

DAYS AFTER BOMBING A WEDDING PARTY AND SQUELCHING UN INVESTIGATION IN YEMEN, SAUDI ARABIA WORRIES ABOUT CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

On Monday, coalition forces in Yemen bombed a wedding party, killing over 130 people.

The death toll from an air strike on a wedding party in Yemen has jumped to 131, medics said on Tuesday, in one of the deadliest attacks on civilians in Yemen's war that drew strong condemnation from the U.N. secretary-general.

[snip]

On Tuesday, a medical source at Maqbana hospital, where most of the casualties were taken, said the death toll had climbed to 131 people, including many women and children.

The United Nations and international rights groups have expressed alarm at the escalating number of civilian deaths in Yemen – at least 2,355 out of more than 4,500 people killed from the end of March to Sept. 24, according to figures released by the U.N. human rights office in Geneva on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, Saudi Arabia succeeded in pressuring western governments to withdraw a Dutch resolution to conduct an inquiry into the civilian casualties caused by both sides in Yemen.

In a U-turn at the United Nations Human Rights Council, Western governments dropped plans Wednesday for an international inquiry into human rights violations by all parties in the war in Yemen that has killed thousands of civilians in the last six months.

The change of direction came as the Netherlands withdrew the draft of a resolution it had prepared with support from a group of mainly Western countries that instructed the United Nations high commissioner for human rights to send experts to Yemen to investigate the conduct of the war.

[snip]

The Dutch resolution also called for the warring parties to allow access to humanitarian groups seeking to deliver aid and to the commercial import of goods like fuel that are needed to keep hospitals running. Deliveries of aid and other goods have been slowed by the coalition's naval blockade of Yemeni ports.

But in the face of stiff resistance from Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners, and to the dismay of human rights groups, Western governments have accepted a resolution based on a Saudi text that lacks any reference to an independent, international inquiry.

On Friday, Saudi Arabia condemned civilian casualties. Just those caused by Russian airstrikes targeting Saudi backed rebels seeking to overthrow Bashar al-Assad.

As Russia continued striking targets in Syria, the U.S. was joined by the U.K., France, Germany, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in saying a bombing campaign begun by Vladimir Putin's government on Wednesday "led to civilian casualties"

and didn't target Islamic State militants. The statement came hours before Putin was due to meet German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the French and Ukrainian presidents, Francois Hollande and Petro Poroshenko, to discuss a Ukrainian cease-fire pact in Paris.

"These military actions constitute a further escalation and will only fuel more extremism and radicalization," the countries said in the statement. "We call on the Russian Federation to immediately cease its attacks on the Syrian opposition and civilians and to focus its efforts on fighting ISIL," according to the statement, which used an acronym for Islamic State. Russia has said it is only targeting "terrorist" groups.

It's a nice statement. And civilian killings surely do fuel extremism.

But Saudi Arabia – and, for that matter, the US, which has bombed its share of wedding parties (though often because it relies on Saudi intelligence) – is probably not the country that should be condemning civilian casualties right now.

Update: Billmon has been checking and he was only able to find the statement actually posted on Turkey's Foreign Minister's website.

Update: Meanwhile, the US (which also claims to be concerned about civilian casualties) told Judge Ellen Hueville that Ali Jaber, whose brother-in-law and nephew a US drone strike killed, does not have standing to ask for an apology.

Update: Lee Fang asked McCain about the Saudis killing Yemenis.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., spent the most time discussing the issue with me.

But his answers were perplexing.

"They may be bombing civilians, which is actually not true," McCain said, when asked about civilian casualties in Yemen.

"Civilians aren't dying?" I asked.

"No, they're not," the senator replied. "Oh, I'm sure civilians die in war. Not nearly as many as the Houthis have executed," McCain continued, referring to the Shiite militia waging an insurgency against the Sunni government in Yemen.

Asked about the recent reports of Saudi forces bombing a wedding party in Yemen, McCain said, "I'm sure in wars terrible things happen and the Houthis however are an extremist group backed by the Iranians who are slaughtering Yemenis."