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Invisible and Unheard: The Escalating Tragedy of Enforced Disappearances in Yemen

Justice for Yemen Pact

August 30, 2024

On the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, we urgently appeal to the international sponsors of the Yemen peace talks to prioritize the issue of the forcibly disappeared in their efforts to end the conflict. It is imperative that any transitional process includes the formation of a national committee dedicated to locating these individuals and addressing the needs of both the victims and their families. Until such measures are established, the Human Rights Council should form an international committee to investigate violations committed throughout the conflict, including that of enforced disappearance, as well as safeguard evidence and ensure these cases remain ready for future justice processes.

Today, we must shine a light on the dire human rights crisis in Yemen, where enforced disappearances have become a widespread and deeply alarming practice. Since last year, the situation has not improved, and in many cases, it has actually deteriorated.

All parties involved in the Yemen conflict have forcibly disappeared people, including men, women, and children. The exact number of forcibly disappeared individuals in Yemen is difficult to determine. According to a 2023 [statement](#) by Amnesty International and other organizations, warring parties in Yemen perpetrated 1,168 cases of enforced disappearance between 2014 and early 2023. Ansar Allah (also known as the Houthis) were responsible for 596 cases, followed by the Southern Transitional Council who were responsible for 349 cases, and the internationally recognized government of Yemen was accountable for 223 cases. Additionally, the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition committed 38 cases of enforced disappearance, the Hadrami Elite Forces are



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linked to 28 cases, the Joint Forces to 15 cases, and the Giants Brigades, in partnership with the Shabwani Defense Forces, to 9 cases of enforced disappearance.

Parties have often justified these violations as being necessary for security and counterterrorism. In reality, however, many cases of enforced disappearance have targeted perceived opponents and religious minorities, or have been used as a tactic of intimidation.

Enforced disappearance, in which authorities detain a person and then refuse to acknowledge their whereabouts or situation when asked, is a serious crime that is prohibited at all times under both international human rights law and international humanitarian law. International practice dictates that no circumstances, no matter how dire, can justify acts of enforced disappearance, as stipulated by the United Nations [Declaration](#) on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

In the latest horrifying incidents of enforced disappearance, the Houthis launched a [campaign](#) against dozens of employees of international and local agencies and organizations in Sana'a, disappearing them and holding them incommunicado, without access to their families or to lawyers. In [a joint statement](#), UN agencies reported that 17 of their staff members were detained. [Human Rights Watch](#) confirmed that Houthi security forces arrested over 60 people between May 31 and June 12, most of whose fates remain unknown except for one case. Women were not spared; the fate of four [women](#) remains unknown to this day. These detentions were accompanied by a large media campaign, in which the Houthis suggested that the detained civil society workers are part of an alleged American and Israeli spy network, creating an environment of fear for those who work for civil society organizations, and undermining public sympathy for them.

The Houthis have a notorious record of forcibly disappearing and mistreating people. In a shocking ruling on July 28, 2024, the specialized criminal appeals division in Sana'a upheld [death sentences](#) for three abductees who had been forcibly disappeared for over five years. The Houthis have forcibly disappeared members of the [Baha'i community](#) without charging them, and have subjected them to torture and mistreatment.



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Recently, the Police Chief of Aden Governorate [accused](#) some officials in the Counter-Terrorism Forces of their involvement in the disappearance of Colonel Ali Abdullah Ashal. Despite the large number of disappearances, this is the one of the first instances in which authorities in Aden have taken public action against individuals accused of enforced disappearance, but many others remain disappeared and arbitrarily detained with the support of the authorities. For example, the Specialized Criminal Court in Aden sentenced journalist Ahmed Maher to four years [in prison](#) on charges of 'spreading false information' after he was arrested by Southern Transitional Council forces in August 2022, held incommunicado, tortured, and denied legal representation, family contact, and medical care.

The data and incidents of enforced disappearances in Yemen reveal a heinous crime that violates fundamental human rights, most notably the right to life. A recent [report by the Abductees' Mothers Association and the Justice for Yemen Pact](#) found that 75% of those who died in prison had been forcibly disappeared, denied contact with their families, and deprived of the legal protection guaranteed by the Yemeni constitution. Families were often denied the bodies of their loved ones and forced to accept their deaths without a medical examination. At least 58% of people who disappeared suffer from severe [psychological trauma](#) after their release.

