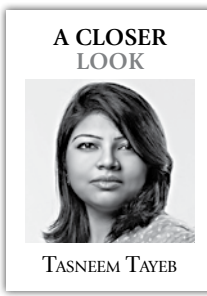


US designation of Houthis as terrorists: A wrong move at a wrong time



A CLOSER LOOK
TASNEEM TAYEB

As the lights were about to go out on Trump presidency, the outgoing US administration made two major announcements about the Middle East—

termining Iran a home for Al Qaeda, and designating the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen as "terrorists". Both of these moves reek of desperation and miscalculation. While these can have dangerous consequences for both the US and Middle East, the branding of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in particular—effectively barring US citizens and entities from interacting financially with the group—is certain to unleash unspeakable horrors on the millions of Yemenis living on the edge of life and death.

Since the beginning of the war in late 2014 when the Houthis seized control of much of the country, including its capital Sanaa, Yemenis have suffered excruciating pain inflicted by the war, loss of loved ones and belongings, and invariably the pangs of hunger. The war has claimed more than a quarter of a million lives "including 131,000 from indirect causes such as lack of food, health services and infrastructure," according to a UN report.

Children, of course, have also succumbed to hunger and attacks. More than 3,153 children have fallen victim to the bloodthirst of the warring parties. "These senseless attacks, with so many children and women casualties, are horrific and inexcusable. Today, more families are grieving for children who died needlessly," said Altaf Musani, the chief UN humanitarian official in Yemen.

In the last three days of November 2020, 11 children—including a one-month-old baby—had been killed in attacks in Taizz and Al Hudaydah, said UNICEF. And so many of the dead remain nameless and faceless, their deaths not even properly mourned at times as no one is left behind to mourn them.

While the world community's failure to stop the killing of innocent children is a shame in itself, what's even more shameful is exacerbating the factors that are causing these deaths. The US move at this critical point of the Yemen war—where all parties, including the Saudis that along with the United Arab Emirates assembled a US-backed military coalition in an attempt to restore the government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, are trying to come to a resolution—is one such act. The designation of the Houthis as terrorists, which came into effect on January 19, a day before the Biden administration was supposed to take office, would unleash uncertainties, if not mayhem, at many levels and for all parties involved, including the aid agencies working in the field.

First of all, the designation would exponentially increase the possibility of mass-scale famine. Yemen's food supply chain is heavily dependent on imports—almost 90 percent of the food coming into the country is through imports, and almost all are procured through commercial channels. In the face of such a designation, however, many suppliers would not want to get embroiled in the mess, especially due to fears of getting caught in regulatory complications with the US, which might affect their business or even land them in prison. The United States' assurance that it will issue licenses to allow some aid or imports does not hold water either, as "those licences do not yet exist, nor will it solve the problem, given that humanitarian agencies do not import



PHOTO: AFP

The US move to designate Houthi rebels in Yemen as 'terrorists' might hamper the work of aid agencies working in Houthi-controlled areas and also have a chilling effect on private companies bringing in critical supplies.

most of Yemen's food," says Relief Web. The Yemenis are already stockpiling whatever goods and supplies they can get their hands on, because no one knows how the food supply chain would work once the designation is enforced. Ships bringing in food to Yemen have to pay port fee to the Houthis. And the supplies are provided to the Yemenis by government institutions controlled by the Houthis. The United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, suggested that sixteen million people are feared to face famine in 2021. With regard to the US' decision to brand the Houthis as terrorists, he warned that "every decision the world makes right now must take this into account." This hasty, last-minute decision by the Trump administration has left the aid workers and food importers

vulnerable in a crisis that has already claimed hundreds and thousands of lives, and pushed millions into a spiralling famine. While the Trump administration officials said with regard to aid and supplies that they are "planning to put in place measures", what those measures are remain unclear. The New York Times reported that many diplomats, aid groups and lawmakers have suggested that "clear-cut legal protections should have been enacted in tandem with the terrorism designation to prevent another barrier to assisting one of the world's poorest states." And of course, provoking the Houthis with this time-insensitive decision has the potential to jeopardise the efforts of the UN to bring the warring parties to the table. In response to the recent development, the Houthis might refuse to sit at the negotiating table and even sever

