



YEMEN: “IT IS A MIRACLE WE SURVIVED”

US AIR STRIKE ON CIVILIANS HELD IN SA’ADA
MIGRANT DETENTION CENTRE

RESEARCH
BRIEFING

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On 28 April 2025, a US air strike hit a migrant detention centre in Sa'ada, north-western Yemen, killing and injuring dozens of African migrants. Based on the testimonies of survivors of the strike and the analysis of satellite imagery and footage, Amnesty International has reasonable basis to conclude that the US air strike on the migrant detention centre qualifies as an indiscriminate attack and should be investigated as a war crime.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Some of us regained consciousness in the hospital three to four days after the attack and we started asking about who was dead and who remained alive and where the others were.

I saw the video where they [the rescuers] dug and pulled me out from under the debris... I lost my leg, and others have lost their limbs.”

Hagos, 20-year-old survivor and former detainee at the Sa’ada migrant detention centre.

On 28 April 2025, between 4:00 and 4:30 am local time, a US air strike hit a migrant detention centre in Sa’ada, north-western Yemen, killing and injuring dozens of African migrants. The migrants were being detained by the Huthi de facto authorities.

The strike on the migrant detention centre was carried out in the context of a new wave of US air and naval strikes in Yemen, coined “Operation Rough Rider,” in the early days of President Trump’s second term in office. The United States of America (USA) claimed that, between 15 March and 29 April 2025, it had hit over 1,000 targets in Yemen. On 6 May 2025, the USA announced it was ending its military campaign against the Huthis.

Based on the testimonies of survivors of the strike and the analysis of satellite imagery and footage, Amnesty International has reasonable basis to conclude that the US air strike on the migrant detention centre qualifies as an indiscriminate attack, which is a serious violation of international humanitarian law, and should be investigated as a war crime.

The USA must conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, impartial and transparent investigation into the air strike. Where sufficient evidence exists, competent authorities should prosecute any person suspected of criminal responsibility, including under the doctrine of command responsibility.

Victims and their families should receive full reparation, including financial compensation.

Amnesty International investigation

On 19 May 2025, Amnesty International published its initial findings on the 28 April 2025 US air strike on the migrant detention centre in Sa’ada. At the time, the organization had interviewed three people who worked with African migrant and refugee communities in Yemen, including two people who had visited the detention centre, two nearby hospitals and their morgues in the immediate aftermath of the strike. Amnesty International also analysed satellite imagery of the location, as well as dozens of videos and photographs obtained from local sources and others available on social media.

This briefing builds on that initial research. In June 2025, Amnesty International interviewed 15

survivors, all Ethiopian migrants, who were held at the Sa'ada migrant detention centre at the time of the air strike. The organization also reviewed photos and medical reports from survivors.

The US air strike on the migrant detention centre took place in northern Yemen, which is controlled by the Huthi de facto authorities. The Huthis' ongoing crackdown on civic space, including their targeting of activists, journalists, human rights defenders and humanitarian workers, has limited the ability of Amnesty International and other civil society organisations to gather testimonial and physical evidence of attacks carried out in Huthi-controlled territory. Reporting on the civilian impact of attacks, and in particular reporting incorporating survivors' testimony, has been extremely limited. This briefing provides a detailed account of one strike, with a focus on testimonial evidence.

A US air strike on a well-known detention centre

Almost all of the 15 survivors Amnesty International spoke to said that they were sleeping in the Sa'ada migrant detention centre when they heard the sound of explosions nearby, sometime between 4 and 4:30 a.m. They likely heard the US air strike on a different structure within the Sa'ada prison compound. According to satellite imagery, another building, located about 180 meters from where the migrants were detained, was hit and destroyed the same day.

Survivors said they woke up terrified and ran towards the gate of the detention centre. They screamed for help and pounded on the gate, asking the Huthi prison guards to let them out to seek safety. Instead, prison guards fired warning shots, to keep the detainees inside. Minutes later, the USA hit the migrant detention centre.

Survivors said they were being detained with about 100 to 120 other migrant detainees, mostly Ethiopian, in the migrant detention centre at the time of the attack. Dozens were killed and injured, they said, identifying 16 of those killed by name and approximate age.

The US authorities should have known that the building it hit on 28 April 2025 was a migrant detention facility. It had been used for years by the Huthis to detain migrants and was regularly visited by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Survivors, all migrant detainees, said they had spent between three days and more than three years detained at the site.

The USA also should have known that any aerial attack could result in significant death and injury to civilians. A few years earlier, on 21 January 2022, the Saudi-led coalition carried out an air strike on another detention facility within the same prison compound in Sa'ada, using a US-made precision guided munition, killing more than 90 detainees and injuring dozens.

In relation to the 28 April 2025 air strike on the migrant detention centre, Amnesty International did not find any evidence that the migrant detention centre was a military objective or that it contained any military objectives. Survivors told Amnesty International that, throughout their time in detention, they were held with other migrant detainees. It was an open space, so they were able to see everyone who was present in the building. No Huthi fighters were inside the migrant detention centre, they said.

Satellite images reviewed by Amnesty International show the destruction of the migrant detention centre after the US air strike. Photo analysis shows one crater and three walls that were blown down, indicating at least one aircraft bomb was dropped on the building.

On 27 August 2025, Amnesty International requested information from US Central Command (CENTCOM) and US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). The organization shared its findings with both, seeking clarification about what military objectives the USA intended to target and what

precautions were taken. Amnesty International received a short response from CENTCOM on the same day the detailed request for information was submitted. CENTCOM said it was still “assessing all reports of civilian harm resulting from operations during that time period”. CENTCOM said it took all reports “seriously” and assessed them “thoroughly.”

An indiscriminate attack that should be investigated as a war crime

Amnesty International’s investigation found that the US air strike on the migrant detention centre was not directed at a specific military objective, thereby amounting to an indiscriminate attack. The USA does not seem to have complied with its obligation to do everything feasible to verify whether the object attacked was a military objective, particularly given that the Huthis’ use of the Sa’ada prison compound to detain migrants was widely known, and that they had used the specific building that the US hit to detain migrants for an extended period of time.

Given the air strike killed and injured civilians, the US authorities should investigate this attack as a war crime. The result of the investigation, including any conclusions related to civilian casualties and efforts to respond to them, should promptly be made public.

Reparations urgently needed

The US air strike caused profound civilian harm. Of the 15 survivors with whom Amnesty International spoke, 14 suffered significant injuries with lasting impact on their lives, including lost limbs, serious nerve damage, as well as head, spine and chest trauma. Two of the 15 migrants had their legs amputated, one had one of his hands amputated, and one lost one of his eyes.

The US authorities should provide victims of violations of international humanitarian law, including their families, with access to effective remedies and prompt, full and effective reparations, including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition. The US authorities should do so through an effective mechanism that ensures safe and accessible means for victims, their families and communities to self-report civilian casualties and harm arising from US air strikes and other military operations, as well as to seek redress.

Regardless of the lawfulness of an attack under international humanitarian law, the USA should acknowledge civilian casualties and harm caused by US attacks and offer amends and explanation to victims and their families.

Out of the 15 survivors, 10 were detained by the Huthi de facto authorities on the basis of their irregular immigration status. The Huthi de facto authorities should end the arbitrary arrest and detention of migrants based solely on their immigration status and nationality. The Huthi de facto authorities should also provide survivors of the air strike with a temporary residency status in order to allow them to recuperate, heal and complete any required medical treatment without fear of further detention.

