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Yemen's crisis: 1,000 days of disaster

Western governments will be complicit of the world's worst humanitarian crisis if they do not act now, as 1,000 days of war continue to push the country towards an apocalyptic situation.



A child sits in what is left of his house after an airstrike in Faj Attan area in Yemen's capital Sana'a. (Credit: Gabreez / Oxfam Yemen)

Background

Yemen has been wracked by a complex and bloody war that escalated in March 2015, involving among others, the Government of Yemen backed by a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia, and the Houthis, who were until recently aligned with Yemen's former President Saleh.

Over the past 33 months, airstrikes and fighting have killed thousands of civilians and forced millions of people out of their homes. The country is now enduring the largest ever recorded cholera outbreak and the UN has warned it could face the world's worst famine in recent decades.

1000 days of war

A worsening situation, month after month

Before the conflict, Yemen was already the poorest country in the region and 1,000 days of war have led to incredible levels of suffering and humanitarian disasters¹:

26 March 2015: The Saudi-led coalition begins airstrikes in an attempt to re-establish the internationally recognized government. The air campaign and ground fighting spread across the country.

Summer 2015: The coalition takes back the control of Aden and southern Yemen. Taiz is under siege by Houthi and Saleh forces.

18 August 2015: The cranes of Al-Hudaydah port are bombed.

3 June 2016: Houthi-affiliated forces shell a market in Taiz city, killing at least 12 and injuring over 120 people.²

August 2016: The Coalition closes Sanaa airport. Fighting and airstrikes escalate. An MSF-supported hospital and a school are hit by airstrikes.

16 August 2016: Shells fired by Houthi-affiliated forces kill seven civilians in southern Saudi Arabia.³

4 October 2016: 10 children are killed by shelling of civilian areas by Houthi-affiliated forces in Taiz city.

8 October 2016: Several airstrikes hit a funeral in Sanaa killing and injuring hundreds.

March 2017: 7 million people are announced to be on the brink of famine.

April 2017: The major cholera outbreak begins.

6 November 2017: The Houthis fire a missile towards Riyadh. The Saudi-led coalition imposes a new blockade on all Yemen's ports, effectively sealing the country off.

23 November 2017: Saudi Arabia agrees that humanitarian supplies will be allowed to enter Yemen's ports, but no fuel and only a third of Yemen's food needs have been allowed to enter Yemen's northern ports since this time.

Death and displacement

As the conflict escalated, the lives of millions of people were turned upside down.

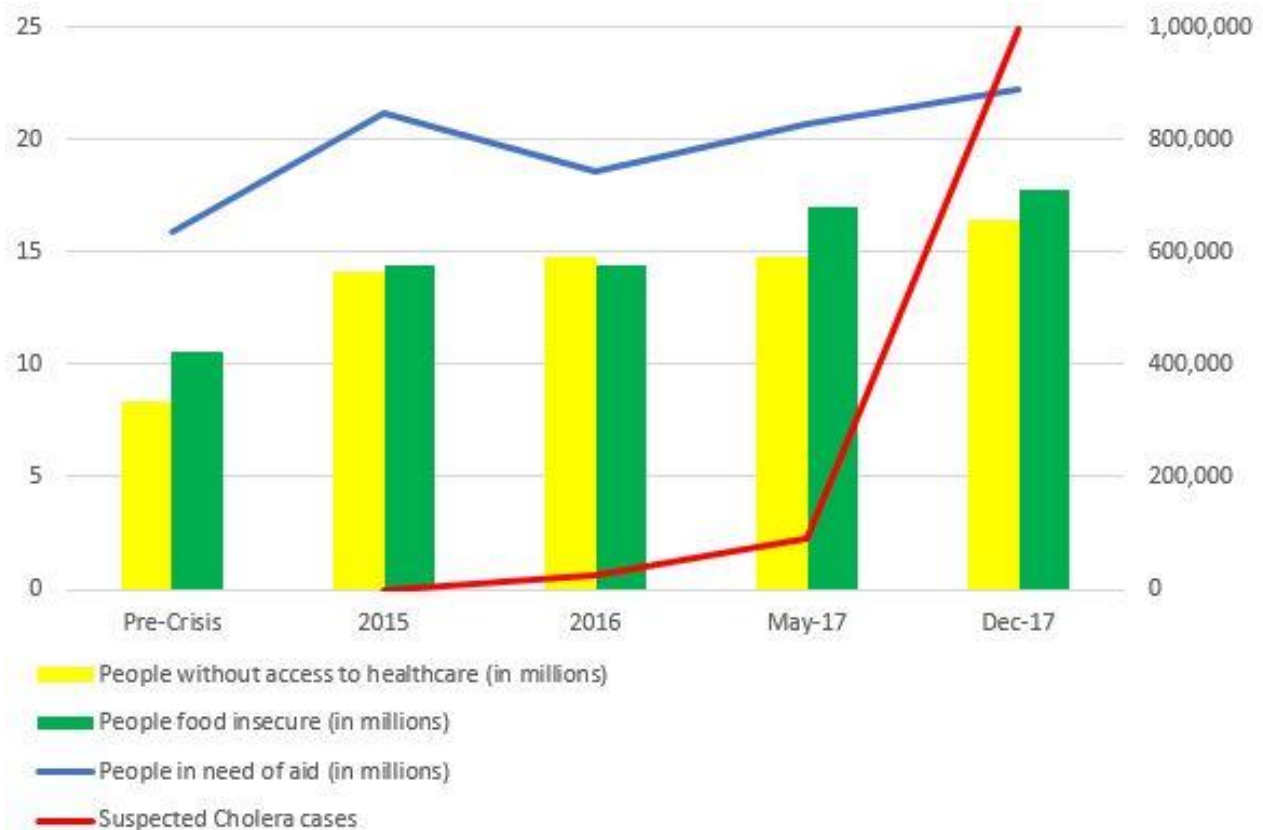
Airstrikes, ground level fighting, indiscriminate shelling, rockets and sniper fire by all sides have killed nearly 5,300 civilians since March 2015⁴. Almost 9,000 have been injured.

