



(Handout photo by Houthi Media Center/Getty Images)

29 October 2025

Also available in Español, Français, العربية

Yemen: US air strike on migrant detention centre must be investigated as a war crime

A new, in-depth investigation by Amnesty International concludes that a US air strike on a migrant detention centre in Sa'ada, north-western Yemen, on 28 April 2025 that killed and injured dozens of African migrants amounted to an indiscriminate attack. US authorities must promptly and transparently investigate it as a war crime.

The attack, carried out by the US military during “Operation Rough Rider,” inflicted catastrophic civilian harm on vulnerable migrants, many of whom were held by the Huthi de facto authorities in the detention centre solely for their irregular immigration status.

‘It is a miracle we survived’: US air strike on civilians held in Sa'ada detention centre is based on interviews with 15 survivors, all of whom were Ethiopian migrants detained in Sa'ada, and analysis of digital evidence, including satellite imagery, photos and videos. The report provides compelling evidence that, in carrying out this attack, the US failed to abide by its obligation under international humanitarian law to distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives.

The strike killed and injured dozens of the migrants held at the detention centre at the time of the attack. Survivors who spoke to Amnesty International were able to identify by name and approximate age 16 of the people – all Ethiopian migrants, all men and most in their twenties – who had been killed.



This was a lethal failure by the US to comply with one of its core obligations under international humanitarian law.

Kristine Beckerle, Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“The harrowing testimonies from survivors paint a clear picture of a civilian building, packed with detainees, being bombed without distinction. This was a lethal failure by the US to comply with one of its core obligations under international humanitarian law: to do everything feasible to verify whether the object attacked was a military objective,” said Kristine Beckerle, Amnesty International’s Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“Victims and their families should receive full reparation, including financial compensation. Given the air strike killed and injured civilians, the US authorities should investigate this attack as a war crime. Where sufficient evidence exists, competent authorities should prosecute any person suspected of criminal responsibility, including under the doctrine of command responsibility.”

Amnesty International formally requested information from US Central Command (CENTCOM) and US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) on 27 August 2025, detailing its findings and seeking clarification on the military objective attacked and the precautions taken. CENTCOM provided only a brief response on the same day the request was sent, stating that it was still “assessing all reports of civilian harm”, that it was taking all of them “seriously” and reviewing them “thoroughly”.

Amnesty International also requested information from the Huthi de facto authorities on 11 September 2025, 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 time of the attack, their conditions of detention, and what steps, if any, the Huthi authorities took to investigate the failure of prison guards to allow detainees to seek safe shelter.

The Huthi Ministry of Justice and Human Rights provided two detailed responses on 24 September and 6 October 2025, including information on the number of migrants detained at the centre, denying any wrongdoing in terms of conditions of detention, and sharing a list of casualties from the US air strike.

A mass-casualty attack on a known civilian target

Amnesty International’s investigation found no evidence that the migrant detention centre was a military objective. Survivors said the migrant detention centre was an open space, so they were able to see everyone who was present in the building, whom were all migrant detainees.

The facility, part of the Sa’ada prison compound, had been used for years by the Huthis to detain migrants, and its civilian nature was widely known. It was visited by humanitarian organizations.

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. The 2022 attack, which Amnesty International also investigated, was carried out using a US-made precision guided munition, killing more than 90 detainees and injuring dozens.

Given this context, the US should have known the facility was a civilian object and that any aerial attack could result in significant death and injury to civilians. Under international humanitarian law, attacking forces have an obligation to do everything feasible to verify whether their intended target is a military objective and, if there is doubt in this respect, to refrain from launching an attack or to cancel or suspend it.

Survivors severely injured, maimed and traumatized

Almost all the 15 survivors Amnesty International spoke to said that they were sleeping when they heard the sound of an explosion nearby, sometime between 4 and 4:30 a.m. This was most likely a US air strike on a different structure within the Sa'ada prison compound which took place minutes earlier.

According to satellite imagery, another building, located about 180 meters from where the migrants were detained, was hit and destroyed the same day. In their response to Amnesty International, the Huthis stated that this building was a prison administration building.

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 prison guards to let them out to seek safety. Instead, prison guards fired warning shots, to keep the detainees inside. Minutes later, a second US airstrike hit the migrant detention centre.

In their response to Amnesty International, the Huthi de facto authorities stated that 117 African migrants were detained at the time of the strike, of whom 61 were killed and 56 injured. They also claimed that "there were no recorded instances in which prison guards prevented detainees from fleeing the targeted area or from seeking a safe location", but did not respond clearly to whether they had investigated this particular incident.

The air strike caused profound civilian harm with devastating, long-lasting consequences. Of the 15 survivors interviewed by Amnesty International, 14 sustained critical injuries with lifelong impacts 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 his hand amputated, and one lost an eye.

One 20-year-old survivor, Hagos*, who lost his leg and regained consciousness days after the attack in hospital, described his pain, stating: "You just wish you were dead there... I am begging for some money from friends to get the treatment and pills."

Another survivor, Desta*, 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."

At the time of the interviews, almost two months after the US air strike, 10 survivors said 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 paying for this treatment themselves or with the support of their financially struggling families back home.

Urgent call for accountability and reparations

In addition to its obligations under international humanitarian law, the USA has codified in its domestic law and policies key human rights protections and international humanitarian law obligations. The US Department of Defense (DoD) Instruction on Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response 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”.

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. Amnesty International urges the US Congress to ensure that civilian harm mitigation and response mechanisms remain intact and robustly funded to effectively respond to this and other recent incidents.

“

The US must conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, impartial, and transparent investigation into the air strike on the Sa’ada migrant detention centre and make the results public.

Kristine Beckerle

“The US must conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, impartial, and transparent investigation into the air strike on the Sa’ada migrant detention centre and make the results public. Survivors of this attack deserve nothing less than full justice. They must receive full, effective, and prompt reparations, including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition, through an effective and accessible mechanism,” said Kristine Beckerle.

Amnesty International also urges the Huthi de facto authorities to conduct a transparent investigation into the failure to evacuate and provide shelter to the detained migrants. They should also end the arbitrary detention of migrants based solely on their immigration status and nationality and provide survivors of the US air strike with temporary residency status so they may recuperate, heal, and complete essential medical treatment without fear of re-detention.

* Names of survivors changed for security reasons

