the outcome, Mohammad Ali Alnsour, special assistant to the high commissioner, told The Huffington Post. “We did not have any say in the final text. It was a package deal so basically we have to live with it,” he said.

The resolution asks that the U.N. technical assistance team provide an oral update of its findings at the next council session in March and then put together a written report of human rights violations in time for next September’s session.

The OHCHR Yemen team just did this, and it wasn’t easy. It delivered a report recently about the situation on the ground after several months of investigating and found that Yemeni representatives were difficult to work with and didn’t meet the international standards for data collection.

Alnsour anticipates that the U.N. assistance team will face the same uphill battle in receiving credible information from the Yemenis this time around, he added.

Some were more optimistic about the outcome.

“Although imperfect, the Human Rights Council resolution provides the UN High Commissioner a clear mandate to send more investigators to Yemen, vigorously investigate abuses by all sides, and report publicly,” John Fisher, Geneva director of Human Rights Watch, said in a statement. “With this vote, council members overcame obstruction by Saudi Arabia and showed they recognize the need for accountability for the grave human rights violations in Yemen.”

The U.K., although allied with Saudi Arabia, did shift its position and come out in [support](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/26/uk-supports-call-independent-un-human-rights-mission-yemen) of the international inquiry. The United States did the same.

It’s also a longtime ally of the Saudis, and reports have indicated that some of the coalition bombs used in Yemen were [sold to the Saudis by the U.S.](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/whats-the-u-s-role-in-yemens-civil-war/)

The U.S. delegation is pleased with the resolution, which “includes a much more robust and explicit mandate to report on human rights abuses and violations,” according to Ambassador Keith Harper, the U.S. representative to the HRC. He views it as a major improvement compared with last year.

And while diplomats continue to spar in Geneva, the humanitarian situation on the ground in Yemen continues to deteriorate.

“At least 7 million people ― a quarter of the population ― are living under emergency levels of [food insecurity](http://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/severe-food-insecurity-widespread-yemen),” the World Food Programme said in June.

The toll of war has been particularly hard on children. Preventing disease and death among children in the country has been set back almost a decade, according to UNICEF. More than 1.5 million children are suffering from malnourishment.