For many years, journalists in Yemen have been arrested in various forms and have been enforced to disappear. Most of the arrested individuals were hidden for long periods before their families learned of their whereabouts, and they were subjected to different kinds of torture. Three of them have still forcibly disappeared, and some have been missing for nine years without any information about them, according to a [report](#) by the Media Freedoms Observatory in Yemen.

The impact of enforced disappearance extends beyond the victims themselves, affecting their families and friends, who endure deep trauma and emotional suffering as they continue to search for them. The widespread practice of enforced disappearance in Yemen is deeply linked with the culture of impunity that has developed due to the lack of accountability for violations that warring parties have committed throughout the current conflict, as well the lack of accountability for violations in past conflicts. It is therefore imperative that the international community prioritize



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accountability and transitional justice in ongoing efforts to end the conflict. The Justice for Yemen Pact and the organizations that have signed this statement call for the following measures to eliminate cases of enforced disappearance and to strengthen the protection of human rights in Yemen.

Recommendations:

1. All parties to the conflict must immediately cease enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions.
2. Parties should immediately provide the whereabouts of those who have disappeared, and release those who are being held without charge.
3. The Ansar Allah (Houthi) group must end the enforced disappearance of staff of international and local organizations and release them unconditionally.
4. The internationally recognized Yemeni government should prioritize ratifying the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and ensure its implementation by aligning national legislation with international treaties and agreements.
5. The internationally recognized Yemeni government should have a national investigative body should be established to investigate and search for the forcibly disappeared, address their circumstances, and support their families. Efforts should also be made to enhance international cooperation and information exchange with all relevant stakeholders, including organizations, countries, and entities that have successfully combated enforced disappearances.
6. The Human Rights Council should establish an international, independent mechanism to investigate violations of international law committed by parties throughout the conflict in Yemen, including non-Yemeni parties, and ensure that the issue of the disappeared is addressed..



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7. National and international actors should work to strengthen and protect local human rights organizations and civil society organizations, especially those operating under Houthi control.

Signatory Organizations:

1. Abductees' Mothers Association (AMA)
2. Al-Amal Women's and Sociocultural Foundation (AWSF)
3. Center for Strategic Studies to Support Women and Children (CSWC)
4. Free Media Center for Investigative Journalism
5. Marib Dam Foundation for Social Development (MDF)
6. Musaala Organization
7. SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties
8. Studies and Economic Media Center (SEMC)
9. Yemeni Media Freedom Observatory (YMFO)
10. Watch for Human Rights (Watch4HR)
11. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
12. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
13. Yemeni Coalition to Monitor Human Rights Violations (YCMHRV)
14. Taafi initiative
15. Caesar Families Association
16. DHM
17. QUEEN FOUNDATION for Development aHuman Rights
18. Monitoring Center for Rights and Development
19. FYFHRD
20. For All Foundation



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21. MCCD
22. Arab Human Rights Foundation
23. Yemen Center For Humen Rights Studies (YCHRS)
24. Ahrar Organization for Human Rights and Development
25. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
26. Women Relief Aid
27. Engender
28. Human Development Foundation HDF
29. Think Twice Brasil
30. Yemen Center for Transitional Justice
31. Defense Committee for Detainees and Enforced Disappearances
32. Wogood Foundation for Human Security
33. Honna
34. Awam foundation for development and culture
35. Association of War Affected Women
36. American Center for Justice
37. bahith Foundation for Development and Human Rights
38. Defense Foundation for Rights and Freedoms
39. WOGOOD for Human Security
40. PAIMAN TRUST
41. NATIONAL COORDINATION OF FAMILIES OF THE DISAPPEARED
(ALGERIA)
42. Advocacy for women in peace and Security- Africa
43. Al-Haq Foundation for Human Right
44. Alrowad Foundation for development
45. Elbarlament
46. The National Organization of Yemeni Reporters SADA



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47. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
48. Qarar Foundtion for Media and development
49. Women Education and Development Organisation of Liberia
50. Together We Rise Foundation for Women and Child Care
51. Arab-European Center for Human Rights and International Law
52. Masar Foundation for Development and Human Rights
53. Shohood Organization for Human Rights
54. Myanmar- Women Peace and Security
55. Gender Equality Network (GEN)
56. Media Village for development & Information
57. Ruwwad Foundation of Development and Human Rights
58. Afghan Women's Network
59. Urkino
60. Al-Nahda Youth Organization to Save the Marginalized in Yemen