Three million people were forced to flee their homes⁵. Under the bombs and shelling around them, they packed a few things and fled to wherever they could to find safety, such as a tree, a camp, a cave in the mountain or a relative's home, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away. Most of these families lost everything they had. More than two million people are still displaced today, living in crowded camps with little access to food and water, or hosted by families who are struggling to provide for everyone.

Many other families had no choice but to stay and risk death as they didn't have the means to leave.

22.2 million people – three-quarters of Yemen's population – are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection⁶, a 40 percent increase since the escalation of the conflict. More than half (11.3 million) of those are in acute need.⁷

Civilian infrastructures such as homes, schools, hospitals, businesses, factories, farms, markets, roads and bridges, were hit in contravention of the rules of war. Highly-populated areas were bombed and children were recruited by armed groups.



Yemen's road to apocalypse

Between war and diplomacy

On 14 April 2015, the UN Security Council passed the resolution 2216 demanding that all Yemeni parties, and the Houthis in particular, end the violence.⁸ But aside from a five-day humanitarian pause in May 2015 and a two-week ceasefire in late December 2015, the bloodshed continued, uninterrupted, until April 2016. A cessation of hostilities was then agreed upon and UN-sponsored peace talks began in Kuwait. They failed in early August 2016 and since then, the conflict has continued, extracting an increasingly heavy toll on its population.

Several western governments such as the United States and the United Kingdom are backing the Saudi-led coalition, and while calling for an end to the war, they continue along with Spain, France, Canada, Australia, and Italy, to sell billions of dollars' worth of weapons and military equipment to parties to the conflict. The Houthis are also accused of receiving backing and arms from Iran.

A shattered economy

The war has decimated Yemen's economy. The UN estimates that 8.4 million people in Yemen need assistance to meet their basic needs.⁹

The agriculture and fishing sectors, the main source of income for 73 percent of the population before the war¹⁰, have been severely damaged because of the fighting and the airstrikes, as well as the shortages of water, seeds, fertilizer, vaccines or even fuel for irrigation as well as preventing families to work.¹¹

As a result, the country's total cereal production in 2016 was around 37 percent below the previous five years' average and 11 percent lower than the harvest in 2015. Around 40 percent of all farming households have witnessed a decline in cereal production, while only about half of all fishermen are still able to work.¹²

More than half (55 per cent) of people working in the private sector have lost their jobs because of the conflict.¹³

Similarly, approximately 1.2 million civil servants – more than a third of Yemen's workforce – have not received salaries or received them only intermittently since August 2016.¹⁴ Around 7 million Yemenis in total depend on these public salaries.