any backchannel they might have opened with the Saudis or the UN to resolve the situation. In view of the ground reality, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's suggestion that the action was taken "to advance efforts to achieve a peaceful, sovereign and united Yemen that is both free from Iranian interference and at peace with its neighbours" does not make much sense. If anything, in the wake of such a move, the Houthis might get closer to Iran and strengthen their ties with them further. While the Houthis should be held accountable for their crimes, this is not the right approach or the right context, given that so many lives are at stake.

With various organisations including the UN, human rights groups and civil society now calling on the US government to reverse the designation of the Houthis as terrorists, pressure is mounting on the new Biden administration to address this issue at the earliest.

What is understandable from this latest move by the Trump administration is that it is intentionally creating complications in the Middle East, especially with regard to Iran and its allies, where the Biden administration will have little room for rapprochement manoeuvres. And it has done so for an obvious reason: to push Trump and company's Israel-First Middle East policy. But every action comes with a price, and for this particular one, it will be the lives of millions who are already struggling to survive amidst war, famine and a global pandemic. And the US will be responsible for every life lost in Yemen due to this recent development.

The Biden administration will have little time to act, but it must do so and soon to save millions of life from becoming the collateral damage of America's irresponsible move.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem

Why we need a national strategy to prevent drowning

SADRUL HASAN MAZUMDER

GLOBALLY, drowning is the second leading cause of injury-related deaths among children and also the third leading cause of accidental deaths. According to the WHO, drowning claims around 322,000 lives per year worldwide, with over 90 percent of incidents taking place in low- and middle-income countries. It also causes the deaths of at least 12,000 children per year, which is equivalent to 43 percent of all child deaths. Drowning mortality is the highest among children aged 1-4 years, while more than 50 percent of the deaths occur before the victims' 3rd birthday.

Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey 2016 estimated that its drowning mortality rate of 11.7 per 100,000 persons per year corresponds to a total of 19,247 deaths, two-thirds of them involving children. A study by the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) shows that 68 percent of drowning takes place between 9 am and 1 pm and the majority of incidents take place in ponds (66 percent) and ditches (16 percent) located within around forty steps of households. This has been accelerated by the reality that both parents in poorer households often have to work in distant places, leaving their children unattended.

Despite such a reality, drowning has not been mentioned in any of the laws enacted since the country's independence. But the "Multi-Sector Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Disease, 2018-2025", adopted by the Directorate General of Health Services



(DGHS), includes the development of day-care facilities aimed at improving child supervision to reduce exposure to water bodies. The strategy mandated the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to ensure setting up of day-care centres in partnership with the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives as well as NGOs and private-sector organisations. But there is a lack of leadership and coordination among the ministries concerned, which has further been complicated by the diverse terms of reference, roles, and responsibilities for operationalising multiple interventions of drowning prevention.

Globally, drowning has been considered under the non-communicable disease control

segment of the WHO. But if the drowning prevention interventions are thoroughly examined, it would be evident that most of the interventions do not fall under the jurisdiction or scope of the ministry/directorates of health, which creates a problem at the operational level and in designing the delivery portfolio. For example, in Bangladesh, developing the day-care centres, teaching swimming skills, and conducting water safety sessions at schools do not fall under the jurisdiction of the ministry of health. Thus, through the adoption of the National Strategy on Drowning Prevention, the multiple actors working at the national level should be brought under a common accountability and monitoring framework so that they can deliver the interventions necessary to tackle

drowning. And it should be done urgently. A recently published factsheet on drowning, published by the Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS), the Commonwealth's oldest and largest live-saving and drowning prevention organisation, shows that during 2017, about 110,000 people died from drowning in the Commonwealth countries—and India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan account for 78 percent of the estimated fatalities. In this regard, Bangladesh stands 5th among the Commonwealth countries.