2. METHODOLOGY

On 19 May 2025, Amnesty International published its initial findings on a 28 April 2025 US air strike on a migrant detention centre in Sa'ada, Yemen that left dozens of civilians dead and injured.¹ At the time, the organization interviewed three people who worked with African migrant and refugee communities in Yemen, including two people who visited the detention centre, two nearby hospitals and their morgues in the immediate aftermath of the air strike. Amnesty International also analysed satellite imagery of the location of the air strike and its immediate surroundings, as well as dozens of videos and photographs obtained from local sources and others available on social media.

This briefing builds on that initial investigation. Since that time, Amnesty International interviewed 15 survivors, all Ethiopian migrants, who were held at the Sa'ada migrant detention centre at the time of the air strike. Fourteen of the survivors suffered significant injuries. The organization also reviewed photos and medical reports from survivors. The interviews with the 15 survivors were conducted via encrypted voice calls with the help of an interpreter who speaks Tigrigna and Oromifa, two languages spoken by the victims.

The Huthis' ongoing crackdown on civic space, including their targeting of activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and humanitarian workers, has limited the organization's ability to gather testimonial and physical evidence of attacks carried out in Huthi-controlled territory.² Since 15 March 2025, Huthi officials have issued several statements and directives prohibiting people from sharing names, photos, or information related to air strikes on social media or other public platforms. Multiple people told Amnesty International that they and others were afraid to speak out of fear of reprisal from the Huthi de facto authorities.

Amnesty International has used pseudonyms throughout this briefing.

On 27 August 2025, Amnesty International requested information from US Central Command (CENTCOM) and US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)³. Amnesty International shared its findings, seeking clarification about what military objectives the US intended to target in its attack on the Sa'ada prison compound, and what precautions were taken to avoid or minimize the risk of causing civilian casualties or damage to civilian objects. The same day the detailed request for information was submitted, Amnesty International received a short response from CENTCOM. CENTCOM stated it was still "assessing all reports of civilian harm resulting from operations during that time period." CENTCOM said it took all reports "seriously" and assessed them "thoroughly."⁴

Amnesty International did not receive a response from JSOC prior to publication.

¹ Amnesty International, Yemen: US air strike that has left dozens of migrants dead must be investigated, 19 May 2025, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/yemen-us-air-strike-that-has-left-dozens-of-migrants-dead-must-be-investigated/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/yemen-us-air-strike-that-has-left-dozens-of-migrants-dead-must-be-investigated/)

² Amnesty International, Yemen: A year on, Huthis must free UN, civil society staff, 30 May 2025, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/yemen-a-year-on-huthis-should-free-un-civil-society-staff/#:~:text=Huthi%20de%20facto%20authorities%20should,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today.](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/yemen-a-year-on-huthis-should-free-un-civil-society-staff/#:~:text=Huthi%20de%20facto%20authorities%20should,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today.)

³ Letter from Amnesty International addressed to CENTCOM, 27 August 2025; Letter from Amnesty International addressed to JSOC, 27 August 2025

⁴ Email response from CENTCOM media desk, CENTCOM HQ, USA, to Amnesty International, 27 August 2025

On 11 September 2025, Amnesty International requested information from the Huthi de facto authorities, sharing its findings and seeking clarification regarding the uses of the Sa'ada prison compound and the migrant detention centre, the number of people detained at the centre at the time of the attack and their conditions of detention, information on those who were killed or wounded, and what steps, if any, the Huthi authorities took to investigate the failure of prison guards to allow detainees to seek safe shelter.

On 24 September 2025, the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights provided a detailed response. The letter included a description of the Sa'ada prison compound and the migrant detention centre, information on the number of migrants detained at the centre, and claims regarding conditions of detention and casualties from the US air strike.⁵ On 28 September 2025, the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights shared an annex that listed the name, age and type of injury for those the Huthi authorities recorded as injured in the 28 April US air strikes on the Sa'ada prison compound.⁶ The annex also included the number of migrants killed, whose remains were recovered, but who were unidentified.

On 30 September 2025, Amnesty International sent follow up questions to the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. On 6 October 2025, the Ministry responded again, offering further information on the number of casualties from the strike.⁷

⁵ Letter from the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to Amnesty International, 24 September 2025

⁶ On file with Amnesty International.

⁷ Letter from the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to Amnesty International, 6 October 2025

3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTERNATIONAL LAW

International humanitarian law is comprised of rules whose central purpose is to limit, to the maximum extent feasible, human suffering in times of armed conflict. As an attacking party, the USA must abide by, among others, the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions.⁸

According to the principle of distinction, parties to an armed conflict must at all times “distinguish between civilians and combatants”, especially in that “attacks may only be directed against combatants” and “must not be directed against civilians”.⁹

A similar rule requires parties to distinguish between “civilian objects” and “military objectives”.¹⁰ “Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives” and they cannot be attacked.¹¹ Military objectives are “those objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture or neutralization, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage.”¹² Objects that do not meet the criteria to be qualified as military objectives are civilian objects. In cases where it is unclear whether a specific object is being used for military purposes: “It shall be presumed not to be so used”.¹³

The corollary of the rule of distinction is that “indiscriminate attacks are prohibited”.¹⁴ Indiscriminate attacks are those that are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction, either because the attack is not directed at a specific military objective, or because it employs a method or means of combat that cannot be directed at a specific military objective, or has effects that cannot be limited as required by international humanitarian law.¹⁵

International humanitarian law also prohibits disproportionate attacks, which are those “which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.”¹⁶

The protection of the civilian population, civilians and civilian objects is further underpinned by the requirement that all parties to a conflict take precautions in attack. In the conduct of military operations, “constant care must be taken to spare the civilian population, civilians and civilian objects”; “all feasible

⁸ These principles are codified in the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (AP I), adopted on 8 June 1977. At present, they have become part of customary international humanitarian law. See ICRC, Customary IHL, available at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl>

⁹ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 1. AP I, Article 48. In line with the ICRC Customary IHL Study, “[t]he term combatant in this rule is used in its generic meaning, indicating persons who do not enjoy the protection against attack accorded to civilians”.

¹⁰ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 7; AP I, Articles 48 and 52.

¹¹ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 9; AP I, Article 52(1).

¹² ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 8; AP I, Article 52(2).

¹³ AP I, Article 52(3); ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 8.

¹⁴ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 11; AP I Article 51(4).

¹⁵ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 12; Protocol I, Article 51(4).

¹⁶ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 14; AP I, Articles 51(5)(b), 57(2)(a)(iii) and 57(2)(b).

precautions” must be taken to avoid, and in any event to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects.¹⁷ Parties must choose means and methods of warfare with a view to avoiding, and in any event to minimizing, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects. Everything feasible must be done to verify that targets are military objectives, to assess that attacks are not disproportionate, and to cancel or suspend attacks if it becomes apparent that they are not directed at a military objective or are disproportionate.¹⁸ Parties must give effective advance warning of attacks which may affect the civilian population, unless circumstances do not permit.¹⁹

The Huthi de facto authorities have an obligation to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects under their control against the effects of attacks.²⁰ This includes the obligation, to the maximum extent feasible, to avoid locating military objectives within or near densely populated areas; and the obligation, to the extent feasible, to remove civilian persons and objects under a party’s control from the vicinity of military objectives.²¹ As with precautions in attack, these rules are particularly important when fighting is taking place in areas with concentrations of civilians.

The fact that a party to the conflict fails to take precautions against the effects of attacks does not release the attacking party from its obligations under the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution in attacks.