In this environment, being able to access the basic needs became a daily struggle for thousands of families.

On the brink of famine

The conflict has pushed an already poor country to the brink. Before the escalation of the conflict, 10.6 million people were already going hungry in Yemen¹⁵ – those classified as food insecure¹⁶. A thousand days later, 17.8 million Yemenis are now food insecure, a 68 percent increase. This is the world's largest food emergency.¹⁷

Before the conflict, Yemen imported 90 percent of the food it needed.¹⁸ The blockade imposed by the Saudi-led coalition in March 2015 led to a drastic increase of basic items such as flour and fuel, the prices of which had increased by 55 and 560 per cent by May 2015.¹⁹ Prices then eased but have since fluctuated as new restrictions on shipping and the destruction of many port facilities, such as the cranes of Al-Hudaydah port in August 2015, continued to disrupt the flow of food into country.

Fighting and the destruction of roads and bridges is impacting the distribution of those supplies that do arrive in Yemen. Taiz city is among a number of areas suffering from a de-facto siege by the Houthis.

Daoshah Ahmed, 35, used to live in Sa'ada governorate with her husband and their four children. When the war broke out, they fled to a camp in Hajjah governorate. Shortly after, they heard that her husband's entire family was killed in an airstrike while they were having lunch. After a year of struggling without income, her husband decided to join an armed group to fight as it was the only work available. He was killed soon afterwards.

"We're alone and being displaced is a terrible situation. My young kids collect plastic bottles in the streets and they sell them for 50 YER (around 0.12 USD). With that money, we can buy 500g of flour for our only meal of the day."

Since the escalation of the conflict, shipping costs of wheat and rice for importers have thus respectively increased by almost 60–75 percent and 100 percent, while transportation cost rocketed by up to 100 percent.²⁰

In the midst of all these numbers, it is people, at the end of this process, who suffer the most.

Between March 2015 and April 2017, prices for wheat grain increased by 31 percent, for wheat flour by 32 percent, and for rice by a staggering 85 percent. The devaluation of the Yemeni Riyal, which has witnessed an approximate 84 percent rate increase from 215 YER/USD in 2014 to 396 YER/USD by the end of October 2017, has also further exacerbated the payment crisis that Yemenis face when trying to buy food.²¹

As of September 2017, overall food prices were on average, food prices were up to 29 percent higher since March 2015.²² And following the renewed blockade in November 2017, prices for the basic food items further increased by up to an additional 28 percent.²³

The overall result is a country on the brink of starvation. 8.4 million people are now a step away from famine, a staggering 23 percent increase in nine months.²⁴

Thabit Abdullah, a man in his 70s, was forced to move to Al-Nabeyah village in Lahj governorate with his family because of the war. They had nowhere to go so they found a spot under a tree that they transformed into their outdoor home until they managed to build a small hut made of hay. To make some money, he tries to sell firewood with his two sons and they all share whatever money they manage to make, but it's not enough for their basic food and water needs.

"Sometimes we eat, sometimes we don't. Whenever I can buy food, it's at credit, and that's only flour, oil and sugar. We can't afford anything else. For water, my sons and grandsons must walk for 30 minutes to go fetch it, several times a day. If I had money to get water, I'd use it for food!"

With increased food insecurity also comes increasing levels of malnutrition. 2.9 million people are currently acutely malnourished. 400,000 children under 5 are now suffering from severe acute malnutrition (SAM) and rates of stunting have increased.²⁵

In this catastrophic situation, aid organisations can only help but not revert the situation. Humanitarian food imports for survival cover only about 20 percent of the country's monthly needs in food imports.²⁶ The 2017 UN appeal itself only targets 12 million people, which means that even if it was fully funded, the needs of nearly 10 million people wouldn't be met.

The UN is now warning that unless the food security crisis is dealt with quickly, Yemen will face the worst famine the world has seen in decades.²⁷

A crippled health system

Weakened by hunger and the war, Yemenis are also becoming increasingly vulnerable to disease. In the meantime, their access to medical treatment has been all but wiped out by the war.

Between 2014 and November 2017, the number of people lacking basic and adequate healthcare has nearly doubled to reach 16.4 million, of which 9.3 million are in acute need.²⁸ This extreme deterioration is mostly a result of attacks which have crippled the healthcare system.

Only half of health facilities are functioning²⁹ following the bombings of hospitals and clinics, their use by armed groups, and fuel and medicine shortages.

