Human Rights Watch Report

Human Rights Watch has released a report condemning the Saudi Arabian regime for human rights abuses committed in Yemen during the ongoing conflict there. In a report published late last week, Human Rights Watch accused Saudi and Saudi-backed forces in the eastern Yemeni province of al-Mahra of abuses including arbitrary detention, forced disappearance, and illegal prisoner transfer. The province of al-Mahra borders Saudi Arabia and Oman, and has avoided most of the serious fighting in Yemen's five-year-long conflict. In 2017, Saudi forces occupied much of al-Mahra, and took control of the provincial airport, which they turned into a detention center. Residents in the province have repeatedly called on Saudi forces to leave the area, and consider Saudi Arabia's presence to be an unlawful occupation.

Yemen's civil war has been ongoing since contested elections sent the country into turmoil in 2015. Saudi Arabia leads a coalition that backs the deposed Yemeni government led by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, and they are fighting the Houthi armed movement, who are led by a former Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and control the capital Sana'a. The Houthis are suspected of receiving support from Iran, and the conflict has devolved into an additional theater of Saudi Arabia and Iran's proxy war. Saudi Arabia has committed grave human rights abuses in Yemen, including the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas. Over 12,000 non-combatants have been killed over the course of Yemen's civil war, with total casualties reaching 100,000 earlier this year.

The report from Human Rights Watch sets the timeline of Saudi abuses in al-Mahra beginning in June of 2019, and continuing to-date. Peaceful protests by residents of al-Mahra have resulted in the arbitrary detention of activists, and the illegal transfer of detainees from Yemen into Saudi Arabia. The airport in al-Mahra, al-Ghaydah, has turned into a detention center, with reports from former prisoners, journalists, and activists, all claiming that there were torture chambers within the building that Saudi-backed forces used to extract information from detainees. Four members of the Hadi government have confirmed there is an "informal detention center" in the al-Ghaydah airport, and an internal document showed that Yemen's domestic intelligence service was responsible for imprisoning people at the facility.

Former detainees from al-Mahra province have said that Saudi officials tried to coerce them into signing documents that pledge they and their family members would abstain from participating in anti-coalition protests. Many of the people arrested in the province have been targeted due to their presence at peaceful sit-ins against the Saudi occupation, and journalists at the protests have also been targeted. In addition to the illegal detention, Saudi officials have not provided notice to detainees' families about their whereabouts. Some prisoners have been transferred to a detention center in Abha, Saudi Arabia, and are often held without being charged.

Saudi Arabia has consistently been condemned by the international community for its actions in Yemen, and the Human Rights Watch report is another example of this. Last year, the U.S. Senate also voted to stop providing military support to Saudi Arabia, when reports surfaced that American-supplied weaponry was being used to target civilians. That vote was non-binding, and the Human Rights Watch report has no enforcement mechanism, so Saudi Arabia will likely go unpunished for its abuses in Yemen.