Direct attacks against civilians and civilian objects constitute war crimes.²² Indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks resulting in death or injury to civilians, or destruction or damage to civilian objects, which are carried out with intent or recklessness also constitute war crimes.²³

Individuals who commit or order war crimes bear individual criminal responsibility.²⁴ Military commanders and civilian superiors may also be responsible for the acts of their subordinates if they knew, or had reason to know, that such crimes were about to be committed or were being committed, and did not take all necessary and reasonable measures to prevent them, or to punish those responsible for crimes that had already been committed.²⁵

Under international law, there is an obligation to conduct prompt, thorough, independent, impartial and transparent investigations into allegations of violations of international humanitarian law, such as the attack investigated in this briefing.²⁶

¹⁷ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 15; AP I, Article 57(1) and (2)(a).

¹⁸ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rules 16-19; AP I, Article 57(2)(a) and (b).

¹⁹ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 20; AP I, Article 57(2)(c).

²⁰ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 22; AP I, Article 58(c).

²¹ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rules 23-24; AP I, Article 58(a) and (b).

²² ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 156.

²³ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rules 11-12, 14 and 156.

²⁴ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rules 151-152.

²⁵ ICRC Customary IHL, Rule 153.

²⁶ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 158; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 2(3) and 6; Human Rights Committee, General comment No. 36 on article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the right to life, CCPR/C/GC/36, 30 October 2018, paras. 28 and 64 and 1; Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016) (published by OHCHR in 2017), paras. 20-21.

Full, effective and adequate reparations, including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition, must be provided to victims of violations of international humanitarian law.²⁷

3.2 US DOMESTIC POLICIES

In addition to its obligations under international law, the USA has codified in its domestic law and policies key human rights protections and international humanitarian law obligations.²⁸

The US Department of Defense (DoD) Law of War Manual, which includes the DoD's interpretation of its international humanitarian law obligations, provides legal guidance to DoD personnel responsible for executing military operations.²⁹ The Law of War Manual acknowledges the binding character of the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack³⁰ and states that there is a legal duty to presume civilian status for persons or objects unless there is sufficient information that indicates they are military objectives.³¹

In December 2023, the DoD released its Instruction on Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response, which was mandated by Section 936 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020.³² The policy requires that considerations related to mitigating and responding to civilian harm be incorporated throughout the entire process of military operations. The instruction notes that mitigating civilian harm is not limited to compliance with international humanitarian law and encourages commanders to “take additional protective measures not required by the law of war as they deem appropriate”.³³ This includes considering alternatives to an attack that poses risks of civilian harm, issuing higher standards for identifying targets, and employing weapon systems or munitions that may help mitigate civilian harm.³⁴

DoD policy requires that alleged violations of international humanitarian law, such as the attack described in this briefing, be investigated.³⁵ DoD policy requires the reporting of possible, suspected,

²⁷ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 150; UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law, paras. 15 ff.; Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36, paras. 4.

²⁸ Two notes on terminology: First, the US military employs the phrase “law of war” to refer to international humanitarian law. This section will use the same phrase when directly quoting from or referring to US official sources. Second, on 5 September 2025, President Trump signed an executive order to rename the “Department of Defense” the “Department of War”. Renaming the department requires congressional approval.

²⁹ US Department of Defense, Law of War Manual, June 2015 (updated 31 July 2023), media.defense.gov/2023/Jul/31/2003271432/-1/-1/0/DOD-LAW-OF-WAR-MANUAL-JUNE-2015-UPDATED-JULY%202023.PDF

³⁰ US DoD Law of War Manual, paras. 5.5, 5.11 and 5.12

³¹ US Department of Defense, Defense Department Updates Its Law of War Manual, 31 July 2023, defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3477385/defense-department-updates-its-law-of-war-manual/

³² US Department of Defense, DOD Announces Release of Department of Defense Instruction and Website on Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response, 21 December 2023, defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3624661/dod-announces-release-of-department-of-defense-instruction-and-website-on-civil/

³³ DoD Instruction 3000.17 Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response 3.2.b, 21 December 2023, esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/300017p.pdf

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ US DoD Law of War Manual, Chapter XVIII

or alleged violations of international humanitarian law for which there is credible information³⁶ and that all such incidents be thoroughly investigated.³⁷

In the past, the USA has provided “*ex gratia*” or “condolence” payments to some civilians that have been harmed due to US military operations or to their families. These are discretionary payments made by the military and are not related to a finding of an international law violation. Congress has specifically allocated an annual budget for the USA to make *ex gratia* payments to civilian survivors and victims of US military operations. Yet, according to the DoD’s annual reports to Congress on civilian casualties in US military operations, while the DoD has admitted causing civilian harm in a number of cases, the US government has not provided any such payments since January 2021.³⁸

These payments are not considered “reparations”, which all victims of international humanitarian law violations have a right to under international law.

Critical systems put in place in recent years in the US to reduce and better respond to civilian harm caused by US military actions abroad are under threat by the Trump Administration. News outlets have reported that the DoD has considered scaling back efforts focused on civilian harm mitigation and that the US President has rolled back constraints on commanders authorizing certain types of air strikes and special operations. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth also fired senior military lawyers responsible for ensuring compliance with international humanitarian law in military operations.³⁹

³⁶ US Department of Defense Directive 2311.01E, DoD Law of War Program, 2 July 2020, esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/231101p.pdf

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ US Department of Defense, Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response, policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/Civilian-Harm-Mitigation-and-Response/

³⁹ Amnesty International, USA: Chaos & cruelty: 10 compounding assaults on human rights: A review of President Trump’s first 100 days in office (Index: AMR 51/9313/2025), 29 April 2025, amnesty.org/en/documents/amr51/9313/2025/en/

4. US MILITARY ACTIVITY IN YEMEN

On 15 March 2025, the Trump Administration started a new wave of US air and naval strikes on Yemen, coined “Operation Rough Rider”. These attacks followed a year of similar strikes on Yemen, from January 2024 to January 2025, under the Biden Administration, named “Operation Poseidon Archer”. US armed forces conducted strikes, some jointly with UK armed forces, against Huthi targets with the declared purpose of degrading the Huthis’ capabilities to threaten maritime trade and personnel. Between November 2023 and January 2025, the Huthis attacked at least 74 commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, which they claimed were linked to Israel, the USA or the UK.⁴⁰

The new round of air and naval strikes under the Trump Administration began after the Huthi de facto authorities stated on 11 March 2025 that they would resume attacks on Israeli ships passing through the Red and Arabian seas. The Huthis said this was in response to Israel blocking aid into the occupied Gaza Strip.⁴¹

Between 15 March and 29 April 2025, the US claimed its strikes had hit over 1,000 targets in Yemen.⁴² On 6 May 2025, the USA announced it was ending its military campaign against the Huthis.

US Central Command statements on air and naval strikes in Yemen have lacked detailed information, including about location of the attacks and claimed military objectives. On 27 April 2025, a day before the attack on the Sa’ada migrant detention centre, US Central Command published a statement claiming they were intentionally limiting disclosing information for reasons of operational security.⁴³

Airwars, an independent UK-based watchdog that investigates civilian harm during conflict, reported that US air strikes had killed at least 224 civilians during “Operation Rough Rider”. This nearly doubled the civilian casualty toll Airwars had recorded from US military actions in Yemen since 2002.⁴⁴

The USA has carried out attacks in Yemen for more than 20 years, under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

⁴⁰ On 6 March 2024, the Huthi armed group attacked the MV *True Confidence* in the Gulf of Aden, killing three of its crew members and injuring at least four others. They sank two commercial vessels, seized the commercial vessel the *Galaxy Leader* and arbitrarily detained its 25 crew members (from the Philippines, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Mexico, and Romania) for over a year. The MV *True Confidence* is a Barbados-flagged ship operated by Greek and Liberian companies and the *Galaxy Leader* is a Bahamas-flagged ship operated by a Japanese company.