Nada Abdullah, 32, lives in Taiz governorate. Due to the bombings, she suffered a miscarriage at the beginning of the war. Months later, she was forced to leave her house with her four children because of armed groups. She lived in a camp until she was displaced once again when the camp was shelled because of nearby fighting. Now they live in another camp, in a small plastic tent.

"When we are short of food, I walk for hours to reach the villages and knock on the doors asking for anything people can give me. My baby girl Aisha had a fever last night. I stayed up all night in fear crying as I couldn't take her to a hospital or just to buy anything to reduce her fever."

Yahya Ali, who lives in Sana'a with his wife and 10 children, is facing the same challenge. His brother suffered a stroke which left him with physical and psychological disabilities. While he needs regular medical exams and medicine, Yahya is unable to help his brother.

"Without any income, I can't pay for any of this. Everything is so expensive, I don't have the money that's needed. The only thing I can buy him is aspirin. How can this help?"

War as a breeding ground for diseases

A cholera epidemic first broke out in October 2016, with over 25,000 suspected cases in the six months it lasted.³⁰ Another, more serious outbreak occurred in April 2017 that spread with a lethal speed exacerbated by the rainy season of spring 2017, the continued deterioration of the health system and the strike of sanitation workers – leading garbage to pile-up in the streets

Hundreds of thousands of people became infected in a couple of months. At the height of the outbreak, up to one person was dying every hour. The outbreak is now the world's largest ever recorded.³¹ Since April, the cholera epidemic has spread to nearly every corner of the war-ravaged country. Nearly a million people are believed to have been infected and more than 2,200 people have died.³²

In less than six months, Yemen's outbreak infected more people than those who caught cholera during the previous record in Haiti. Yet it took Haiti seven years to reach that number.

Ali Alward, 45 and Badriyah Abdullah, 38, were cut off from clean drinking water by several airstrikes that bombed their village in Hajjah governorate. Deteriorating hygiene and sanitation conditions in the village made it easy for cholera to spread rapidly. 11 members of their family contracted cholera, including Badriyah.

"We drink the water from the well in the village. We never knew whether it was contaminated or not. There is no source of drinking water here, and there is no water trucks service as well. If we wanted to buy water trucks, it would cost us over 11,500 Yemeni Riyals (around 28 USD) for a week."

The cholera outbreak is also an example of how the different crisis are all intertwined and a direct consequence of the war. Hajjah and Al-Hudaydah governorates, which are among the worst regions in terms of food insecurity, are also among the governorates with the highest numbers of suspected cholera cases. Similarly, Hajjah, Sana'a and Taiz governorates all show the highest numbers of displacement, with elevated numbers of suspected cholera cases and food insecurity and are all subject to intense bombing and fighting.³³

Even though the epidemic has finally been brought under some level of control and is now slowing down, it could flare up again as the tightening of the blockade leads to shortages of the fuel needed to provide millions of people with clean water.

In the meantime, Diphtheria is spreading with 318 suspected cases and 28 deaths recorded in 15 out of 22 governorates in the country, with half the cases being children under the age of 14.³⁴

Women's increasing suffering

Yemeni women currently face some of the gravest inequalities in the world when it comes to resources such as legal protection, justice, healthcare or education, according to a worldwide study on the gender gap.³⁵ This imbalance clearly holds in terms of food security and nutrition, where women in Yemen suffer disproportionately.

Women are often the first to skip meals or eat smaller portions so that the family ration goes further.³⁶ 1.1 million pregnant or breastfeeding women are acutely malnourished³⁷ and malnourished women are in turn at increased risk of giving birth to malnourished babies.³⁸ There are also over 52,000 women who risk developing complications during childbirth.

Incidents of violence against women have increased by more than 63 percent over the last two years.³⁹

Yemeni women, especially those who are displaced, are increasingly struggling to access hospital and medical services, as well as legal services as they have lost their identification papers, or never held them, and no longer have the means or infrastructure to obtain them.

Children's unknown future

Children bear the brunt of the conflict and their future is looking increasingly gloomy as the war continues.

An estimated 4.1 million children now require assistance to continue their education⁴⁰ and over 1,600 schools can no longer be used because they were destroyed, or are used to host displaced families or warring parties.

