

EVAP Ep. 3 Radhya Almutawakel

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SPEAKERS

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Radhya Almutawakel, Jahaan Pittalwala



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:11

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention, a podcast by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. Over the last year, we've had multiple conversations and public events around what it means to prevent and respond to atrocities at a granular level. These conversations have ranged from discussing the relationship between R2P and human rights violations, to situating atrocity prevention within the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and to understanding the preventive and restorative aspects of pursuing investigations, justice and accountability. To explore these dynamics further, this podcast will feature one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the field of human rights, conflict prevention, atrocity prevention, and other related agendas. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention. We hope that through these conversations, we can explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons

learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Today, we'll be speaking with Radhya Almutawakel from Mwtana Organization for Human Rights about the conflict in Yemen. Before we get started with Radhya's interview, I sat down with the Clobal Centre's Yemen expert, Jahaan Pittalwala, to discuss the situation in Yemen. Jahaan, six years have passed since the war in Yemen dramatically escalated. In that time, we've seen evidence of rampant atrocity crimes, and the situation has generated the world's worst humanitarian crisis. How did the country end up here?



Jahaan Pittalwala 01:46

Thanks for that question, Jackie. The war in Yemen, as you mentioned, has been raging for over six years since the Houthi's seized Sanaa and President Hadi fled the capital. And then this was followed by an intervention of a coalition of Arab states which is led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. And since then, the war in Yemen has primarily been waged through violations of international law that actually amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Saudi- and UAE-led coalition in 2015 had launched a brutal air war campaign, and it's backed by countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and France. And those indiscriminate airstrikes, since its launch in 2015, have killed or maimed over 18,000 civilians. And there's also been accompanying on the ground violent hostilities, which in turn have been accompanied by a wide ranging assault on civilians and on human rights in Yemen by all parties to the conflict. Civilians have been killed, wounded, arbitrarily detained, disappeared and tortured; warring parties obstruct humanitarian aid; they recruit and us children in hostilities; they occupy schools and hospitals illegally; and they attack healthcare and humanitarian workers. This is a wide range of atrocity crimes and violations of international law that are being consistently perpetrated in Yemen. And these crimes, for which there's been almost total impunity and no accountability, have cumulatively caused the deaths of more than over 13,000 civilians and displaced more than 4 million Yemenis. And these crimes have also inflicted, as you mentioned, the world's worst humanitarian crisis, and it's entirely man-made: 20 million Yemenis are in need of dire humanitarian assistance, that's over 80% of the population. So the situation in Yemen is extremely dire, multifaceted and consistently inflicting threats upon civilians there.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 03:58

Thanks Jahaan, and I know that the situation in Yemen has really sort of dropped off the radar in terms of international media, international attention within places like the Security Council. And so is it a question of it's a humanitarian problem now and the war is waning, or are other things at work now... so what is happening in the conflict today?



Jahaan Pittalwala 04:25

So to put it quite frankly, the situation in Yemen has not really improved at all. There are 49 active frontlines across the country and civilians are still facing daily atrocity risks, and the conflict has really devolved since its escalation in 2015. There's the internationalized level in which the Saudi/UAE-led coalition backing President Hadi's government is fighting the Houthis, and then there are multiple intra-Yemeni conflicts on the ground that are occurring where the Houthis are fighting the Southern Transitional Council, and the Southern Transitional Council is also fighting Hadi government. So it's really complex and it's continued to be complex over the years. There are flare-ups in Hodeidah and Taizz and Hajjah governorates, plus a new Houthi offensive in Marib, which is leading to increased mass displacement, more civilian casualties, and continued illegal attacks on civilian objects like homes and farms, and displacement camps. So the situation is extremely worrying. And there really isn't an end in sight, because the Houthis seem to be advancing really rapidly on Marib, and there's not a lot of momentum coming from the international community.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 05:43

Speaking of the lack of momentum by the international community, you know, despite the crimes you've mentioned, here, action on Yemen remains painfully slow. There are at least two UN bodies documenting evidence of crimes, there's been a UN envoy to Yemen since 2012, and the current and former heads of OCHA have been extremely vocal about the humanitarian consequences of the fighting. Amidst all of these mechanisms raising alarm bells, plus the efforts of civil society organizations like our own and Mwatana, which we'll be talking to today, why do you think international attention on Yemen has continued to wane?