⁴¹ After a six month pause, the Huthis resumed their attacks on commercial ships in July 2025, targeting and sinking two Greek-owned, Liberian-flagged vessels in the Red Sea on 6 and 7 July respectively. Their attack on *MV Eternity C* killed at least three of its crew members. The Huthis also arbitrarily detained 10 of its crew members. On 27 July, the Huthis announced they would target ships belonging to companies that do business with Israeli ports, as part of what they called the fourth phase of their military operations against Israel. Their military spokesperson also said ships would be attacked if companies ignored their warnings, regardless of their destination.

⁴² U.S. Department of Defense, Statement by Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and Senior Advisor Sean Parnell on the First 100 Days at the Department of Defense, 29 April 2025, [defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4169267/statement-by-assistant-to-the-secretary-of-defense-for-public-affairs-and-senior/](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4169267/statement-by-assistant-to-the-secretary-of-defense-for-public-affairs-and-senior/)

⁴³ U.S. Central Command, X post, 27 April 2025, x.com/CENTCOM/status/1916599885698138615

⁴⁴ Airwars, The U.S. killed almost as many civilians in 52 days as the previous 23 years of U.S. action in Yemen, 18 June 2025, trump-yemen.airwars.org/operation-rough-rider

Since 2002, the USA has carried out strikes in Yemen against armed groups, including al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State in Yemen.⁴⁵ During President Trump's first term in office (2017-2020), the USA carried out drone strikes and ground raids in Yemen.

US military operations have killed and injured dozens of civilians in Yemen. Rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, Mwatana for Human Rights, and Open Society Justice Initiative, have all reported on serious international law violations by the US during these operations.⁴⁶ While the USA has occasionally acknowledged causing civilian harm in Yemen,⁴⁷ including, for example, in the 2017 ground raid in al Bayda governorate during President Trump's first term in office, these acknowledgments have been extremely rare.⁴⁸

The USA has thus far taken no credible steps towards ensuring accountability, including through effective investigations, or providing adequate reparation to civilian victims of its attacks in Yemen.⁴⁹

In addition to carrying out attacks in Yemen, the USA has also played an active role in Yemen's multiple armed conflicts, including by transferring arms to the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, which carried out unlawful air strikes in Yemen that killed and wounded many hundreds of civilians and damaged and destroyed critical civilian infrastructure. Amnesty International has repeatedly documented the use of US-made weapons in these attacks.⁵⁰ The USA was also implicated in torture and other ill-treatment carried out by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and UAE-backed groups in Yemen.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Between a Drone and Al-Qaeda": The Civilian Cost of US Targeted Killings in Yemen, 22 October 2013, [hrw.org/report/2013/10/22/between-drone-and-al-qaeda/civilian-cost-us-targeted-killings-yemen](https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/10/22/between-drone-and-al-qaeda/civilian-cost-us-targeted-killings-yemen)

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch, Yemen: US Should Investigate Civilian Deaths in Raid, 24 February 2017, [hrw.org/news/2017/02/24/yemen-us-should-investigate-civilian-deaths-raid](https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/24/yemen-us-should-investigate-civilian-deaths-raid); Mwatana For Human Rights, Death Falling from the Sky: Civilian Harm from the United States' Use of Lethal Force in Yemen 23 March 2021, [mwatana.org/reports-en/falling-from-the-sky](https://www.mwatana.org/reports-en/falling-from-the-sky); Open Society Justice Initiative, Death by Drone: Civilian Harm Caused by U.S. Targeted Killing in Yemen, April 2015, [justiceinitiative.org/publications/death-drone](https://www.justiceinitiative.org/publications/death-drone)

⁴⁷ Amnesty International, *Deadly Assistance: The Role of European States in US drone strikes* (Index: ACT 30/8151/2018), 19 April 2018, [amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/8151/2018/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/8151/2018/en/)

⁴⁸ Mwatana for Human Rights, *Death falling from the sky: Civilian harm from the United States' use of lethal force in Yemen (January 2017-January 2019)*, March 2021, cdn.prod.website-files.com/680e3db2ba5a3deea9f1f0a6/680e3db2ba5a3deea9f2041a_Death-Falling-from-the-Sky-En.pdf

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Amnesty International, *Yemen: 'Nowhere safe for civilians': Airstrikes and ground attacks in Yemen* (Index: MDE 31/2291/2015), 17 August 2015, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde31/2291/2015/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde31/2291/2015/en/); and Amnesty International, The US should have no part in war crimes in Yemen, 31 August 2018, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/the-us-should-have-no-part-in-war-crimes-in-yemen/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/the-us-should-have-no-part-in-war-crimes-in-yemen/) and Amnesty International, Yemen: US-made bomb used in deadly air strike on civilians, 26 September 2019, [amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/09/yemen-us-made-bomb-used-in-deadly-air-strike-on-civilians/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/09/yemen-us-made-bomb-used-in-deadly-air-strike-on-civilians/)

⁵¹ Amnesty International, "God only knows if he's alive": Enforced disappearance and detention violations in southern Yemen, 12 July 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde31/8682/2018/en/>

5. MIGRANTS CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

People have long taken the dangerous migration route known as the “Eastern Route” from the Horn of Africa, across the Gulf of Aden, into Yemen and then into Saudi Arabia. More than 90 percent of the migrants arriving on this route are Ethiopian.⁵²

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the majority of migrants on the Eastern Route rely on irregular routes or smugglers, placing them at an increased risk of human trafficking or drowning on unsafe boats. Since 2014, the IOM has documented 1,860 people dying or going missing along the route, including 480 migrants that drowned.⁵³

Both the internationally recognized government of Yemen and the Huthi de facto authorities have detained migrants in poor conditions and subjected them to abuse. In a 2023 report, Human Rights Watch documented Huthi de facto authorities working with smugglers and extorting or transferring migrants to locations where they were abused and detained until they paid an “exit fee”.⁵⁴

All 15 survivors of the Sa’ada migrant detention centre air strike interviewed by Amnesty International are Ethiopian migrants. Thirteen are from the Tigray region, while two are from the Oromiya region in Ethiopia. Fourteen arrived in Yemen between 2019 and 2025. One arrived in 2010.

Out of the 15 survivors, 10 were detained by the Huthi de facto authorities on the basis of their irregular immigration status. Seven out of these 10 were detained while trying to cross the Yemeni border into Saudi Arabia or for being close to the border on suspicion that they would attempt to cross. Two migrants were held as suspects for allegedly being involved in a fight, three were detained for involvement in smuggling, and one was detained for the possession of a bottle of alcohol.

Survivors told Amnesty International that they were held with at least 100 other migrant detainees in an overcrowded detention centre that had a hangar-like structure. They described it as an open space with no partitions. Satellite images reveal that the size of the centre was approximately 440sqm.

Survivors, who had spent between three days and more than three years in the detention centre, said they were held indoors all the time.

The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules) state that “all accommodation provided for the use of prisoners and in particular all sleeping accommodation shall meet all requirements of health, due regard being paid to climatic conditions and particularly to cubic content of air, minimum floor space, lighting, heating and ventilation.”⁵⁵

Under international law, everybody, regardless of their immigration status, has the right not to be arbitrarily detained or detained solely on immigration-related grounds without the opportunity to legally

⁵² International Organization for Migration, Migration Along the Eastern Route, 6 March 2025, dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/2024_Yearly_Eastern_Route_Report.pdf?iframe=true#:~:text=The%20Eastern%20Route%20is%20one,%E2%80%A2

⁵³ United Nations, 180 migrants dead or missing in latest tragedy off Yemen, UN agency reports, 11 June 2024, news.un.org/en/story/2024/06/1150936

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch, “They Fired on Us Like Rain”

Saudi Arabian Mass Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border, 21 August 2023, hrw.org/report/2023/08/21/they-fired-us-rain/saudi-arabian-mass-killings-ethiopian-migrants-yemen-saudi

⁵⁵ Rule 13. United Nations, Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

challenge their detention.⁵⁶ Prolonged administrative detention without the possibility of review is considered arbitrary and is prohibited under international law.⁵⁷

Amnesty International opposes the routine or automatic use of migration-related detention, as it considers this to be, by definition, arbitrary.