Research from home and abroad have identified multiple factors causing drowning deaths, such as lack of physical barriers between people and water, particularly close to home; inadequate supervision of young children; uncovered or unprotected water supplies and lack of safe water crossings; lack of water safety awareness and risky behaviour around water, such as swimming alone; travelling on water, especially in overcrowded and poorly maintained ferries; and flood disasters, whether from extreme rainfall, storm surges, tsunamis or cyclones. In Bangladesh, especially in the health sector, although major advancements have been made so far, drowning continues to be a major factor affecting the mortality rate of children below five years.

To tackle this, the CIPRB has advocated innovative solutions such as the strategic use of barriers to control access to water, creation of a community-based supervision mechanism for pre-school children, and teaching basic swimming skills to school-age children. The supervision

mechanism has been especially found to be a cost-effective and useful intervention to protect children aged 1-4 years. The mechanism, designed to function within the context of rural Bangladesh, has been broadly steered by the community-based approaches in which parents of the children play a key role while the community plays a supportive role or acts as a facilitator.

Studies show that teaching children basic swimming skills and water safety with safe rescue skills can help to reduce the rate of drowning. But for a wider impact, it is essential that drowning prevention interventions are integrated with a SDG framework as well as other national priorities relating to the wellbeing of children. It is also necessary to scale up the existing drowning prevention interventions. Most importantly, the government should facilitate a multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism to reduce deaths from drowning, with particular focus on the approval of a comprehensive national strategy on drowning prevention; allocating resources to scale up the day-care model adopted; enhancing awareness among the general public; examining the possibilities of engaging government and semi-government agencies like the directorates of primary and secondary education to introduce water safety lessons; engaging the countryside network of Ansar-VDP to provide first responder services; and widening the scope of the Swimming Federation to provide life-saving training.

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QUOTABLE Quote

DESMOND TUTU
(Born 1931)
South African archbishop.

My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Enterprise science officer
- 6 Speculate
- 11 Des Moines native
- 12 Craze
- 13 Note from the boss
- 14 Some golf clubs
- 15 Musk of Tesla
- 17 Tennis court divider
- 18 Reject
- 22 Saudi native
- 23 Burr or Hamilton
- 27 Nearsighted Mr.
- 29 Slyly sarcastic
- 30 Guarantee
- 32 Plane part
- 33 Afternoon social
- 35 Pussy foot
- 38 Chow
- 39 Kitchen come-on
- 41 Nary a soul
- 45 Second airing
- 46 Open-sea catches
- 47 Lively dance
- 48 Train stations

DOWN

- 1 Pop's daughter
- 2 "The Raven" writer
- 3 Need to pay
- 4 Happened
- 5 Ring
- 6 Foreboding
- 7 Golf goal
- 8 Privy to
- 9 Three squared
- 10 Sunrise site
- 16 Outmoded
- 18 Titled woman
- 19 Turkey neighbor
- 20 Hangs low
- 21 Tended to, as business
- 24 Deceitful one
- 25 Fix text
- 26 Depend
- 28 Pizza herb
- 31 Corn unit
- 34 Fourthdown plays
- 35 Component
- 36 Region
- 37 Frayed
- 40 Saloon vessel
- 42 Lennon's love
- 43 Catch some z's
- 44 Snaky shape

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	A	L	T	S	J	A	M	E	S
T	R	O	U	T	A	L	O	N	E
A	R	U	B	A	W	A	S	T	E
R	I	V	A	L	S	S	I	R	S
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D	E	R	I	N	C	A	S	E	
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P	E	R	U	S	A	L	R	O	W
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S	T	A	T	E	O	H	A	R	A
T	O	T	A	L	N	O	N	E	T
S	N	A	R	K	S	E	E	D	S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

HANG ON, BEETLE! I'LL GO GET A ROPE!

GRAB IT!

CAN'T I FINISH MY NAP FIRST?

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

I AM HAMBOT. THE WORLD'S MOST INTELLIGENT ROBOT.

WOW! JUST WHAT I NEEDED!

REALLY? I MEAN, REALLY.

ABSOLUTELY!

HAMBOT'S ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS INSULTED.