Jahaan Pittalwala 06:21

I think in these types of protracted conflicts, that there usually are two primary reasons why international attention is limited. And I think Yemen is a really strong case in point. So firstly, there's complacency of the UN Security Council. When the Security Council first engaged on the conflict in Yemen, the dynamics of the conflict were drastically different. And they haven't really updated their framing of the conflict with a new resolution in over six years. And so therefore, they're sort of presenting a really inaccurate picture of the fractious multi-front conflict that's unfolding on the ground. Simultaneously, the UN Security Council doesn't really react with an even hand to the atrocity crimes that are being perpetrated in Yemen. There are basically little to no repercussions for the Saudi/UAE-led coalition and the indiscriminate airstrikes that they have been conducting in Yemen. Three permanent members of the Security Council have been complicit in the

coalition's crimes, and perhaps this is why there hasn't really been an even hand coming from the Council. And as an extension of that, the Council hasn't really engaged on the human rights dimensions of this conflict whatsoever, which has almost given a free pass to perpetrators and to warring parties to continue their likely atrocity crimes and violations of international law. And secondly, and I think this point is actually really connected to the complacency of the Security Council, is that in Yemen, there has been pervasive impunity for violations of international law. As you mentioned, yes, there is a Group of Eminent Experts monitoring ongoing violations in Yemen. Yes, there is a limited UN Security Council sanctions regime. Yes, there is a UN Special Envoy. But there hasn't been consistent, principled intolerance from high levels of the international community for the atrocities that have been perpetrated against Yemenis. When there's no consistent outrage, or consistent accountability for crimes, they sort of become the status quo. And this is exactly what has happened in Yemen.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 08:33

Thanks, Jahaan. I'm glad you mentioned the lack of consistency and intolerance and rage both by the Security Council, as well as high levels of the international community, and the the lack of even-handedness because I know, with Yemen in particular, one issue that has been, you know, very much at the forefront is the listing and delisting of perpetrators of crimes against children in this conflict. Some years, the Saudi coalition is listed, some years they're not, and they've very much been a perpetrator of crimes against children throughout the conflict. Given the lack of consistency and international response, what do you think it would take to prompt real action for this crisis?

J

Jahaan Pittalwala 09:22

You know, galvanizing real action by the international community is extremely challenging, not just in the situation of Yemen, but across the board. You're essentially relying on principled states to make the right choice. And I think the unique geopolitics surrounding the situation in Yemen, the complicity of numerous powerful states in the atrocity crimes that have been ongoing there, and the complacency of the UN Security Council like I mentioned before, all make real action all the more difficult in the context of Yemen. So what it would take is something actually really dramatic: I think that the Security Council would have to suddenly wake up, pass a new resolution that accurately reflects the dynamics of the conflict on the ground, adopt more even-handed sanctions against all perpetrators of violations, and place human rights and the protection of Yemeni civilians at the center of the UN Special Envoy's efforts. But to be honest, I think this is extremely unlikely, at least in the short term. So I think what we can do, what we must do, in the interim is to continue to raise the bar. That means reminding the

international community and third party states that they are ultimately failing to uphold their responsibility to protect and remind them of the consequences of this inaction. So civil society organizations like ourselves at the Global Centre, like Mwatana, like other Yemeni and international partners, should and will continue to exert consistent pressure towards the UN Security Council and the UN Special Envoy to do more to halt impunity, towards parties to the conflict to actively protect civilians, and towards the international community at large to alleviate and ultimately end the humanitarian suffering in Yemen. We do our best and we work our hardest towards these ends. And ultimately, we just hope that states are listening and will eventually uphold our moral and legal obligations.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 11:36

Our guest today is Radhya Almutawakel, the Chairperson and Co-Founder of Mwatana Organization for Human Rights. Radhya was on Time Magazine's list of 100 Most Influential People of 2019, and last year received the Anna Politkovskaya Award for her courage and determination in documenting and reporting on the human cost of war in Yemen. Her organization, Mwatana, has documented war crimes and human rights abuses perpetrated against civilians in Yemen throughout the conflict, and was recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Thank you for joining us today, Radhya.



Radhya Almutawakel 12:12

Thank you for having me, I'm glad to be with you.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 12:15

Radhya, you're celebrated globally for your dedicated work on documenting international law violations throughout the war in Yemen. Can you share a little with us about what drew you to this line of work and your personal history?



Radhya Almutawakel 12:29

You know, Jaclyn, when I started as individual to work in human rights, I started in 2004, I started like doing like advocacy and pressure. So the documentation was not in my mind. And then me and my partner, Abdulrashid, that we have founded Mwatana together, we have worked with international NGOs like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty, Open Society Foundations, and we started to realize what does documentation mean, what does having the information, the power of having information as a first step towards any work in human rights. So when we started to build Mwatana, we decided that documentation should be one of our main work in Mwatana, because we believe that the information is a

power and we believe that we have the responsibility to build a human rights memory.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 13:30

Can you elaborate a little on how Mwatana approaches this documentation work? And how does your analysis and reporting enhance the information collection being done by the UN's Group of Eminent Experts and others operating at the international level?

