



CHILDREN OF YEMEN

CATAPULTED FROM SCHOOLS INTO BATTLEFIELDS AND LOWERED INTO GRAVES

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Notoriously enough, child recruitment in Yemen is one of the most infamous manifestations of human rights violations domestically and globally. The internecine war raging on in Yemen for years has caused tragic political, economic and social conditions that have made the entire country in tatters, especially children. Enervated by grinding poverty, prolonged starvation, ongoing conflict, and the persistently stubborn attacks on schools, children left school to be voluntarily taken into battlefields for combat and security purposes.

The Houthis and Child Recruitment

UNICEF always emphasizes that good education is the right for every child, and that decision-makers must make good education a priority. However, a UNICEF report recently published reveals that nearly two million children in Yemen have dropped out of school, reducing children of Yemen, who were once happy, to be the most miserable, the most notorious children who dropout, and the most exploited in recruitment and combat.

Although domestic and international laws and customs have ensured the protection of childhood, children in Yemen are the least protected. Children in Yemen are reduced to be recruits on the battlefronts, or laborers in servitude, or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) alongside their families or fall victim to violence and terrorism (deaths or injuries). According to a United Nations report on children and conflict areas, child recruitment and involvement in warfare in Yemen has alarmingly peaked the death toll; the armed Houthis bear the full brunt of the despicable scourge, with more than 77% of child recruitment in Yemen, while documented cases of the government forces made up 16%, the Security Belt Forces affiliated with the Transitional Council 5%, and the rest of the groups and organizations 2%.

The Houthis use summer centers and schools in Yemen to recruit children, after providing them with sectarian and ideological training for more than a month to be driven into the pitched battlefields and be part of the machine of war. Recruited children alongside their families are decoyed into their families deceptive cultural courses or security centers far from the confrontations of war. While many children are allured into the frontlines of war, others are instrumentalized to provide supplies, pool information, build fortifications, dig trenches, and plant mines.

The Yemeni SIYAG organization for children rights highlighted the Houthis recruitment of more than half a million children in 2020, through six thousand summer camps set up in the territory under the Houthis control, planning to involve many other children in running fierce battles with the legitimate forces. School children are tempted into recruitment by the Houthis by money, food provision, promotion of military ranks, or forced conscription through kidnappings and threats. Drugs are also used in recruitment; the territory under the Houthis control is flooded with drugs. As such, children have become addicted to drugs, hence, to force them to join the Houthis training camps and battlefronts. Against such a backdrop of loss, childhood in Yemen is derailed from schools and bulldozed into battles.

Shocking Statistics

According to the Permanent Representative of Yemen to the United Nations, His Excellency Ambassador Abdullah Al-Saadi, the Houthis have disreputably recruited about 30,000 children, most of whom are from Sana'a, Dhamar, Amran, Al-Mahwit and Hajjah, who are under the age of 17; they were distributed among the different conflict zones to be involved in committing appalling hostilities. Such acts are glaringly blatant violations of international conventions and laws of child protection.

A recent international report issued by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor and the Yemeni SAM Organization for Rights and Freedoms reveal that the Houthis used about 52 camps to train thousands of students and children between the ages of 10 and 18. Such camps first distort their Yemeni and Arab identities and second imbibe them with extremist sectarian ideologies and hollow slogans, and third provide with weapons.

The marked deterioration of the economic situation has substantially contributed to increasing child recruitment in Yemen; many families agree to have their children recruited to obtain financial return, albeit a pittance meet some everyday life needs,

given the price spike and the unpaid salaries for civilians and military staff for years. Still, some families are unwitting victims of the recruitment of their children until they return home as dead bodies or being injured in the battlefields.

Tragedies

Once we seek to cite telling examples of the recruitment of children in Yemen and their belligerency, hundreds of tragedies come flooding into memory. Such children once dreamed of a better future but slipped into an awful nightmare in a country sadly drenched in bloodshed, following a failed coup d'état staged by the Houthis against legitimacy. Perhaps one of the strangest of such tragedies is that two brothers fight each other, each aims his rifle at his brother, which reduced their parents to lose their patience and be driven into a state of mental, emotional and psychosocial uncontrollable loss.

