

Humanitarian disaster in Yemen as fighting for Marib intensifies

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18 October 2021

Yemen is facing the world's worst food crisis. This is the direct result of the criminal Saudi-led military coalition's efforts to restore by force the discredited government of Riyadh's proxy, President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Backed by US and British imperialism, the six-year war fought by air, land and sea, has wrecked the country's economy.

Fighting has intensified, with 47 identifiable front lines. The war has caused at least 120,000 deaths, including tens of thousands of civilians, as well as a further 131,000 from indirect causes such as lack of food, health services and infrastructure. An outbreak of cholera, an easily treated disease, has led to more than 2.5 million cases and at least 4,000 deaths.

Human rights organisations have accused the Saudi-led coalition of bombing schools, hospitals and other civilian targets. Earlier this month, the United Nations Human Rights Council succumbed to pressure from Saudi Arabia and its extensive lobbying campaign and voted against extending its investigation into possible war crimes in Yemen committed by the Saudi-led coalition. It marked the first time in the council's 15-year history that a resolution was defeated.

Last week, the UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs's (OCHA) Assistant Secretary-General Ramesh Rajasingham warned that five million people are one step away from famine and more than 20 million Yemenis, two thirds of Yemen's 30 million population, need humanitarian assistance. But, he said, the aid agencies "are, once again, starting to run out of money," having received \$2.1 billion, just over half of its \$3.85 billion requirement. Without further funding to "keep famine at bay," he added, "in the coming weeks and months, up to four million people could see their food aid reduced," and the number rising to five million by the end of the year.

Yemen's population is young and the situation facing children is heartbreaking. Henrietta Fore, Executive

Director of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), said, "Being a child in Yemen is the stuff of nightmares." Having experienced or witnessed horrific scenes of violence or watched their parents fight off starvation, they will carry the physical and emotional scars for their entire lives. In 2021, 1.6 million children were internally displaced due to violence, while essential health, sanitation and education services are "incredibly fragile" and "on the brink of total collapse."

Of the 20 million Yemenis in need of humanitarian assistance to survive, 11.3 million are children. Of these children, around 2.3 million are acutely malnourished and 400,000 under five suffer from severe acute malnutrition. Fore stressed, "In Yemen, one child dies every 10 minutes from preventable causes, including malnutrition and vaccine-preventable diseases."

Yemen's economy has suffered one blow after another thanks to the blockade of its ports and the closure of its international airport in Sana'a. Its currency has sunk to one sixth of its pre-war value against the dollar in Aden, making imports unaffordable. According to OCHA, commercial food imports to the key ports of Hodeida and Saleef were down eight percent compared to this time last year, while "fuel imports were an alarming 64 percent lower."

Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world even before the war, has seen its GDP crash by 40 percent since 2015, leading to doctors, teachers and sanitation workers being paid late if at all over the last four years. Two million children are not in school and one in six schools are unusable. A further four million children are at risk of dropping out as unpaid teachers leave to find paid work.

Unemployment is running at more than 50 percent. The war has disrupted agriculture, manufacturing and the extraction of oil and natural gas, the country's key

exports. Inflation last year was more than 26 percent, with the situation in relation to food far worse. Between February 2016 and October 2020, wheat flour rose 133 percent, vegetable oil 96 percent and rice 164 percent, making it impossible for most Yemenis to put food on the table. Most now survive only because of international aid.

The Saudi-led military campaign was launched in 2015, with the US and UK providing weaponry, surveillance, intelligence, training and other backup support, to restore the Hadi government. It is part of the House of Saud's efforts to maintain the rule of the Gulf petro-monarchs and their allies across the peninsular amid seething social tensions that came to a head in the Arab Spring of 2011. Mass protests in Bahrain, major demonstrations and unrest in Kuwait and Oman, and smaller protests in Saudi Arabia were brutally suppressed.

In Yemen, protests broke out against the 32-year-long dictatorial rule of US and Saudi-backed president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who unleashed the military. Following forced Saleh's forced resignation, Hadi, his vice-president, took over in 2012. Two years later, protests again erupted over his failure to resolve any of the social problems, leading to Hadi's ouster and the seizure of power by the Houthis, a Shia tribe from the north of the country, in alliance with some of Saleh's supporters in January 2015. Hadi fled to Riyadh.

The Saudis, fielding a military coalition with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other Arab countries, invaded their southern neighbour in 2015, denouncing the Houthi rebels as Iran's proxies, in a bid to reimpose Hadi and prevent a similar uprising at home. The oil-rich Eastern Province that is home to Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population who have faced decades of economic neglect is a social powder keg. But the coalition disintegrated as the war proved more difficult and costly than expected, with local or tribal militias operating in unstable and fluid alliances—some backed by Riyadh and some by Abu Dhabi, which has since withdrawn its support for the war.

The country has splintered with the Houthis controlling the northern part of the country, including the capital Sana'a and the majority of the country's population. The south and the west, including the port city of Aden, is controlled by the UAE-backed secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) in the south and the Republican Guards on the western coast, led by former president Saleh's nephew. The eastern provinces that are home to the country's energy resources, pipelines and Indian Ocean ports, is controlled by Hadi's dwindling forces and supporters linked to Islamists and al-Qaeda.

All the major ports and cities in the south and west have seen protests in the last months denouncing the government's failure to pay wages, ensure reliable electricity and fuel supplies and end inflation.

The Houthis are now fighting to gain control of Marib, which along with Shebwa is the site of Yemen's oil and gas reserves. In recent weeks, they have taken control of the central province of al-Bayda, the southern approach to Marib and its oil reserves, and made gains in Shebwa and Abyan provinces, cutting off Saudi supply lines in readiness for a final push on Marib city.

The Saudis have pushed back against the Houthis, with ground forces killing at least 165 Houthi fighters and air strikes killing another 1,000 in the last week and displacing nearly 10,000 people. The city is already home to hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people. The loss of Marib would mean the near certain collapse of the mission to reimpose the Hadi government and likely see the Houthis push south to confront the secessionists in the south and west of the country, potentially causing the UAE to return to Yemen to support its clients.

The Biden administration in the United States has begun to pressure Riyadh to put an end to a war that is draining the resources of one of its key regional allies. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan recently visited Riyadh, calling for an end to its blockade on Hodeida port and negotiations with the Houthis to enable the reopening of Sanaa International Airport. He warned Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that Congressional legislation could limit US military cooperation with Saudi Arabia.



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