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Yemen pushed towards man-made famine

The whole world must act now to avoid famine in Yemen, as two years of brutal conflict have led to what the UN describes as the worst humanitarian situation on the globe, with nearly 7 million people facing starvation.



A woman makes tea in an IDP camp in Taiz governorate. For millions, tea and bread is often the only thing they have to eat. Credit: Oxfam Yemen / Hind Aleryani

Background

Yemen has been wracked by a complex and bloody war that escalated in March 2015. The conflict involves among others the Government of Yemen backed by a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia, and the Houthis, aligned with Yemen's former president.

Over the past 24 months, airstrikes and fighting have killed more than 7,600 people and resulted in an average of 70 casualties per day.¹ The world is now confronting the largest humanitarian crisis since the creation of the United Nations, with more than 20 million people facing starvation and famine in South Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen.

A country knowingly pushed towards starvation

Before the conflict, Yemen was already the poorest country in the region and two years of war have sunk it deeper into crippling debt and poverty. The war has forced over three million people out of their homes,² and political and military decisions made by all parties to the conflict have led 6.8 million to the brink of famine.³

Ports, roads and bridges, along with warehouses, farms and markets have been regularly destroyed by the Saudi-led coalition, draining the country's food stocks. The Houthi led de-facto authority on the other hand, is delaying the delivery of life-saving relief, and sometimes detaining aid workers. This, coupled with a flattened economy, has created an abyss of hunger and a serious threat of famine

Numerous institutions have already warned of this possibility. In March 2016, Oxfam said the conflict was pushing millions towards famine.⁴ In June, 9 out of the 22 governorates⁵ in Yemen were classified as "one step away" from famine.⁶ In October, World Food Programme's Country Director in Yemen, Torben Due, warned that "an entire generation could be crippled by hunger," if all people in need didn't receive assistance,⁷ and in November, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) estimated it was possible that some populations could face famine between November 2016 and May 2017.⁸

Despite this, peace talks ended in August 2016 and have not yet successfully been revived, fighting has intensified, and during the past nine months alone, an additional 3 million people are now food insecure.

If the parties to the conflict – and those fueling it with arm sales – continue to ignore Yemen's food crisis, they will have knowingly caused a famine.

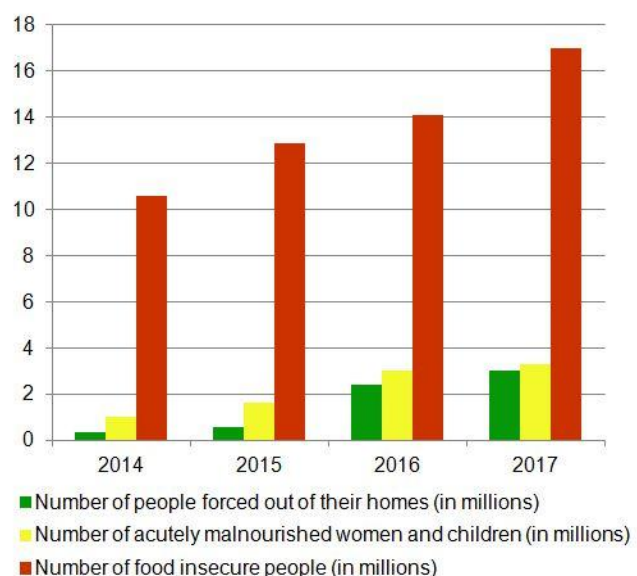
A population at a breaking point

Between June 2015 and March 2016, the number of people going hungry in Yemen – those classified as food insecure⁹ – increased by more than 30 percent.¹⁰ Now an estimated 17 million people, 60 percent of the population, lack reliable access to sufficient quantities of nutritious food. In seven governorates, 6.8 million people are one step away from famine – that is severely food insecure – and have no idea where their next meal is coming from. This is a 60 percent increase since 2014.¹¹

In these circumstances, bread and tea is for many people the only diet available.

Oxfam surveyed 2000 families of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Hajjah Governorate, between November and December 2016, and found 85 percent of respondents were going hungry. These families, who were forced to flee their homes because of the conflict, have lost everything they had.

The survey showed that the only solution for many families is to reduce the amount of food they eat, or feed what little they have to their children in priority before themselves. They skip meals and end up buying food of lesser quality, often on credit.



