



General Assembly

Distr.: General
8 September 2021

English only

Human Rights Council

Forty-eighth session

13 September–1 October 2021

Agenda item 2

**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by The Next Century Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



A referendum on autonomy in southern Yemen to stabilise the region

By the end of this year, some 233,000 people will have died in Yemen as a result of the war, including 140,000 children under the age of five. That projection is in a U.N. commissioned study by the University of Denver. The report underscores the disintegration of a country that was already among the world's poorest before the war began in 2015.

If the war continues through 2022, 482,000 people are estimated to die. If it lasts until 2030, the death toll will rise to an estimated 1.8 million, including 1.5 million children.

A key fault line that acts as a stumbling block when peace negotiations are attempted is the question of whether the outcome of any referendum for independence for South Yemen should be determined by a vote by all Yemenis or just by South Yemenis.

Calls for secession from Southern independence activists and fighters date back to the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 and have been exacerbated by the current conflict. A peaceful transition to stable governance can only be secured through a dialogue between all sides of the conflict on the future of Southern Yemen. The Next Century Foundation suggests that such a dialogue may look towards a referendum on establishing an autonomous zone in Southern Yemen as part of a federal Yemen.

Yemen remains divided between factions that include the internationally recognised government-in-exile and the Ansar Allah (Houthi) movement, which operates as a de facto government from Sana'a and controls most northern governorates. Southern independence fighters, represented by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which is supported by the United Arab Emirates, currently control the key city of Aden and have been in a tentative military alliance with the internationally recognised Hadi government in order to confront Ansar Allah. However, this alliance, though currently functioning, has turned sour at several points in the war, for example the STC declared self-governance in 2020 without giving recognition to the Hadi government.

Peace in Yemen is impossible without acknowledgement of the STC's calls for independence from the North. The STC has far greater control of the South's eight governorates, including the city of Aden, than the UN-recognised Yemen government. "To ignore the will of the people is a recipe for only more instability," the head of the presidential council of the STC, Major General Aidarus al-Zoubaidi has said.

Humanitarian efforts and attempts to lift the country out of its deepening economic crisis are unlikely to succeed without stable government, which is currently dependent as a minimum on political autonomy in the South. The alternative to constitutional autonomy, that of a referendum on partition, is liable to worsen the conflict. It is the responsibility of the international community to mediate a dialogue between all those party to the conflict and promote an amicable arrangement for autonomy in the South as part of a federal Yemen. The Next Century Foundation believes that endorsing autonomy in South Yemen would be a vital step forward on the path to peace in Yemen as a whole and would help bring a decisive end to conflict.

Peace agreements are unlikely to succeed if all major parties to the conflict, namely Ansar Allah, and Al Islah (the Reform Party) and the Southern Transitional Council, do not participate. The Internationally recognised Hadi government, though not of itself a major party to the conflict in its own right, should also be included. Therefore, we urge the international community, especially the member states of Gulf Cooperation Council, to facilitate dialogue between such parties to the conflict in order to secure a long-term arrangement for peace, autonomy and stable government.

Confederate system

The international community must look to new solutions that go further in empowering local government. A confederate system of governance may be a viable solution that strikes a balance between the demand for independence in South Yemen and the wishes of both Ansar

Allah and the internationally recognised government to keep Yemen a united country. The Next Century Foundation has looked at international examples of politically autonomous zones from which the peace effort in Yemen can learn.

Greenland

Greenland is an example of an autonomous zone with very few areas of governance controlled by Denmark. For this reason, it can be likened to a confederate system of governance due to the relatively weak powers of central government in Greenland. Greenland's executive, Parliament and judiciary control their own finances and natural resources, with only partial funding from Denmark. Whilst Denmark controls security and defence, there is some international recognition of Greenland's separate identity; for example, Denmark is a member of the European Union, whereas Greenland is not. The international community may want to implement a similar model of autonomy in South Yemen, in which most areas of governance will be controlled locally, and only a few, broader issues are relegated to central government, in which there should continue to be fair representation of South Yemenis.

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Iraqi Kurdistan is a rare example of a recognised autonomous zone with separate armed forces, the Kurdish Peshmerga. The Kurdistan region of Iraq is known to enjoy a more stable parliamentary democracy and a stronger economy compared to the rest of Iraq, with their own elections, control over finances, natural resources and foreign relations. Whilst the relations between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Iraq government remain tense, especially as a result of the 2017 independence referendum in which voters overwhelmingly voted in favour. This referendum resulted in military conflict, so lessons may be learnt from this example about the potentially perilous results of an independence referendum in South Yemen. Since 2019, relations between the autonomous Kurdistan region and the government have stabilised, though there have been instances of party divisions and power concentration within a few ruling families in the Kurdish government, which have perhaps weakened the authority of the local government. The international community can learn from the successes and failures of this example in order to build a successful arrangement for political and military autonomy in South Yemen.

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria remains unrecognised officially by the central government of the Syrian Arab Republic yet acts as a de facto political structure akin to an autonomous region. This zone was established on a de facto basis during the Syrian Civil War as government forces withdrew from Kurdish-majority zones. The political system in the AANES is an example of democratic confederalism, organised through local councils and communes with high levels of participation from women and young people. The armed forces present in the AANES are the Syrian Democratic Forces, which also has a high percentage of female members. The political system in the AANES aspires to be centred around the political leadership of women, religious and ethnic pluralism and environmental sustainability. The region is more economically prosperous than other regions in Syria. Parties to the conflict in Yemen may look to this system of religious pluralism in order to overcome their own sectarian divisions. The representation of women in governance is also a strong model for Yemen, especially as the new power-sharing government in Yemen has failed to incorporate women. One study shows that the substantial inclusion of women in peace negotiations makes the arrangement 64% less likely to fail. Another study suggests that such peace arrangements would also be 35% more likely to last at least fifteen years. The international community and parties to the conflict in Yemen must do its utmost to incorporate women into the peace process, and any autonomous system of government in South Yemen should strive towards strengthening the participation of women in political and military leadership, akin to the representation in the AANES.

Future governance

The Next Century Foundation recommends that parties to the conflict work towards an arrangement for maximum autonomy for South Yemen within a federal Yemen, without resulting in partition, which could lead to further conflict. We further suggest that the autonomous zone has control over most areas of governance, including control over its own armed forces, as the presence of central government forces in South Yemen is likely to exacerbate the conflict. The central government may provide financial support and manage foreign relations, but most governance would occur locally.

Such an arrangement may be formed through a referendum in Yemen, or through national dialogue between all conflicting parties. The Next Century Foundation strongly believes that this is the optimal solution for all groups, but the establishment of stable governance and peace in Yemen must be supported by all international and national stakeholders to be successful. The international community must come together to support the peace process in Yemen and provide robust solutions towards an amicable system of autonomy in South Yemen in order to prevent the continuation of sectarian and nationalist division in the country, spiralling the state into a decade of war and humanitarian crisis.
