

Yemen: Houthis should end their crackdown on civic space and immediately release arbitrarily detained UN and civil society staff

Houthi de facto authorities should immediately release the at least eight UN staff who were arbitrarily detained between 23 and 25 January 2025, as well as dozens of staff from UN agencies and Yemeni and international civil society organizations who continue to be arbitrarily detained since May 2024, 24 organizations said today in a joint statement.

The latest wave of arrests is part of the Houthis' ongoing crackdown on human rights and humanitarian workers, which intensified last year. Starting on 31 May 2024, over two weeks the Houthis [conducted a series of raids](#) in areas under their control, arbitrarily detaining 13 UN staff and [at least 50 staff](#) from Yemeni and international civil society organizations. To date, only three people have been [released](#) – one UN staff member and two NGO staff members. The rest remain detained without access to a lawyer or their families and without charge.

The office of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen [confirmed](#) the arrests in a statement published on 24 January 2025, noting that seven UN staff members, including personnel from the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, had been detained. UN Secretary-General António Guterres [condemned](#) the arrests, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all detained individuals.

The Houthis' actions continue a troubling pattern of repression of civic space in Yemen and a brutal targeting of human rights and humanitarian workers under baseless accusations of espionage. In August 2024, the Houthi-run Supreme Council for Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation (SCMCHA) reiterated the Houthis' restrictive policies on humanitarian activities in five-day long meetings with UN and INGO staff, warning them “of the dangers of espionage that may be exploited within the framework of humanitarian work.”

The arrests have been accompanied by an ongoing Houthi-led media campaign accusing humanitarian organizations and their staff of “conspiring” against the country's interests through their projects. Following the first wave of arrests, on 10 June 2024, the Houthi Security and Intelligence Service announced the “discovery” of what they called “a spying network.” Two days later, Al Masirah TV, a Houthi-affiliated channel, broadcast a video featuring a different group of detainees, who had been detained between 2021 and 2023 and held incommunicado since then, “confessing” to spying.

The Houthis have a [track record](#) of [using torture](#) to extract “confessions”, raising fears these detainees were coerced to “confess”.

Since 2015, several human rights organizations, including [Amnesty International](#), [HRW](#), [CIHRS](#), and [Gulf Center for Human Rights](#) have documented scores of cases involving journalists, human rights defenders, political opponents and members of religious minorities who had been subjected to unfair trials before Houthi-controlled courts on trumped charges. In all these cases, the Houthis' prosecution authorities

appeared to have brought the spying charges as means to persecute political opponents and silence peaceful dissent.

Notably, on 1 June 2024, the SCC [sentenced](#) 44 individuals to death on trumped up spying charges following an unfair mass trial. 16 were sentenced in absentia while 28 were brought before the SCC.

These waves of arrests exacerbate the already deteriorating humanitarian situation in Yemen, where at least 80% of the population relies on aid, according to the UN. In response to the recent arrests, the UN announced the suspension of all official movements into and within areas under the Houthis' control, a decision that will severely impact the delivery of life-saving assistance to millions. Following the arrests of last year, a number of governments decided to either gradually or immediately end their programs in Yemen, such as the Swedish government which on 26 November 2024 announced that it “decided to stop providing development assistance to Yemen.”

On 26 January 2025, the Houthis' Deputy Foreign Minister Abdulwahid Abu Ras [attacked](#) both statements made by the UN Secretary General and the UN Resident Coordinator stating that “Yemen firmly rejects and condemns all forms of external interference in its internal affairs.” He further justified the arrests by framing them as a defense against foreign plots, specifically naming the United States and Israel as threats.

The Houthis' new wave of arrests comes after US president Donald Trump [re-designated](#) the Houthis as a “foreign terrorist organization” through an executive order on 22 January 2025, citing the Houthis' actions in the Red Sea where they “have fired at U.S. Navy warships dozens of times since 2023, endangering American men and women in uniform.” Since it remains unclear whether and to what extent such designation allows for humanitarian exemptions, this decision risks [further harming](#) the delivery of essential humanitarian aid to Yemeni civilians. By imposing additional barriers on aid groups operating in Houthi-controlled areas, this move threatens to worsen the already dire situation for those in need of critical assistance, as Oxfam [has stated](#). President Trump also decided to cut [funding](#) for aid programs funded by the US government globally for 90 days during a budget review. The executive order also risks significantly harming the provision of critically-needed aid in Yemen.

The undersigned organizations urgently call on the international community, in particular those states with an established communication channel with the Houthis, to do everything in their power to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all those who have been arbitrarily detained, including human rights and humanitarian workers.

Signatories:

1. Abductees Mothers Association
2. Al-Nama Center for Humanitarian Media
3. Amnesty International
4. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
5. Center for Strategic Studies to Support Women and Children

6. Civic Center for Support and Advocacy
7. CIVICUS: Global Alliance
8. Dameer Foundation for Rights and Freedoms
9. Electronic Organization For Humanitarian Media EOHM
10. Foundation for the Defense of Rights and Freedoms
11. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
12. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
13. Human Rights Watch
14. International Federation for Human Rights
15. Justice4Yemen Pact Coalition
16. Munazamat Muhasabat Huquq Al'Insan
17. Musaala Organization for Human Rights
18. PASS_Foundation Peace_for_Sustainable_Societies
19. Qana,a Media and Rights Foundation
20. Rasd Center for Rights and development
21. SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties
22. Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies
23. The Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations- Rasd Coalition
24. Yemen Future for Culture and Media Development