Yemen's spiral of decline

All the respondents declared they were eating meat, fish or fruits, less than once a week, while some have no source of food at all.

Rabii, 51, was forced to flee with his wife and 11 children to Hajjah governorate. They lost their house and everything they owned.

“I’ve been living in a hut for two years, which doesn’t protect us from the cold winter and the summer rain. We had no choice though, because my village was under the bombs, we left to save the children,” he said.

Without a source of income, he is unable to buy food or medicine for his children. Not even bread.

“At the beginning, I had some money by selling the few sheep I had left. But for the past six months, I have no money at all. Sometimes the farmers I work with give me some flour but it’s not enough for my big family,” added Rabii.

In the absence of a proper diet, malnutrition is on the rise in Yemen. About 3.3 million children and pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers are acutely malnourished, including 462,000 children under 5 suffering from severe acute malnutrition. This represents a 57 percent increase since late 2015, and an extreme increase of 200 per cent since 2014 according to UNICEF.¹²

With a lack of water and sanitation and people’s immune systems weakening, cholera broke out in October 2016. Six months later, there are over 22,000 suspected cases across 15 governorates and at least 100 people have died so far.¹³ Pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, new born babies and young children remain the most vulnerable¹⁴ and UNICEF has estimated that 63,000 children died in 2016 from preventable causes linked to malnutrition.¹⁵

The rise of cholera is an ominous sign in a country with a crippled health system already brought to its knees. More than 14.8 million people lack access to basic healthcare, including 8.8 million living in severely underserved areas.¹⁶

Foziah, 36, fled Taiz to Amran with her sick husband who suffers from epilepsy.

“Life has never been easy for us, even before the conflict. But my husband used to work as a mechanic. Now that he’s sick, I have to take care of him and help my family at home cleaning and cooking, I can’t work outside of the house. Money is a challenge for me, we cannot even buy his medicine,” she said.

The closure of Sana’a airport in August 2016 to commercial flights also left people without access to medical care abroad, and is a death-sentence for people without any possible escape from the war.

As the conflict drags on, life is reaching breaking point for Yemenis, and nearly 70 percent of the population, 18.8 million people are estimated to need humanitarian assistance – a nearly 20 per cent increase since late 2014. 10.3 million of these are in acute need.¹⁷

A food pipeline under attack

Even before the conflict started, nearly 90 percent of Yemen’s food had to be imported.

However, the flow of food has been massively disrupted by the warring parties. A blockade was first imposed on the country, preventing food coming in the country. While this has been eased, new restrictions on shipping and the destruction of many port facilities, such as the cranes of Al-Hudaydah port in August 2015 are punishing the Yemeni population. In October 2016, Yemen was only importing 40 percent of the food it needed.

Furthermore, lenders have become increasingly reluctant to supply credit to Yemeni traders seeking to import essential goods and international banks are routinely closing international accounts of Yemeni private sector companies and individuals because they judge their accounts too risky to hold as they are transferring money to Yemen.

Subsequently, Yemen's biggest traders announced last December that they were halting new wheat imports.¹⁸ Current estimates indicate that existing supplies of wheat in the country will last only until the end of April.

Fighting on Yemen's west coast has escalated in the last month, especially around Al-Hudaydah and Mocha ports, which risks further cutting off vital supplies. In February, replacement cranes for Al-Hudaydah port were prevented from being unloaded and were instead sent back the UAE, further delaying the full operation of the port.

As a result, some ships carrying wheat and other stocks are being redirected to Aden port, while those carrying fuel are redirected to Hadhramaut. Al-Hudaydah port normally handles 70 percent of Yemen's food imports as well as humanitarian aid.

Rerouting supplies and overland transport will greatly increase the costs and further delay the delivery of much need goods to the northern part of the country. Businessmen report that getting a container from Aden to Sana'a now costs as much as getting the same container from Hong-Kong to Aden.

Some areas, such as Taiz city, are also suffering a de facto siege due to the fighting, and the few goods and supplies coming into the city are far from enough to meet the needs of a starving population. In total, 2.4 million people are food insecure in Taiz governorate, 75 percent of its population, the highest number in the country.¹⁹

Khawla, 7, was displaced with her family a year ago because of the fighting in Taiz governorate, like thousands of others. They now live in a public school used a shelter.