Detention solely for migration-related purposes is only allowed in the most exceptional of circumstances, and there is a presumption against such detention. Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, like anyone else, must benefit from a legal presumption of liberty. As a consequence, if these people are subject to any deprivation of liberty, this must be clearly prescribed by law, strictly justified by a legitimate purpose, necessary, proportionate and non-discriminatory.

⁵⁶ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 9.

⁵⁷ UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, General comment No. 2 on the rights of migrant workers in an irregular situation and members of their families, 28 August 2013, (CMW/C/GC/2), para. 27.

6. SA'ADA MIGRANT DETENTION CENTRE AIR STRIKE

“I was buried under the rubble and after about one hour my brother came and pulled me out. He took me to the hospital. I was bleeding... I had a head injury and I lost sight in one eye... It is a miracle we survived and got out of that place.”

Desta, 33-year-old survivor and former detainee at the Sa'ada migrant detention centre.⁵⁸

“I saw 25 injured migrants in the Republican Hospital and nine in Al Talh General Hospital... They suffered from different fractures and bruises. Some were in critical condition and two had amputated legs... The morgue in the Republican Hospital was overwhelmed and there was no place left for tens of corpses that were still left outside the morgue for the second day.”

A witness who visited two hospitals in Sa'ada two days after the attack.⁵⁹

Between 4:00 and 4:30 am local time on 28 April 2025, a US air strike hit a migrant detention centre within the Sa'ada prison compound in north-western Yemen. The US air strike killed and injured dozens of African migrants.

Survivors interviewed by Amnesty International said they were among 100 to 120 other migrant detainees, mostly Ethiopian, who were held at the detention centre at the time of the attack.

Survivors told Amnesty International that dozens of the migrant detainees were killed and injured in the strike. Survivors were able to identify by name and approximate age 16 of the people – all migrants, all men and most in their twenties – who had been killed.

Soon after the strike on the migrant detention centre, Amnesty International was able to speak, on condition of anonymity, with three people working with African migrant and refugee communities in Yemen. Two of them visited the migrant detention centre and two nearby hospitals – the Republican Hospital and al Talh General Hospital in Sa'ada – and their morgues in the aftermath of the air strike.

⁵⁸ Interview by voice call with Desta, 21 June 2025.

⁵⁹ Interview by voice call with a witness on 5 May 2025.

Both of the witnesses that visited the hospitals said they saw evidence of a high number of casualties. They told Amnesty International they saw more than two dozen injured Ethiopian migrants and one injured Eritrean migrant at the hospitals. Injuries included severe amputations and fractures. They also said the hospitals' morgues ran out of space to receive dead bodies and that air strike casualties had to be stacked outside.⁶⁰

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), whose staff, along with the Yemen Red Crescent Society, were at the site in the immediate aftermath of the attack and helped evacuate the wounded and assist in the dignified management of the dead, also confirmed in a statement "a high number of casualties".⁶¹

In addition to the three interviews conducted soon after the air strike, Amnesty International interviewed 15 survivors of the attack on the migrant detention centre in June 2025. Amnesty International also analysed satellite imagery and video footage, including scenes showing migrants' bodies strewn across rubble and rescuers trying to pull badly wounded survivors from the debris. Amnesty International also analysed seven videos of the injured migrants while at hospitals privately shared by one witness.

The Huthi authorities have claimed that more than 100 people were killed or wounded. Soon after the attack, the Huthi-run Ministry of Interior stated the detention centre was holding 115 African migrant detainees, of whom 68 were killed and 47 were injured.⁶² In their October 2025 response to Amnesty International, the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights updated their figures, stating that 117 African migrants were detained at the time of the attack.⁶³ Among the 117 migrant detainees, 61 were killed and 56 injured by the air strike on the migrant detention centre on 28 April 2025, the Huthi authorities said.⁶⁴ All 61 migrants that were killed were buried in Yemen.⁶⁵

The air strike on the migrant detention centre followed another air strike on a different building within the larger Sa'ada prison compound.⁶⁶ In the immediate aftermath of the attack, the Huthis did not publish information on this building or on whether there were other casualties from the strike on it. However, in their October 2025 response, the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights stated that the other building was a prison administration building that contained all prison and migrant detainees' documents.⁶⁷ They claimed that 15 prison staff members, all Yemeni, were injured as a result of the 28 April 2025 US air strikes.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Interview by voice call with two witnesses on 5 May 2025.

⁶¹ International Committee of the Red Cross, Yemen: ICRC responds to deadly attack on Sa'ada Prison, urges for protection of civilians amidst worsening humanitarian crisis, 28 April 2025, [icrc.org/en/news-release/yemen-icrc-responds-deadly-attack-saada-prison-urges-protection-civilians-amidst](https://www.icrc.org/en/news-release/yemen-icrc-responds-deadly-attack-saada-prison-urges-protection-civilians-amidst)

⁶² Masirah TV, 28 April 2024, ارتفاع حصيلة ضحايا المجزرة الأمريكية في مركز إيواء المهاجرين بمدينة صنعاء إلى 115, [masirahtv.net/post/270217](https://www.masirahtv.net/post/270217)

⁶³ Letter from the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to Amnesty International, 6 October 2025 (previously cited)

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ According to satellite imagery, this building, which is located 180 meters to the southwest of the building where the migrants were detained, was also hit and destroyed on the same day.

⁶⁷ Letter from the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to Amnesty International, 6 October 2025 (previously cited)

⁶⁸ Ibid

6.1 A WELL-KNOWN DETENTION FACILITY

The USA should have known that the Sa'ada prison compound contained a detention facility, and that any attack on the migrant detention centre could result in significant civilian casualties, based on both open-source information and Amnesty International's documentation of a previous air strike on a migrant detention facility within the same compound.⁶⁹

The Sa'ada prison compound, which encompasses an approximately 21-hectare area, has been used for years by the Huthi de facto authorities to detain migrants. Satellite imagery reveals that the prison compound appears to be separated into three different internal areas, including the area where the migrant detention centre the US air strike hit in April 2025 was built. Each area has different levels of security features such as walls, gates, and guard towers.