Early marriage has also increased since the escalation of the conflict. Between 2016 and 2017, rates of child marriage have increased from 52 to 66 percent of girls under the age of 18 getting married.⁴¹ Girls as young as eight or 10 years old can be married off to reduce the number of family members to feed, but also as a source of income in order to feed the rest of the family and pay off debts.⁴²

The UN listed the Saudi-led coalition, the Houthis, the government forces, AQAP and other armed groups in its report Children and Armed conflict for being responsible of violations against children. In 2016, over 500 children were killed, more than 800 were injured, and 33 schools were attacked by different parties.⁴³ There were also 606 cases of recruitment and use of children by warring parties for the past year.⁴⁴

A blockade leading to fuel and water shortages

On top of this worsening situation and following a missile fired toward Riyadh airport by the Houthis, on 6 November 2017 the Saudi-led coalition ordered the temporary closure of all Yemeni ground, air and sea ports, amongst other measures, sealing the country off. Prices went through the roof in a matter of days with fuel increasing up to 170 percent, water by 133 percent and food basket by up to 28 percent.⁴⁵

Some ports were reopened in the following weeks but only insufficient supplies – both aid and commercial shipments – were allowed in the country.

Fuel is now the critical issue at stake: 97 percent of Yemen's fuel needs are imported and only through commercial imports. However, no fuel shipment has entered the country since 6 November, which lead to fuel shortages in most of the country's northern areas – the same areas that are the most impacted by the blockade – while the prices continue to remain too high for ordinary people. and dramatic price spikes

Yemen already has one of the worst problems of water scarcity anywhere in the world. 16 million people lack access to clean water, either because there is no infrastructure or because they can't afford water trucks. To survive, many families are forced to search for water in neighbouring areas, which is often a dangerous trip.

Salim Ibrahim, 55, was displaced from Taiz governorate when the war broke out. He lost everything.

"Instead of a house, we live under a big tree. There is nothing around here. I need to walk for two hours every morning to fetch 60 litres of water. And then I repeat the same thing shortly before sunset. I wish we could just buy water. We're so exhausted. But it costs more than 4,000 YER (around 9 USD) and we can't afford that!"

The majority of people who do get clean water receive it via networks that depend on fuel. Following the fuel shortage, the ICRC announced that nine cities have seen their networks shut down, leaving over 2.5 million people without clean water.⁴⁶

If fuel is not allowed into the country urgently, Oxfam estimates that eight million people could be cut off from clean water, leaving more than four in five people without a steady supply of clean water. A disruption to fuel supplies on this scale could trigger a fresh spike in a cholera epidemic.

Underfunded UN appeals

As humanitarian needs keep increasing month after month, humanitarian funding remains well below what is needed. UN appeals for Yemen have been repeatedly underfunded, respectively 55 percent and 63 percent in 2015 and 2016 and 2017, equivalent to \$1.9 billion funding in two years, with a shortfall of \$1.3 billion.

The 2017 appeal is only 61.3 percent funded, with a shortfall of over \$900 million.⁴⁷ This means that the Yemen appeal has not been fully funded for a third consecutive year. The world can no longer afford to wait to take immediate and substantial action - millions of lives are hanging in the balance.

While the US and the UK are among the biggest donors to the 2017 appeal – representing together over 46 percent of the funding – they are also benefiting from the over \$10 billion worth of arms sales that were made to warring parties since 2015, four times the amount of the Yemen 2017 UN appeal.

If world leaders keep on failing to meet humanitarian needs and pressuring parties to the conflict, while fuelling the conflicts with arms sales, they will be complicit of the world's worst disaster ever seen.

Oxfam recommends:

1. World leaders should pressure all parties to the conflict to reach an immediate ceasefire to end the bloodshed.
2. All land, sea and air routes to Yemen should be fully 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. Sanaa airport must also be reopened for commercial flights to allow people to come in and out of Yemen, especially those in need of medical attention. Attacks targeting military objects related to supply routes and infrastructure, including ports, must not disproportionately affect civilians in accordance with International Humanitarian Law.
3. 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.
4. The United Nations Secretary General needs to push 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.
5. 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.

NOTES

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- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ UN (14 April 2015) <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11859.doc.htm>
- ⁹ Yemen 2018 HNO op.cit.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ FAO Yemen situation reports (February 2017 & November 2017)
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- ¹⁸ Oxfam op.cit.
- ¹⁹ OCHA Yemen Humanitarian Bulletin, issue 1 (27 August 2015)
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