"We were using gas for cooking, but prices are too expensive now and we can't afford it. So I help my mother fetching firewood instead. We're worried our father will join armed groups in order to provide for us,!" she explained.

Bureaucratic impediments and restrictions, such as clearances and movements requests, are also at times delaying or even preventing aid deliveries.

In the meantime, Yemeni agriculture and food production, on which 60 percent of the country relies to live, have also been decimated by the conflict.

Over a thousand farms producing grain, fruits and vegetables have been bombed between March 2015 and October 2016 according to the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation.²⁰

More than 1.5 million households engaged in agriculture work, also lack critical agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizer, or fuel for irrigation.²¹

As a direct result of the war, cereal production has plunged by 37 percent since 2015,²² pushing further millions of people towards starvation. People may not survive the situation much longer if the international community fails to step up.

A decimated economy

Even when food does reach the shops and market stands, too many Yemenis cannot afford to purchase what they need to survive. Costs have increased sharply while people's ability to make a living has collapsed as the economy has been decimated.

Average food prices are now 22 percent higher²³ than when the conflict escalated two years ago, and the general cost of living is now 40 percent higher²⁴.

Salaries of over 1.2 million government employees have barely been paid since September 2016, which means around 7 million people have lost the income they were living on.²⁵ The majority of private sectors employees have also been laid off.

Yahya, 45, is a retired soldier who used to work in farms in the north of the country. As food prices went up, his pension was no longer enough to feed his 12 children.

"I haven't received my pension for three months now. When I work, I don't get more than 1,500 Riyals a day (\$6) and that's only a few days during the rainy season. On the other hand, flour alone costs 6,500 Riyals (\$26) for ten days, and I still need to buy oil, sugar and anything to feed my family," he explained.

"My youngest son is sick, his body is weak. I went to the hospital and they told me he was suffering from malnutrition. He's unstable and has to eat healthy food to recover. I am afraid my little son will die and I would blame myself because I couldn't buy enough food for him. I was even thinking of selling my kidney before I received some humanitarian aid," added Yahya.

The Central Bank of Yemen has been at the center of political maneuvers between the warring parties and is now split between two branches in Sana'a and in Aden. In the capital, the body has mostly run out its supplies of Yemeni Riyals, meaning that institutions are unable to pay their workers.

Ansa, 50, lives with her family in Lahj governorate in the south of the country. Divorced, she is supporting her children and grandchildren alone. Her government pension now stopped being paid while food prices keep increasing.

"We've been living hungry since the beginning and now we cannot even buy as much food as before. So we eat smaller quantities and we eat less often," she said

There has been an influx of newly printed Riyals into the new Central Bank in Aden, but there are concerns over the Yemeni government's willingness to pay civil servants in the northern part of the country.

The Emergency Food Security and Nutrition Assessment (EFSNA) found that over 80 percent of Yemenis are now indebted and more than 50 percent of households buying food on credit.²⁶

Families also had to sell their livestock to pay for food, and many rely on communities' generosity to help them survive.

In Hajjah, all the displaced people Oxfam spoke to were found to be highly food insecure. This is due to the fact that they either lost everything during the war or had been forced to sell everything to survive and have nothing left to sell. More than a third (35.5 per cent) of the displaced population does not have any source of income at all.

Urgent action is needed to rescue the economy if Yemenis are to be rescued from a catastrophe for which the world will bear the responsibility.

The need for a fully funded immediate response

The world cannot wait for a famine to be declared in Yemen to act.

While peace is the only lasting solution, humanitarian needs continue to increase while the funding hasn't kept up to address these needs. The 2016 UN appeal for Yemen was only 60 percent funded with a shortfall of \$623 million.

In February 2017, the UN launched the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan with a humanitarian appeal of \$2.1 billion for Yemen, which represents a 30 percent increase compared to 2016.²⁷ It is only 7 percent funded as of 15 March.²⁸

The current humanitarian aid effort is helping but the levels of need are enormous and not close to being met, which means more people will die if funding gaps continue.