Survivors interviewed by Amnesty International said that they were held at the migrant detention centre for between three days and as long as three years and four months. In its public statement issued on 30 April 2025, the ICRC said: "For the past few years, ICRC delegates regularly visited detainees held in this facility as part of its ongoing work to ensure humane treatment and detention conditions."⁷⁰

Amnesty International documented a 21 January 2022 Saudi-led coalition air strike on a building, also a detention centre, within the same Sa'ada prison compound. The Saudi-led coalition used a US-made precision guided munition and killed more than 90 detainees and injured dozens.⁷¹

After the 2022 attack, the Saudi-led coalition issued a statement claiming that the air strike targeted a Huthi "Special Security Camp".⁷² A week after the attack, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stated: "During our recent visit, we saw no signs indicating that this site, formerly a barracks, continues to have a military function."⁷³ Human Rights Watch reported that humanitarian workers had confirmed that the detention centre, which was formerly used as a military camp by the Huthi central security forces, had been transformed into a detention centre in 2020.⁷⁴ The ICRC also issued a statement confirming the facility was a detention centre.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Amnesty International, Yemen: US-made weapon used in air strike that killed scores in escalation of Saudi-led coalition attacks, 26 January 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/01/yemen-us-made-weapon-used-in-air-strike-that-killed-scores-in-escalation-of-saudi-led-coalition-attacks/>

⁷⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross, Yemen: ICRC responds to deadly attack on Sa'ada Prison, urges for protection of civilians amidst worsening humanitarian crisis, 30 April 2025, [icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/985/yemen-icrc-responds-to-deadly-attack-on-saada-prison-urges-for-protection-of-civilians-amidst-worsening-humanitarian-crisis-301692](https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/985/yemen-icrc-responds-to-deadly-attack-on-saada-prison-urges-for-protection-of-civilians-amidst-worsening-humanitarian-crisis-301692)

⁷¹ Amnesty International, Yemen: US-made weapon used in air strike that killed scores in escalation of Saudi-led coalition attacks, 26 January 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/01/yemen-us-made-weapon-used-in-air-strike-that-killed-scores-in-escalation-of-saudi-led-coalition-attacks/>

⁷² Asharq Al-Awsat, Arab Coalition Refutes Houthi Allegations Regarding Saada Prison, 8 February 2022, english.aawsat.com/home/article/3462536/arab-coalition-refutes-houthi-allegations-regarding-saada-prison

⁷³ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Press briefing notes on Yemen, 28 January 2022 reliefweb.int/report/yemen/press-briefing-notes-yemen-28-january-2022-enar

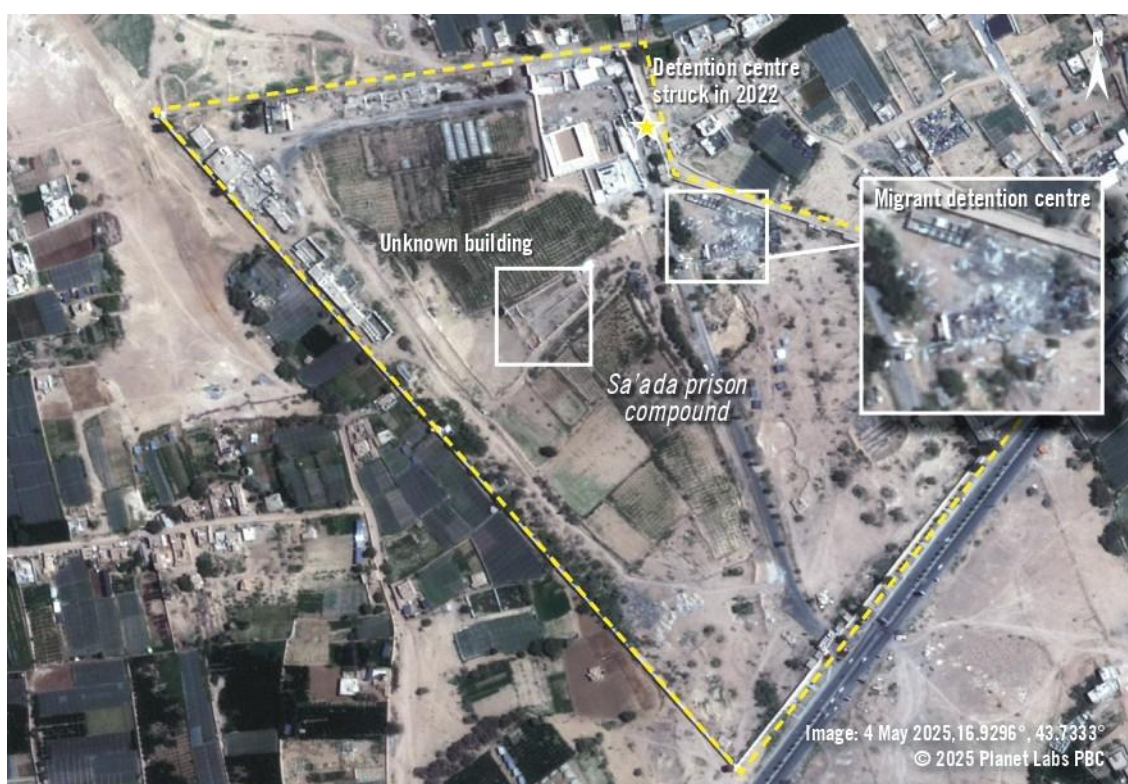
⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch, Yemen: Latest Round of Saudi-UAE-Led Attacks Targets Civilians, 18 April 2022, [hrw.org/news/2022/04/18/yemen-latest-round-saudi-uae-led-attacks-targets-civilians](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/18/yemen-latest-round-saudi-uae-led-attacks-targets-civilians)

⁷⁵ International committee of the Red Cross, Yemen: ICRC expresses deep concern about the human toll caused by escalating violence, 21 January 2022, [icrc.org/en/document/yemen-icrc-expresses-deep-concern-about-human-toll-caused-escalating-violence](https://www.icrc.org/en/document/yemen-icrc-expresses-deep-concern-about-human-toll-caused-escalating-violence)

Based on the information above, the migrant detention centre the USA struck on 28 April 2025 does not qualify as a military objective under international humanitarian law, particularly as it could not be said to “make an effective contribution to military action” based on its “nature, location, purpose or use”.⁷⁶ In cases where it is unclear whether an object is used for military purposes, “it shall be presumed not to be so used”.⁷⁷ Under international humanitarian law, attacking forces have an obligation to do everything feasible to verify whether their intended target is a military objective and, accordingly, if there is doubt in this respect, to refrain from launching an attack or to cancel or suspend an attack.

⁷⁶ ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 8; AP I, Article 52(2).

⁷⁷ AP I, Article 52(3). See also US DoD Law of War Manual, paras. 5.4.3.2 and 5.4.3.4.



📷 ↑ Satellite imagery from 8 April 2025 (top) shows the Sa'ada prison compound. The migrant detention centre that was struck in 2022 is highlighted along the two buildings – the unknown building and the migrant detention centre. Imagery from after the documented strikes show the migrant detention centre is destroyed and the unknown building is completely gone.

6.2 HUTHI PRISON GUARDS FIRED WARNING SHOTS

“The guards were really cruel for not opening the gates right after the first air strike, we could have been saved. That’s all I can say.”

Tsega, 26-year-old survivor and former detainee at the Sa’ada migrant detention centre.⁷⁸

Almost all survivors said that they were sleeping when, between 4:00 and 4:30 a.m., they heard one or two loud explosions nearby. It is most likely the survivors heard an air strike on another structure located 180 meters to the southwest of the building where the migrants were detained, which, according to satellite imagery, was also hit and destroyed on the same day.

According to satellite imagery, since the Saudi-led coalition air strike in 2022, the Huthi de facto authorities have constructed additional buildings at the Sa’ada prison compound, including the other building that was struck on 28 April 2025 and completely destroyed, which the Huthis said was a prison administration building.⁷⁹ This briefing focuses on the subsequent strike on the migrant detention centre.

Hearing the explosions, survivors said they woke up terrified and ran towards the gate of the detention centre where they were held. They screamed for help and pounded on the gate, asking the prison guards to let them out and seek shelter. Survivors told Amnesty International that, instead, the prison guards fired warning shots toward the detention centre where they were held.

