

CHASING PEACE IN YEMEN

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The ceasefire between Yemen's Houthi rebels and forces loyal to President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in the port city of Hodeida came into existence on December 18. The agreement was reached in UN-mediated talks held in Stockholm earlier this month. At the time of the negotiations, the city was almost in the hands of the Saudi-led coalition. The coalition had blockaded the port, the main conduit for humanitarian aid to enter Yemen, for months, and the fighters, mostly UAE soldiers, were battling the rebels. But Saudi Arabia came under increased global pressure to stop fighting in Yemen after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside its consulate in Istanbul triggered a global outcry. The spotlight on Yemen and its deteriorating humanitarian situation has been so strong after the Khashoggi affair that even the U.S., which supports Riyadh in the war, cut down its involvement by ending refuelling of coalition aircraft. With the UN also pushing for talks, the Yemeni government backed by Saudi Arabia gave the green light for talks.

Since the Saudi intervention in 2015, at least 10,000 people have been killed in Yemen, according to the WHO. The widespread damage caused to infrastructure by the coalition airstrikes and lack of supplies of food and medicines due to the blockade have pushed Yemen into a humanitarian catastrophe. About 12 million people are at the risk of starvation if aid doesn't reach them fast. The country has also seen a massive cholera outbreak. A child dies every 10 minutes in Yemen from preventable causes, says UNICEF.

Saudi Arabia interfered in Yemen after the Shia Houthi rebels captured Sana'a, the capital city, and the internationally recognised government of President Hadi moved to the country's south. The Saudis accuse Iran of bankrolling the Houthis and "destabilising" the Arabian peninsula. The Saudi plan was to expel the Houthis from Sana'a and restore the authority of the government. But almost four years since they launched the attack, the Houthis still control Sana'a and much of the north of Yemen. They also fire short-range missiles across the border into Saudi Arabia, which has become a major security concern for Riyadh.

Barring some violations, the ceasefire held on the second day on Wednesday. Both sides are under pressure. The war reached a stalemate long ago. The Houthis have seen loss of territory in recent months, while the Saudi coalition is facing growing international pressure. According to the agreement, all combatants should withdraw from Hodeida in 21 days. UN observers will set up a monitoring team of government and rebel representatives to oversee the truce. But the Stockholm agreement is primarily focussed on Yemen's humanitarian conditions. That is why the ceasefire was agreed only in Hodeida. The question is whether the warring parties can extend the truce to other areas of conflict. Both parties are well-entrenched in Yemen's fractured political landscape. A solution to the conflict can be found only if the rebels and the government make some political concessions.

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