

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

December 16, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.  
Washington D.C. 20500-0003

Dear President Biden:

We write to urge you to exert diplomatic pressure to end the Saudi-led coalition's ongoing closure of the Sana'a International Airport in Yemen. The continued restriction of commercial and humanitarian flights into the airport has exacerbated the ongoing crisis in Yemen and had a devastating impact on millions of innocent Yemenis. Re-opening the airport will be vital to ensuring a resolution to the conflict, and to ensure desperately needed humanitarian aid is able to enter the country and reach those who need it.

Yemen has suffered from a devastating civil war for over seven years that has completely destabilized the entire country and impacted the region.<sup>1</sup> The conflict has imperiled millions of innocent Yemeni citizens and devolved into the world's worst humanitarian crisis. According to the United Nations, nearly 80 percent of Yemen's 31 million citizens are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection and 16.2 million people are at risk of famine. This includes more than 400,000 children under the age of five who are at risk of perishing from malnutrition.<sup>2</sup> Aid agencies have described Yemen as the worst place in the world to be a child, as the conflict has claimed the lives of at least 85,000 children from hunger and disease.<sup>3</sup> Millions have been displaced and those who are still in the country struggle with widespread famine, outbreaks of cholera and COVID-19, and a lack of critical infrastructure such as health care, and sanitation services.<sup>4</sup> The United Nations Development Program predicts that if unabated, the war in Yemen

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<sup>1</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "Global Conflict Tracker: Yemen," April 15, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, "Humanitarian crisis in Yemen remains the worst in the world, warns UN," February 14, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032811>

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, "30 Years of Child Rights Yet Yemen Remains One of the Worst Places to be a Child- UNICEF," November 19, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/press-releases/30-years-child-rights-yet-yemen-remains-one-worst-places-be-child-unicef>

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization, "Cholera Situation in Yemen," January 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/cholera-situation-yemen-january-2020>; Human Rights Watch, "COVID-19 in Yemen," April 14, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/14/covid-19-yemen-perfect-storm>

will lead to 377,000 deaths by the end of this year – nearly 60 percent of those due to indirect causes such as disruptions in access to food, clean water, and adequate healthcare.<sup>5</sup>

Exacerbating the suffering in Yemen is the Saudi-led coalition's blockade of Sana'a International Airport. Prior to the war, Sana'a International Airport served as a vital hub of international commerce for Yemen, handling more than 80 percent of all air passengers in the country and averaging more than two million passengers annually.<sup>6</sup> However, since the start of the conflict, U.S.-enabled Saudi warplanes have imposed a blockade of Yemen's airspace.<sup>7</sup> The coalition launched its first major strike on the airport's runway in April 2015, which destroyed cargo planes transporting humanitarian aid, before completely blocking its use in August 2016.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the Saudi Arabian-led coalition continues to launch airstrikes against the airport, rendering it unsafe for both commercial and humanitarian use.

The closure of the airport has severely impacted access to food and medical services for millions of Yemenis.<sup>9</sup> Yemenis in need are unable to receive the vital medicines they desperately need, imperiling millions. It has also greatly limited the capacity of healthcare facilities in the north of the country, where roughly eighty percent of the population resides, as the flow of medical supplies through the airport has all but stopped.<sup>10</sup> Combined with restrictions on fuel through Yemen's Hodeidah Port, prices of many lifesaving medicines have doubled putting critical medical care treatments out of reach for millions of innocent Yemenis.<sup>11</sup> The closure also blocks vital medical travel for tens of thousands of critically ill Yemeni civilians. Tragically, many Yemenis with chronic health issues, such as cancer, have needlessly suffered and died waiting for potentially lifesaving medical evacuations and medicine.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, Yemenis and humanitarian aid workers seeking to travel internationally to and from Yemen have also been impacted by the closure of Sana'a airport. Travelers from the north are

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "Assessing the Impact of War in Yemen: Pathways for Recovery," November 23, 2021, <https://www.undp.org/publications/assessing-impact-war-yemen-pathways-recovery>

<sup>6</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council, "Five reasons why Yemen's Sana'a airport must reopen," August 5, 2021, <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2021/five-reasons-why-yemens-sanaa-airport-must-reopen/>

<sup>7</sup> Brookings Institute, "Biden's broken promise on Yemen," Annelle R. Sheline and Bruce Riedel, September 16, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/16/bidens-broken-promise-on-yemen/>

<sup>8</sup> Reuters, "Saudi-led planes bomb Sanaa airport to stop Iranian plane landing," Mohammed Ghobari and Mohammed Mukhashaf, April 28, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-airport/saudi-led-planes-bomb-sanaa-airport-to-stop-iranian-plane-landing-idUSKBN0NJ24120150428>

<sup>9</sup> Brookings Institute, "Biden's broken promise on Yemen," Annelle R. Sheline and Bruce Riedel, September 16, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/16/bidens-broken-promise-on-yemen/>

<sup>10</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council, "Five reasons why Yemen's Sana'a airport must reopen," August 5, 2021, <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2021/five-reasons-why-yemens-sanaa-airport-must-reopen/>

<sup>11</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council, "Thousands of critically ill patients stranded with Sana'a airport closure," August 5, 2021, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2021/august/thousands-of-critically-ill-patients-stranded-with-sanaa-airport-closure/>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

forced to use Aden airport in the country's south, the country's only operational international airport, forcing them to take a treacherous journey over land through the war-torn nation. The road from Aden can be unsafe for travelers due to numerous checkpoints, unstable mountainous terrain, and poor road conditions. Many have perished taking this trip including one U.S. resident.<sup>13</sup> Yemenis unable to afford the cost of the overland journey have been separated from family members and have missed out on critical opportunities abroad, including many seeking higher education and scholarships internationally.

Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian crisis and was already the world's poorest country prior to the war. With so many lives at stake, Saudi Arabia must end its blockade of the Sana'a International Airport and allow for commercial and humanitarian traffic. Restrictions on Yemen's ports of entry are a form of collective punishment in violation of international and U.S. law and such practices must be decoupled from ongoing negotiations and brought to an immediate end.

The announcement to the end of offensive support in Yemen was a good first step to ending the war. However, Saudi Arabia has continued its blockade unabated, and the Administration must take more forceful action to end the suffering of more than 24 million Yemenis. The United States must make clear that this cruel and senseless blockade is causing devastating harm to millions of innocent Yemenis and are harmful to diplomacy and the peace process. The Biden Administration should leverage all possible influence to pressure the Saudi-led coalition to end its blockade of Sana'a International Airport and to allow for the unrestricted flow of humanitarian aid through the airport.

We appreciate your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
Member of Congress



Nancy Mace  
Member of Congress



Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator



Rand Paul  
United States Senator

CC: The Honorable Secretary Blinken

<sup>13</sup> Middle East Eye, "Yemen: Mysterious death of a visiting expatriate sparks uproar," September 11, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-war-death-expatriate-sanabani-checkpoint-south-outrage>