Mehret, 30, a survivor and former detainee at the migrant detention centre, woke up in shock after hearing a loud explosion. He told Amnesty International:

“We all screamed for the guards to open the gate and let us out [after the explosion] but [instead] we heard gunfire shots by the guards as a warning. We lost hope. I went back to my sleeping area and laid down there...”⁸⁰

Hagos, 20, a survivor and former detainee, said that, along with the sound of the explosion, the detention centre shook, and some bricks fell from the walls. He added:

“We all screamed and knocked at the doors but the guards fired gunshots at the ward and doors. They could have let us out and saved some of us. But sadly they did not and after 10 mins or so an air strike hit the ward.”⁸¹

Under international human rights law, prison authorities must protect the right to life of detained persons. In case of an attack, this includes, as a minimum, providing immediate shelter and, if

⁷⁸ Interview over voice call with Tsega on 21 June 2025.

⁷⁹ Letter from the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to Amnesty International, 6 October 2025 (previously cited)

⁸⁰ Interview by voice call with Mehret on 21 June 2025.

⁸¹ Interview by voice call with Hagos on 21 June 2025.

necessary, facilitating the evacuation of detainees.⁸² The Huthi de facto authorities, which have human rights responsibilities, should conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, impartial, and transparent investigation into the failure to evacuate and provide shelter to the detained migrants and provide effective remedies and reparation to victims of violations of the right to life.⁸³

In response to a question in Amnesty International's letter on whether the Huthi de facto authorities had investigated the conduct of prison staff, the Huthis said that the conduct of prison guards was subject to investigation and that any guards found responsible for misconduct would be held accountable, but claimed that "there were no recorded instances in which prison guards prevented detainees from fleeing the targeted area or from seeking a safe location."⁸⁴

Since 2015, Amnesty International, the UN and local and international human rights organizations have documented detention-related violations committed by all parties to the conflict in Yemen, including the Huthi de facto authorities. Perpetrators have rarely been seriously investigated or held accountable.⁸⁵

6.3 THE STRIKE HITS THE MIGRANT DETENTION CENTRE

"The air strike hit us right in the middle of the ward. After that we fell unconscious as the place collapsed all over us... I have lost a lot of friends, I am really in shock."

Hamilan, 40-year-old survivor and former detainee at the Sa'ada migrant detention centre.⁸⁶

A few minutes after the air strike on the other building within the Sa'ada prison compound, the USA hit the migrant detention centre. Survivors said they either fell unconscious or were buried under the rubble with severe injuries.

Araya, 21, said he heard two explosions outside the detention centre and then the strike hit the detention centre: "I only remember that the place collapsed... and I was buried under the rubble. After that everything went blank for me."⁸⁷

⁸² Human Rights Committee, General Comment no. 36, paras 21 and 25.

⁸³ ICCPR, Article 2(3); Human Rights Committee, General Comment no. 36, para. 4, 21 and 25.

⁸⁴ Letter from the Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to Amnesty International, 24 September 2025 (previously cited)

⁸⁵ Amnesty International, *Released and Exiled: Torture, unfair trials, and forcible exile of Yemenis under Huthi Rule*, (INDEX: MDE 31/3907/2021), May 2021, [amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MDE3139072021ENGLISH.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MDE3139072021ENGLISH.pdf)

⁸⁶ Interview by voice call with Hamilan on 21 June 2025.

⁸⁷ Interview by voice call with Araya on 21 June 2025.

Satellite images show the destruction of the migrant detention centre after the US air strike. Photo analysis shows one crater and three walls that were blown down, indicating that at least one aircraft bomb was dropped on the building.

Videos published by the Huthi-TV channel al-Masirah showed remnants of weapons allegedly used in the attack gathered and displayed on the ground at the Sa'ada prison compound.⁸⁸ Amnesty International's arms experts analysed the footage and identified fragments of at least two 250-pound precision-guided GBU-39 Small Diameter Bombs. The organization could not verify that the fragments definitively came from the migrant detention centre, but the damage caused to the facility is consistent with weapons of this size.

US Central Command did not disclose information about the target of the attack. Shortly after the attack, a US defense official said they were assessing claims of civilian casualties and conducting a "battle-damage assessment".⁸⁹

Amnesty International did not identify any military objective in the migrant detention centre.

Survivors told Amnesty International that throughout their time in detention they were held with other migrant detainees. It was an open space, so they were able to see everyone who was in the building with them, and no Huthi fighters were posted inside the building or regularly resided there.

Survivors said they were not allowed to leave the detention centre, but that they never heard military activity within the prison compound. On the rare occasions they were taken outside of the detention centre, survivors said they only saw prison guards.

An attacking party must comply with international humanitarian law in relation to every attack, including when conducting a series of air strikes. Amongst other obligations, international humanitarian law requires an attacking party to distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives in respect of each and every attack.

Based on the available evidence, the US air strike on the migrant detention centre amounts to an indiscriminate attack in violation of international humanitarian law, as it failed to be "directed at a specific military objective."⁹⁰ In this respect, it does not seem the US complied with its obligation to do everything feasible to verify whether the object attacked was a military objective, particularly given that the Huthis use of the Sa'ada prison compound to detain migrants was widely known, including based on open-source information, and that the Huthis had used the specific building the US struck to detain migrants for an extended period of time.⁹¹ Given the attack killed and injured civilians, it should be investigated as a war crime.

6.4 SEVERE INJURIES, MAIMING AND TRAUMA

"I am badly injured. I sustained shrapnel injuries to my spine. I can't walk by myself. I have been sitting since the attack; I am being moved with the help of other people."

Sibhat, 22-year-old survivor and former detainee at the Sa'ada migrant detention centre.⁹²

Out of the 15 survivors interviewed by Amnesty International, 14 sustained critical injuries, some with long lasting effects on their health. Most had shrapnel and debris fragments pierce their bodies, causing damage to tissues, bones, and vital organs. The injuries included fractures to legs and arms, nerve damage, and head, spine and chest trauma. Two of the 15 migrants had their legs amputated, one had his hand amputated, and one lost one of his eyes.

All survivors expressed their shock and horror while sharing their testimonies.

Desta, 33, suffered from a head injury and lost one of his eyes. He was so traumatized that he could not speak for 20 days. He said: “The attack was really terrible, it killed lots of people, it made us disabled and left others in shock and terror.”⁹³

Hamilan, 40, was the only one who did not suffer visible physical injuries, although he said that he fell unconscious after the air strike and only regained consciousness at the hospital. He described his severe distress. After the attack, he was socially withdrawn and unable to sleep without taking sleeping pills. Lacking financial resources, he needed other people to buy them for him.⁹⁴

Hagos, 20, who was detained in the migrant detention centre just a week before the attack, lost his leg. He was experiencing severe pain. He said:

“You just wish you were dead there. No one thinks that they got out of such a devastating situation... I am begging for some money from friends to get the treatment and pills.”⁹⁵

Fourteen survivors told Amnesty International that in the immediate aftermath of the air strike they were admitted to Republican Hospital or Al Talh General Hospital in Sa’ada. They stayed there between a few days and a month. Three said they had to pay for some medication, which was not available at the hospitals, to be bought from outside.

Jirata, 29, had one leg amputated after the US air strike. He was detained for three years and four months in the migrant detention centre, after being arrested by the Huthi de facto authorities while attempting to cross the border to Saudi Arabia in 2021. After the air strike hit the detention centre, Jirata fell unconscious. He said:

“The place collapsed and I was buried under the rubble. (...) I think people dragged me out and I then found myself at the hospital. I am badly injured, I lost one leg and my other leg is badly fractured... They have inserted metal rods in it.”⁹⁶

Abay, 31, was also severely injured by the US air strike. Arrested in January 2024 while attempting to cross the border to Saudi Arabia, he was detained by the Huthi de facto authorities for one year and six months in the migrant detention centre. The air strike buried him under the rubble – “The debris pressed against me”, he said – and now he has difficulty breathing and walking:

“One leg was fractured and the other had shrapnel injuries (...) I have a fractured arm... and I have problems breathing and chest pain since I had a shrapnel injury to my heart. I had a shrapnel injury to my back and I still have metal pieces that haven’t gotten out yet.”⁹⁷

⁹³ Interview by voice call with Desta on 21 June 2025.