Oxfam recommends:

1. The United Nations Secretary General should pressure all parties to the conflict to resume peace talks, in order to reach a negotiated peace agreement. This should include reconciliation between communities, and be underpinned by the meaningful participation of women, youth and other marginalised groups.
2. We call on donors to fully fund the UN Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan. Funding needs to be flexible and responsive to the challenges on the ground and longer-term.
3. All land, sea and air routes to Yemen must remain open to allow the regular and consistent flow of commercial supplies of food, fuel and medicines into the country at the levels necessary for economic recovery and to meet the needs of the population. Attacks targeting military objects related to supply routes and infrastructure, including ports, must not disproportionately affect civilians in accordance with International Humanitarian Law.
4. All parties must uphold their legal obligations to protect civilians, and facilitate humanitarian access to all those in need across all areas of Yemen. They must avoid attacking civilian infrastructure including hospitals, schools, markets, humanitarian assets and water infrastructure, and stop impeding the access of humanitarian agencies.
5. The international community needs to provide urgent relief and support to the Central Bank of Yemen, as well as to Yemen's private banks and importers, to stave off financial collapse. All parties to the conflict, in conjunction with the international community, should support the Yemeni financial system in order to stabilize markets for food.

NOTES

- ¹ OCHA Yemen Humanitarian Bulletin, issue 21 (18 March 2017) http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20170318_hb_en_final.pdf
- ² Task Force on Population Movement 13th Report (March 2017) http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/tfpm_dashboard_13th_report_v5.pdf
- ³ Yemen IPC Analysis (March 2017) http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IPC_Yemen_AcuteFI_Situation_March-July2017_ENversion.pdf
- ⁴ Oxfam, Yemen's invisible food crisis (March 2016) https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/mb-yemen-invisible-food-crisis-one-year-on-240316-en.pdf
- ⁵ The nine governorates were Abyan, Al-Bayda, Al-Dhale, Al-Hudaydah, Hajjah, Lahj, Saada, Shabwah and Taiz
- ⁶ Yemen IPC Analysis (June 2016) http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/1_IPC_Yemen_June2016_AcuteFoodInsecurityAnalysis_CommunicationBrief_0.pdf
- ⁷ http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55388#.WMfBWm_yvIV
- ⁸ FEWS NET, Yemen key message update (November 2016) <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen%20-%20Key%20Message%20Update%202016-11-30.pdf>
- ⁹ "Food insecure" refers to people who lack reliable access to sufficient quantities of nutritious food. - Yemen 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview (November 2016) http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/YEMEN%202017%20HNO_Final.pdf
- ¹⁰ Yemen IPC Analysis (March 2017)
- ¹¹ Yemen 2015 Humanitarian Needs Overview (December 2014) https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/2015_HNO_Yemen_Final_0.pdf
- ¹² UNICEF (12 December 2016) <https://www.unicef.org.uk/press-releases/malnutrition-children-yemen-time-high-warns-unicef/>
- ¹³ WHO (07 March 2017) <http://www.emro.who.int/surveillance-forecasting-response/surveillance-news/weekly-update-cholera-cases-in-yemen-7-march-2017.html>
- ¹⁴ MSF (January 2017) <http://www.msf.org/en/article/yemen-healthcare-under-siege-taiz>
- ¹⁵ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-unicef-idUSKBN15F0WC>
- ¹⁶ UN YHRP 2017 (January 2017)
- ¹⁷ UN YHRP 2017 (January 2017)
- ¹⁸ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-food-exclusive-idUSKBN1450H6>
- ¹⁹ Yemen IPC Analysis (March 2017)
- ²⁰ Yemeni Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (October 2016) http://www.agriculture.gov.ye/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=14667
- ²¹ FAO Yemen situation report (February 2017) http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/emergencies/docs/FAOYemen_sitrep_February2017.pdf
- ²² FAO GIEWS Yemen Country Brief (February 2017) <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/YEM10-February-2017.pdf>
- ²³ UN YHRP 2017 (January 2017)
- ²⁴ ESFNA 2016 Preliminary Results (January 2017) http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/efsna_-_preliminary_results_public_final1.pdf
- ²⁵ Studies and Economic Media Center, Yemen 2016 Economic Indicators Report (January 2017) <http://www.economicmedia.net/newen/images/english%20report%202016.pdf>
- ²⁶ ESFNA 2016 Preliminary Results (January 2017)
- ²⁷ UN YHRP 2017 (January 2017)
- ²⁸ Financial Tracking Service (consulted on 20 March) <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/248/summary/2017>