

'A national disgrace': fury over £100m aid deal between UK and Saudi Arabia

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Unveiling of plan to create infrastructure in poor countries overshadowed by unease over Saudi role in Yemen conflict

The controversial aid deal between the UK and [Saudi Arabia](#) announced on Friday has been branded a "national disgrace".

Amid further outcry over Britain's relationship with the Gulf state, government ministers have signed a £100m aid agreement with Riyadh to coincide with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's [visit to London](#) this week.

The government described the deal as a "new long-term partnership" to improve livelihoods and boost economic development in some of the world's poorest countries.

But the accord has been greeted with fury by opposition MPs and the aid sector, with grave concerns expressed about Saudi Arabia's [role in the Yemen conflict](#).

Kate Osamor, the shadow international development secretary, said the agreement "made a mockery" of Britain's reputation as a global leader in delivering humanitarian aid.

"Theresa May implied she would lobby [Mohammed bin Salman](#) to stop bombing civilians and end the use of starvation as a weapon of war," said Osamor.

"Over 22 million Yemeni lives depend on permanent, full access for aid, food and fuel in Yemen. Instead, she has won no concessions and simply handed on a plate to Saudi Arabia a new humanitarian partnership and an endorsement from DfID [the Department for International Development], the world's best aid agency.

"It will whitewash Saudi Arabia's reputation and role in the war, and it is a national disgrace."

Osamor said that in signing an agreement with Saudi Arabia, Britain had aligned itself with the country primarily responsible for one of the world's biggest humanitarian crises. A total of [8.4 million people](#) in Yemen are in imminent danger of famine.

The partnership, which will pool the development expertise of both countries, is the first of its kind between Britain and the [Saudi Fund for Development](#).

The aim, said DfID, would be to create vital infrastructure in drought and conflict-stricken countries.

Penny Mordaunt, the international development secretary, said: "The Saudi Fund has a long record of investing in successful development projects around the world.

“We are sharing the best of British expertise, and our collective efforts will help create jobs and livelihoods to support the poorest people to stand on their own two feet. This in turn will help to boost global prosperity, which is in all of our interests.”

Mordaunt had previously said Saudi Arabia had [no excuse for blocking aid to Yemen](#), warning that the use of starvation as a weapon was in breach of humanitarian law, but a DfID statement announcing the deal said the UK was “encouraged by the easing of restrictions into Yemen”.

Critics have questioned [claims of progress](#), however, arguing that the Saudi-led coalition is only permitting goods through ports on a month-by-month basis, dramatically limiting the efforts of NGOs, traders and shipping agents to get supplies into Yemen.

Osamor said: “In the same breath as announcing this new deal, the government acknowledges there can be ‘no excuse’ for stopping humanitarian supplies, and has claimed this week there is no blockade.”

She added: “Fuel deliveries are estimated to be at just 19% of what is needed and, in January, seven cities shut down their water systems for lack of fuel.

“Before signing off on any new humanitarian partnership, Theresa May and Penny Mordaunt should have insisted on full, permanent access so millions of Yemeni lives can be saved. It is unforgivable that they did not.”

Osamor said the burden was now on the government to show the new partnership had substance and was more than “just big business”.

Allan Hogarth, head of policy and government affairs at Amnesty International UK, also voiced concern over the deal.

He said: “British overseas aid is important in many ways, but at a time when the UK is arming a Saudi-led military coalition that’s laying waste to homes, hospitals and schools in Yemen, this raises troubling questions.

“It is not good enough for the UK to provide humanitarian aid on the one hand and supply the weapons that fuel a humanitarian crisis on the other.”

Bin Salman’s three-day charm offensive has included talks with Theresa May and the Archbishop of Canterbury, and an audience with the Queen.

Kevin Watkins, chief executive of Save the Children, blasted the government over the welcome lavished on the prince, who is taking steps to modernise the ultra-conservative Arab state.

Speaking in London at the launch of a [report on crimes against children in warzones](#), Watkins said: “It has become acceptable to operate humanitarian blockades which, if not explicitly designed to starve children and harm children, will have that inevitable consequence.

“The fact that we have the head of state of a government that has been operating such a blockade – Saudi Arabia – recently invited to Buckingham Palace and Downing Street while the military ... is orchestrating what will potentially become the worst famine in the last 50 years, I think speaks volumes.”

Noting a “growing sense of impunity surrounding crimes against children”, Watkins added: “The fact that you can rape, murder, kidnap, bomb schools, bomb clinics with no consequence, speaks I think

to the heart of the deeper challenge.”

Yemen, which borders southern Saudi Arabia, has been embroiled in a bloody civil war since 2014, when rebels took over the capital, Sana’a.

Saudi Arabia is the main player in a coalition supporting the Yemeni government against the Houthis in a war that has caused a humanitarian catastrophe.

Downing Street defended Bin Salman’s visit, saying trade deals worth £65bn had been agreed.

Karen McVeigh and Hannah Summers

P.S.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/09/national-disgrace-fury-over-100m-aid-deal-between-uk-and-saudi-arabia>