R Radhya Almutawakel 13:44

Mwatana is a team of 100 men and women. One of the biggest units in Mwatana is the Research Unit, we have field researchers all over Yemen, and we follow an investigative research methodology. So in Mwatana, if we said that we have documented this incident, it means that we have conducted interviews with eyewitnesses, survivors, families to the victims and we have visited the site according to the type of the violation. And we have tried to, we see if there is a military target. And we collect all the types of information that help us to build a strong case regarding the information. So and then we publish. So we publish reports, statements, we have done documentary films. So it's to raise the voices of victims but to raise it also in a way that provides the details and to help whoever the target is to know the whole details around the incidents and to know more about the victims and also to more to know more about the violator itself. So if we say that there are airstrikes by the Saudi/Emirati-led coalition, landmines by Houthis, a lot of cases of detention and torture by the Yemeni government and Houthis and the United Arab Emirates, and all the types of information... if we just say it in general, that is gonna be dealt as if it is not happening unless we have documented it in details. So it's a way that helps us to work in these violations as a fact, and to push towards not only to protect civilians, and to minimize the harm, but also for accountability mechanisms in the future. And we know as a local NGO, that even if we are documenting, and doing our best, it will not be enough. We need international mechanisms and international independent investigation to be happened in Yemen, it will make a very different influence.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 16:12

That's incredible. I remember prior to the establishment of the Group of Eminent Experts, how hard it was to get any movement on the creation of an independent international mechanism in either Geneva or New York. I know that you've taken the findings of your documentation work and personally briefed the UN Security Council, US Congress, the EU and other policymakers. What are some of the most consequential findings you've been able to share with governments? And how do you think it has changed the narrative around Yemen?

R

Radhya Almutawakel 16:45

So at the beginning of the war, the narrative of the war was controlled by parties to the conflict and their followers. The independent human rights voice was not there, I mean, even internationally. So we have tried as Mwatana with all our partners to change the narrative of the war, from a human rights angle, and to show the human price of the war, and to show that there are no clean hands in Yemen when it comes to parties to the conflict. They are all committing horrible violations. And it is committed, it is documented. And they are all equal when it comes to not respecting the international humanitarian law, the international law for human rights. When we talk about the types of violations that are happening in Yemen, like the main types of violations like the airstrikes by the Saudi and Emirati led coalition, the ground shelling by different parties to the conflict but mainly by Houthis, the landmines by Houthis, the detention, forced disappearance and torture happening by all parties to the conflict, and attacking hospitals and schools by all parties to the conflict. And you mentioned very perfectly the different parties to the conflict at the beginning of this interview. So we at Mwatana started to talk about starvation as a violation, and we have been saying that Yemenis are not just starving, they are being starved. And what's happening in Yemen, it's known as the worst humanitarian crisis. But we have to remember that is a man-made crisis. So the attitude of parties to the conflict led to this crisis, it's not a natural crisis. And the humanitarian aid, it's not the only solution for this crisis. There should be accountability, and there should be pressure on parties to the conflict if we want to end this crisis. And there should be for sure peace. And we started to talk about the starvation as a violation because parties to the conflict are using starvation as a weapon of war. And this shed the light on the crisis in Yemen and helped Yemen to be seen through a different angle, which is the human rights angle, the humanitarian angle, and to encourage different states in order to act differently when it comes to Yemen.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 19:34

Given the waning attention on Yemen from those outside the country, how are you hoping the international community will respond to these findings?

R

Radhya Almutawakel 19:44

So a key word like it's pressure, but when we say international community, we mean mainly the states because honestly, civil society and also media, they have done a lot of work to shed light on the situation in Yemen. But, so all the information that is needed for the states to act are already there. So states, especially states like the US, UK, and France, and also other Arabian States, they should be more engaged in the war in Yemen. And they should practice pressure on parties to the conflict in order to stop their violations and

