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Yemen: New evidence challenges coalition's denial it used cluster munitions in recent attack

Evidence gathered by Amnesty International appears to confirm reports that the Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces dropped US-manufactured cluster munitions on the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, on 6 January 2016. The attack killed a 16-year-old boy and wounded at least six other civilians, and scattered submunitions in at least four different residential neighbourhoods. Amnesty International is calling on the coalition to immediately stop using cluster munitions, which are inherently indiscriminate weapons and are internationally banned.

From its side, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition has not confirmed that it carried out any attack on the areas hit on 6 January. In addition, in an interview with [CNN on 11 January 2016](#), the spokesperson of the coalition's military forces, General Ahmed al-Asiri, categorically denied that the coalition had ever used cluster munitions in attacks on Sana'a and claimed they had only used them in one attack in Yemen, on a military target in Hajjah in April 2015.

However, according to Amnesty International's information, the coalition is the only party to the conflict that has the capability to drop bombs from the air and its research provides compelling evidence that it did indeed drop cluster munitions on 6 January. The research has included interviews with nine local residents, including the family of the boy killed, three of those wounded, two eyewitnesses, the head of security in western Sana'a and two local photographers who visited sites impacted by the attack the day after.

The attack hit Mu'een, a district in the west of Sana'a, at around 5am on 6 January 2016. According to the head of security in western Sana'a, Ahmed Abdullah, parts of a metal cylinder that dispenses submunitions were found in two different locations: the grounds of Sana'a New University and a location in al-Rabat neighbourhood, approximately 900m to the south. He added that submunitions were also found scattered over several neighbourhoods in the district of Mu'een. Ahmed Abdullah told Amnesty International that in total 23 houses were partially damaged and 20 cars were completely burned out or partially damaged. He said that the majority of the submunitions exploded at the time of attack, though they had also found some unexploded ones.

The distances between the locations where the dispenser parts and submunitions impacted indicates that more than one bomb was dropped, but the precise number remains unclear. Even if the attack was aimed at a military target, the use of inherently indiscriminate weapons like cluster munitions is absolutely prohibited by international humanitarian law.

Eyewitnesses and victims described how, at approximately 5am, they heard one big explosion, followed by a series of small consecutive explosions after a minute. These accounts and the fact that remnants of a dispensing cylinder and submunitions were found after the attack are consistent with the use of air-dropped cluster munitions.

Mohamed Saleh, 55, a local resident of al-Sonainah neighbourhood, 2km west of where the dispenser landed, was at the mosque praying when the strike occurred: "We had been praying at around 5am at the mosque and, as we left the mosque, we heard the plane overhead going whoosh, whoosh, whoosh and then a big explosion followed. We were afraid of a second air strike so we scattered and that is when smaller explosions followed consecutively. I sustained some shrapnel injuries and I was taken to hospital right after that but the neighbourhood was covered in the small bombs. Some of them landed on cars and exploded and others inside houses. Even the water tanks were damaged." According to a photographer who visited al-Sonainah the following day, there were at least eight exploded submunitions in the neighbourhood and three partially damaged houses and five burned out cars.

Amnesty International also spoke to the brother of the 16-year-old-boy who was killed in the attack. Essa Ghaleb al-Farasi, from al-Madhbah neighbourhood, 3.5km north-west of where the dispenser landed, died after sustaining multiple injuries from exploding submunitions. "At around 5am, he was on his way to the mosque opposite our house in al-Daqeeq district to perform the dawn prayers. We then heard the first explosion. A minute later we heard a series of consecutive explosions in the neighbourhood when the little bombs landed, one of which landed on the roof of our neighbour's house... My mother found Essa at the mosque door in a pool of his own blood... In the neighbourhood, several cars were damaged and the mosque was partially damaged as well."

A photographer who visited al-Madhbah on 7 January told Amnesty International that she counted 15 exploded submunitions, three partially damaged houses and five damaged cars. One of the vehicles was a water truck, inside which a submunition had exploded. Amnesty International also spoke to a local resident of al-Madhbah and reviewed photographs of his house, which was damaged when a cluster submunition exploded on the roof, leaving a hole in his living room ceiling. His wife told Amnesty International: "We are a family of 19 living in this house, six of them children. Two of the children, 10 months old and six months old, are still crying because they were so frightened after the attack."

Shaker Ghaleb Ahmed Rajah, 25, a father of a two-year-old girl, sustained serious shrapnel injuries to his abdomen, which necessitated surgery and 19 stitches. He told Amnesty International: "I live behind the National Institute near Kuwait Street. I was asleep when an explosion penetrated the ceiling of my house, creating a hole. All I knew was that I woke up in a pool of my own blood. Luckily my wife and daughter were not sleeping next to me so they were unharmed." The National Institute is 1.5km east of where the submunition dispenser landed.

Two local photographers also told Amnesty International that they had found some submunitions that had landed behind the Khawalani Building on the Ring Road, near al-Judairi police station.

Banned cluster bombs

Cluster munitions contain between dozens and hundreds of submunitions, which are released in mid-air, and scatter indiscriminately over a large area measuring hundreds of square metres. They can be air-dropped or ground-launched.

Cluster submunitions have a high "dud" rate – meaning a high percentage of them fail to explode on impact, becoming de facto land mines that pose a threat to civilians for years after deployment. The use, production, sale and transfer of cluster munitions is prohibited under the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, which has almost 100 states parties.

Even though the USA, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the majority of the other members of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition participating in the conflict in Yemen are not parties to the Convention, under

the rules of customary international humanitarian law they must not use inherently indiscriminate weapons, which invariably pose a threat to civilians.

Amnesty International reviewed photographs taken on 6 and 7 January in Sana'a that showed remnants of cluster munitions, including spherical submunitions, and parts of the bomb or bombs that carried the submunitions.

Amnesty International identified the munitions as US-made BLU-63 anti-personnel/anti-materiel submunitions and components of a CBU-58 cluster bomb. Markings on the bomb remnants indicate that it was manufactured in 1978 at the Milan Army Ammunition Plant in the state of Tennessee in the USA.

Each air-dropped CBU-58 cluster bomb contains 650 submunitions. The USA transferred 1,000 CBU-58 bombs to Saudi Arabia sometime between 1970 and 1995.

Amnesty International has documented the use of three types of cluster bombs by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition in Yemen since March 2015: a [US-manufactured CBU-87](#), which dispenses 202 BLU-97 submunitions; the more sophisticated [US-manufactured CBU-105](#) Sensor Fuzed Weapon (carrying BLU-108 Sensor Fuzed submunitions); and a third variant that resembled the [Brazilian manufactured ASTROS II](#), all of which were used in Sa'da in northern Yemen.