⁹⁴ Interview by voice call with Hamilan on 21 June 2025.

⁹⁵ Interview by voice call with Hagos on 21 June 2025.

⁹⁶ Interview by voice call with Jirata on 21 June 2025.

⁹⁷ Interview by voice call with Abay on 21 June 2025.

Five survivors told Amnesty International that, after receiving initial treatment at the hospital, they were detained again by the Huthi de facto authorities. The Huthis held them for between three days to three weeks and told them they were investigating and processing their release. During this time, the survivors said they were denied access to medical treatment.

Mehret, who was detained again after the US air strike, said that he and his brother were not provided any medical care despite sustaining severe wounds:

“They took me back to prison for additional investigation and I stayed there for three weeks without any medication. My brother joined two weeks later and his wounds formed infections and were infested by maggots in his head and eye. The guards were seeing all this. We pleaded for taking us back to hospital but no one listened. Then they released us after we signed papers and they took our fingerprints.”⁹⁸

The Huthi de facto authorities must ensure detainees receive health care, including access to needed medication. Detainees suffering from injuries or serious illnesses must be promptly transferred to hospitals or facilities that can provide appropriate medical care.⁹⁹

6.5 SURVIVORS STRANDED AND ABANDONED

“The dead are already dead, but we are on the verge of dying because of lack of medical attention and aid, because people might die out of untreated infections. We want someone to advocate for us and help us.”

Mehret, 30-year-old survivor and former detainee at the Sa’ada migrant detention centre.¹⁰⁰

At the time of the interviews, almost two months after the US air strike, 10 survivors told Amnesty International that they still required some form of medical treatment, including follow up surgeries and medication. They also said that, despite their dire economic situation, they were currently paying for this treatment themselves or with the support of family, also in dire economic straits, back home.

Mehret and his brother Desta were still receiving medical treatment as outpatients in a private hospital in Sana’a at the time they spoke with Amnesty International. Mehret said:

“Me and my brother are being treated together, our parents are sending us money despite their own poverty. They are selling their cows and oxen and borrowing money from others. We have paid 6000 Yemeni Riyals and the hospital told us that we still need 15000 Yemeni Riyal for all the procedures, especially for my brother’s case which is critical.”¹⁰¹

Mehret and other survivors expressed feelings of fear and uncertainty given their precarious immigration status, which limits their access to essential services, including healthcare and housing, and puts them

⁹⁸ Interview by voice call with Mehret on 21 June 2025.

⁹⁹ UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), Rule 27.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ Ibid

at risk of renewed detention. Fourteen of the survivors expressed their desire to return to Ethiopia, but many wanted to finish their medical treatment first.

So they may recuperate, heal and complete any medical treatment necessary in Huthi-controlled territory without fear of further detention, the Huthi authorities should provide survivors with a temporary documentation that allows them residency status.

The USA has an obligation to provide victims of violations of international humanitarian law, including their families, with access to effective remedies and full and adequate reparations. The USA should promptly make public its assessment into this strike, including any conclusions related to civilian casualties and efforts to respond to them.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Human Rights Committee, General comment No. 36, para. 28; Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016), paras 31-32.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence gathered, including survivors' testimonies, satellite imagery, and footage, and its analysis, Amnesty International has reasonable basis to conclude that the US air strike on the migrant detention centre in the Sa'ada prison compound in Yemen qualifies as an indiscriminate attack, which is a serious violation of international humanitarian law, and should be investigated as a war crime.

The USA must conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, impartial and transparent investigation into the air strike and into any other air strikes that have resulted in civilian casualties and where the rules of international humanitarian law may have been violated in Yemen. Where sufficient evidence exists, competent authorities should prosecute any person suspected of criminal responsibility for war crimes, including under the doctrine of command responsibility, in proceedings that fully comply with the right to a fair trial and without recourse to the death penalty.

Victims and their families should receive full reparation, including financial compensation.

The Huthi de facto authorities should conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, impartial, and transparent investigation into the failure to evacuate and provide shelter to the detained migrants, as per their human rights responsibilities to protect the right to life. The Huthis should also provide the survivors of the attack with a temporary residency status so they may recuperate, heal and complete any required medical treatment in Huthi-controlled territory without fear of further detention.

7.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, INCLUDING THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, ITS CONSTITUENT COMBATANT COMMANDS OF CENTCOM AND JSOC, AND THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE

- Conduct prompt, thorough, independent, impartial and transparent investigations into all credible allegations of death or injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects caused by air strikes and other military operations in Yemen, including the attack documented in this briefing.
- Where sufficient evidence exists, prosecute suspected perpetrators of war crimes in proceedings that fully comply with the right to a fair trial and without recourse to the death penalty.
- Provide victims of violations of international humanitarian law, including their families, with access to effective remedies and full and adequate reparations, including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition, through an effective mechanism that ensures a safe and accessible means for victims, their families and communities to self-report civilian casualties and harm arising from US air strikes and other military operations and to seek redress.
- Regardless of the lawfulness of an attack under international humanitarian law, acknowledge civilian casualties and civilian harm caused by US attacks and offer amends and explanation to victims and their families.
- Publicly disclose detailed information about investigations carried out into civilian casualties and civilian harm caused by US air strikes to date, including the attack documented in this briefing, which should encompass findings, any remedies provided, and lessons learned.

TO THE US CONGRESS

- Play an appropriate oversight role over US military action and demand information on investigations to date into the attack documented in this briefing as well as other military operations in Yemen.
- Ensure that all previously established civilian harm mitigation and response mechanisms remain intact and robustly funded, including in order to respond to this and other recent incidents and to mitigate further civilian harm.

TO THE HUTHI DE FACTO AUTHORITIES

- Conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, impartial and transparent investigation into the failure to provide shelter to and evacuate migrants detained within the Sa'ada prison compound, as well as into what steps, if any, were taken to evacuate and otherwise protect detainees during other attacks on detention facilities in Yemen.
- End the arbitrary arrest and detention of migrants based on their immigration status and nationality and release all migrants who continue to be arbitrarily detained.
- Provide the survivors of the attack on the migrant detention centre with documentation that allows them a temporary residency status so they may recuperate, heal and complete any medical treatment necessary in Huthi-controlled territory without fear of further detention.
- Take measures to improve dire prison conditions in line with the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (The Nelson Mandela Rules), including by providing prisoners with sufficient and nutritious food; ensuring proper hygiene and sanitation, including regular access to safe water, washing facilities and toilets; providing prisoners with climate-appropriate clothing and bedding; and ensuring that prisoner accommodation has adequate space, ventilation and lighting.

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA

- Ensure that consular assistance be available to all Ethiopian victims and their families and respond in a timely and effective way to requests for support, including requests for repatriations of survivors and the bodies of the dead.
- Ensure the provision of protection and re-integration programmes for returning migrants, including economic and psychosocial support for those returning to their hometowns.
- Engage with the Yemeni authorities to release all those arbitrarily detained solely for their immigration status.

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Index: **MDE 31/0367/2025**

Publication: **29 October 2025**

Original language: **English**

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