to go forward sustainable peace, and those who are supporting actually some parties to the conflict should stop. And I'm glad that there is a new approach with the new US administration. And I think this can have a big influence positively. Since the new approach of the new US administration has started, the civilian impact of the airstrikes by the Saudi and Emirati led coalition is very less, although there is very different hotlines now on frontlines, there is a war still going on. But in spite of this, the in the airstrikes where civilians are killed and injured are much, much less. So this is good in one hand, but it is also sad in another hand, because it means that this could've happened since the beginning of the war. Why we have lost 1000s of civilians, because of the airstrikes, while they could do it in a way that prevent or protect civilians? We with our partners set like a list of demands, we call it a list of urgent actions, that can make the situation in Yemen much better, even among the war. And we have been saying that even among the war, Yemen doesn't have to be the worst humanitarian crisis. If there is accountability, and if we we succeed to make parties to the conflict care, and if we solved like, little issues, it's little, but it's very huge, its impact very huge, like the salaries. So 1000s of Yemenis are not receiving their salaries since 2016, a big part of the Yemenis in the public sector. And this one of the things that really broken the back of Yemenis, and it can be solved, like Sana'a airport and land, sea and an airport should be opened, the detainees should be released, there are many... there is a siege around one of the cities by Houthis in Taizz, it can be ended, and it will make a huge impact on civilians in in this area, for example. So there are many details that can be solved in order to make the situation less miserable. I think that the civil society locally and internationally has succeeded to change the narrative of the war in Yemen to put to make clear to the international community what should be done in order to make the situation less miserable, and to shed light on the violations by all parties to the conflict, and to make clear that the only solution, the only real solution to the war in Yemen is peace and accountability.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 23:47

Absolutely, we've seen how the lack of accountability and impunity for attacks on civilians and other crimes has helped prolong this crisis. I think you've captured something really important to the essence of accountability, in that it's not just important after the conflict has ended, and you're attempting to hold individuals criminally accountable in courts. It's also essential while the conflict is ongoing. You just noted that the renewed pressure on the coalition by the Biden administration has been associated with a reduction in airstrikes. And this sort of pressure and accountability is a perfect example of how within a conflict you can provoke a different type of action by showing perpetrators that they can't get away with doing everything without consequences in the future.

R Radhya Almutawakel 24:37
Right. And if there is a real accountability, it will have its impact even in non-state actors like Houthis.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 24:47
Exactly.

R Radhya Almutawakel 24:48
Yemen became the worst humanitarian crisis, one main reason is the huge lack of accountability. Parties to the conflict, they trust impunity more than anything else. And I have been saying that in, in most of the violations that we have documented in Mwatana by different parties to the conflict, there was no even a mandatory target or a military advantage. And so it's very preventable violations. But it's happening because parties to the conflict, they really don't care.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 25:24
I think one of the really valuable things that you mentioned at the beginning about the work of your organization is the voice of victims. Since you have such a large field presence, you really get the essence of who is affected by the conflict. It's not just a vacant set of numbers of millions of people suffering, they have faces, they have stories. So based on your experience over the past few years, what is your hope for justice for the people of Yemen?

R Radhya Almutawakel 25:52
We used to have in Yemen a shape of state, we used to have not a real democracy, but it was like one step towards democracy. So we have political parties, we have elections, we have different media, we have civil society. And all of this has been collapsed, because of the lack of the recent war. And Yemen now is controlled by armed groups, and the space of civil society is shrinking, and this is very dangerous. But in spite of all of this, Yemeni people, most of them are still civilians, and they believe on the rule of law. This is what they want for their future. They want a state that is based on democracy and the rule of law, because Yemenis, they have experienced the different shape of ruling, and they have also experienced what could, they know what could rule of law and democracy do and how it could change their lives. So I want for the future of Yemenis, we want accountability for sure. But we want also to reach a peace process and a peace agreement that helps

Yemenis to have their lives back, to have their dreams of having a state that is based on a rule and based on the rule of law and democracy back. This is the only shape of life that all societies in the world deserve. And Yemenis, not only they deserve this, they want this. You know when we go to document when we reach I mean victims or their families in order to document their stories, we tell them clearly that we are a human rights NGO that does not provide any humanitarian aid and we do not provide services, our work is to push for justice and for accountability. And in spite of this, people are still very excited to tell us their stories. They want to be told, and they believe in justice, they want it. And so I hope that you know, accountability, sometimes a state where they try to with the dilemma, that accountability will not help peace, but the fact that accountability, it can push for peace, and then it can maintain peace. And also if it happened that the war came again for any reason, at least the war will not be that aggressive if parties to the conflict knew that there will be accountability. And I keep saying if we as a local NGO in a very difficult situation can have an impact, then how we can imagine how much the impact is going to be if it is happening internationally by states, for example. So there is any amount of space to influence to impact to change. And I hope that the international community, especially states, will take the chance of this fact and make a real change in Yemen. As I said, the most of the violations in Yemen are very preventable, but also this war is very preventable, and it can be solved. And I hope that our work will help to push for that.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 29:41

Thank you, Radhya. This has been a really energizing discussion on the power of local civil society, in not just documenting what is happening in the country, but raising the profile and awareness of crimes against populations and putting the pressure forward to get a better response from the international community. In that regard allow me to extend the Global Centre's heartfelt congratulations to you for Mwatana's Nobel Peace Prize nomination. We look forward to following your progress through this process. And thank you again for sharing your time with us today.

R Radhya Almutawakel 30:16

Thank you for having me.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 30:18

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