

Speech: Yemen crisis won't be solved by UK arms exports halt

Nothing in Yemen has been left untouched by war, not even the presidential palace in Aden. When I visited this fortified building a few weeks ago, you could see the pockmarks from bullets and the damage from explosions.

I went to Aden to meet Yemen's recognized government and see for myself the realities of a grave humanitarian crisis. At the port, a United Nations official told me how even now, four years on, they are struggling to bring in enough food for millions of desperate people.

On this anniversary of the intervention in Yemen's conflict led by Saudi Arabia, the imperative need for a peaceful settlement has never been greater.

Some 24 million Yemenis depend on emergency aid for food and medicine. The total population is less than 30 million, so at least 80% of all Yemenis are suffering in this way. No less than 1.8 million children are enduring acute malnutrition.

Behind these stark impersonal numbers are real people – individual mothers, fathers and children. But the blunt truth is that Yemen's ordeal is the consequence not of natural disaster but a tragic man-made conflict.

Some argue that Britain has contributed to the crisis because of arms sales to some of the participants. In fact we have some of the strictest arms control export guidelines in the world and I have made the quest for a political solution in Yemen a central priority for British diplomacy. Despite Brexit, my focus on Yemen has not wavered. So at this crucial moment, if we are to progress, I would offer three observations.

First, historical accuracy matters. This war did not begin with a Saudi-led intervention. Six months earlier, in September 2014, Houthi rebels, representing no more than 15% of the population, captured most of the capital, Sana'a, and expelled the internationally recognized government. Saudi Arabia and its allies began their operation in March 2015 in order to restore that government, consistent with United Nations Resolution 2216. Before they had launched a single air strike, Yemen was already at war.

Second, there is now a path to peace. The agreement reached in Stockholm in December means that for the first time since 2016, the Houthis and the government of Yemen have held direct peace talks. I went to Stockholm myself to encourage progress. The outcome was a ceasefire in the Hodeidah province, including the crucial port through which Yemen receives about 70% of its food imports.

This fragile ceasefire has broadly held for the last three months. But the next phase of the Stockholm agreement, providing for a mutual redeployment of forces away from Hodeidah, has not been implemented. Unless that happens, the

ceasefire is unlikely to be sustained.

So my immediate priority is to press all sides to implement Stockholm, which is why earlier in March I visited the countries most directly involved in the conflict. I was the first British Cabinet minister to pay an official visit to Aden since Denis Healey in 1965.

Which brings me to my final point: Britain's history and our values require us to play our part in making a constructive difference in the Middle East – and our unique links in the region mean that we have the ability to do so. Our strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates allows us the opportunity to influence their leaders. Since becoming foreign secretary last July, I have paid two visits to both countries.

We could, of course, decide to condemn them instead. We could halt our military exports and sever the ties that British governments of all parties have carefully preserved for decades, as critics are urging.

But in doing so we would also surrender our influence and make ourselves irrelevant to the course of events in Yemen. Our policy would be simply to leave the parties to fight it out, while denouncing them impotently from the sidelines.

That would be morally bankrupt and the people of Yemen would be the biggest losers. We would have been unlikely to see Stockholm or the ceasefire that is now broadly holding in Hodeidah.

Instead, the right path for us is to continue to employ every channel of influence to urge the parties to keep the obligations they agreed in Stockholm. The EU too has a powerful voice and must use it.

Martin Griffiths, the U.N. envoy (who happens to be British), is doing heroic work to bring the sides together. We will support his efforts to the full, using all the diplomatic and humanitarian levers in our hands. This year, Britain has contributed another £200 million of emergency aid for Yemen, providing food for over a million people every month and treating 30,000 children for malnutrition.

This is the fourth anniversary of the latest stage of a terrible conflict. Britain will do everything possible to ensure that Yemen's people do not have to suffer a fifth.