Another telling tragedy is about a father who is brought a box with a picture of his only child, decorated with fake slogans and roses. Unexpectedly, the father was dolorously surprised to have seen the remaining parts of his son's dead body.

New Ideology

Back in Dhamar, a 14-year-old child in the lower secondary school cherishes higher hopes for a brighter future; he daydreams and plans to be a future doctor, an engineer or a teacher. On holiday, his parents sent him to the summer center to polish up his skills and hone his talents to perfection. He was miraculously renowned for his acute intelligence, pure intuition, and witty repartee. He came in first among his classmates. Upon completion of the said courses, he came back yoked together and imbibed with a totally different ideology. Inculcated and brainwashed with new mindset, he desperately sought to convince his family to join the battle frontlines, but they refused categorically. Halfway frustrated, he further attempted to convince them that he would be in the back lines, away from any threats. The low-income family was eventually convinced that he would go to a set camp for some training, unwittingly that the journey was driving the final nail into the son's coffin.

One month into his recruitment, he was catapulted into the battle frontlines on the Yemeni border, carrying a Kalashnikov rifle in his hand, about the length of his frail body, while harboring delusions of grandeur that feeds on deception and deviant

ideology. After a while, he returned to his family on a short leave, gave them some money, and soon returned to be stationed at the battle frontlines, honorably dubbed Senior Commander ABU AQEEL. Instead of going to his parents for the second time with money and gifts, he was carried in a bier as a dead body in a coffin, decorated with his image and name as a martyr.

Money in Return for Own Only Son

A 13-year-old boy from Amran is the only child to his parents with several sisters. His lower secondary school is within the immediate vicinity of his house. The regional security supervisor attempted to attract him to cultural course and advanced courses in Sana'a, aiming at spreading ill-intentioned ideology in the mindset of children, drumming up for the dire need for jihad and fighting the invading enemies.

Following several intensive courses, he was imbibed with hostility, and eventually settled on the western coast of the Red Sea in the fierce frontlines with many peers. While the hit-and-run battles were raging on, he is captured by the National Army in Jabal Al-Nar, 15 kilometers east of the coastal city of Mocha. Months later, his troubled parents were desperately doing their best to release him, but to no avail! His father went to Sana'a to meet senior officials for help. Surprisingly, several war brokers asked him for big money in exchange for the release of his son, with other promises to include him in the prisoner exchange deal. In response, his father was forced to sell part of his land to return his son after nearly two years, while his classmates become upper secondary school students.

Sharia Scholar

A 16-year-old child experienced a different tragedy. He received his education up to the first secondary grade, memorized the Noble Quran, and was impressively affable and well-mannered of a remarkable reputation in his neighborhood, Sana'a. His dream was to be a scholarly polymath in the Quranic Recitations or Islamic Sharia, but the human wolves were on the lookout for him! He was drawn in as a supervisor at a summer center, and then was brainwashed with extremist ideology to end up as a cultural supervisor in one of the neighborhoods of Sana'a and then as a supervisor in one of the fierce battle frontlines as there was a dire need for recruits to be used by the Houthis as fuel for war, without training such naïve and new recruits, who do not know the basics

of warfare. Consequently, he was shot in the head and transferred to a hospital in Sanaa, without the knowledge of any of his relatives fear of shock. After a months-long coma, he awoke in a miserable state, fully paralyzed.

Conclusion

The tragedies explained, inter alia, are much telling about poor children, whose future is nipped in the bud, while slipping and allured into full-scale wars, feeding on children, boys and youth; such wars only serve politicians and key actors. It is high time for war to come to an end! When can Yemen restore and bask in greater glory as it once was?

The scourge of children dropping out of schools and joining the extremist and terrorist groups has frighteningly exacerbated, becoming a horrible nightmare that ubiquitously creeps in the stability and prosperity of Yemen now and in the future. This requires a seriously strict stance on various levels. Parents are required to resist the Houthis' temptations, and categorically refuse to throw their children into the incinerators of death. Equally important, human rights and child protection organizations must fulfill their humanitarian and moral responsibilities, and exercise pressure to stop despicable operations savagely committed by the Houthis against children in Yemen. This requires bringing those responsible for child recruitment to trial as war criminals. Again, centers of rehabilitation and social integration of conflict-affected children should be established.