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Yemen: Struggling to Break the Fast

Yemen is a pressure cooker that is reaching its critical point. Attacked from the air, from the ground and cut-off by land, sea and air - Yemenis are in desperate need and have nowhere to go.

The recent escalation in conflict has displaced nearly 1.3 million people. Over 3,500 people have so far been directly killed by the violence, but thousands more face death and impairment due to the secondary effects of this conflict – not least of which is hunger, malnutrition and disease. To prevent Yemen from reaching a tipping-point, the international community need to urgently lift restrictions on imports and implement a permanent ceasefire which facilitates safe movement of goods across the country. The Friends of Yemen – a group of donors including the US and European and Gulf states – has not met since the current escalation in the crisis and the UN humanitarian response fund remains only 15% funded. Hunger is both the cause and the effect of violence in Yemen. Future peace talks need to address underlying causes – equitable distribution of natural resources – to see an end to this conflict.

‘Even if we survive the bombs we are running out of food’

Eid al Fitr, ‘the festival of breaking the fast’ was celebrated around the world last week, but celebrations in Yemen were muted. Since the escalation of conflict in March 2015, almost 13 million Yemenis, one in every two people, face a daily struggle to access enough food to eat, half of whom are living in emergency situations on the brink of starvation.ⁱ Famine could be the most devastating result of this conflict.

Over a three month period from March 26 – June 26, 2015, the number of people with limited access to food increased by a staggering 2.3 million people;ⁱⁱ the equivalent of over 25,000 extra people a day. Even for Yemen, a country with chronic food insecurity,ⁱⁱⁱ this is the highest ever recorded number of people living in hunger in Yemen. Four months of intense airstrikes, shelling and ground fighting and restrictions on imports imposed by the Saudi-led coalition have left the country in tatters. A lack of food is leaving people hungry and causing an increase in malnutrition levels, particularly among women and children, and is putting hundreds of thousands of lives at risk.^{iv}

During an Oxfam assessment in Sanaa, displaced families identified food as their number one concern.^v Nuha Al Saeedi, Oxfam Deputy Programme Manager and a resident of the capital Sanaa said: “Even if we survive the bombs we are running out of food”. The violence, the restrictions on imports and the cost of fuel means that what limited supplies exist, are only sporadically available, and at hugely inflated prices. Price hikes have pushed vital food, fuel and medical supplies out of the reach of cash-strapped families, most of whom have not had regular income for several months. A lack of food in the market, high prices, difficult access to markets, and a lack of income, have all contributed to a rapid increase in the number of Yemenis going hungry.

Although Yemen reportedly has some stocks of wheat in country, fuel shortages, airstrikes and ground violence are severely hindering distribution of food to local markets. Families fleeing violence are placing additional strain on the communities that now host them, as they arrive empty-handed and communities share what little they have.

WARNING SIGNS

Oxfam has previously reported on the human cost of a late response to early warning signs of famine in different crises it has worked on.^{vi} Time and again, famine is a human-created disaster which quick action and effective diplomacy could have prevented. Experts warn that Yemen is one step away from famine.^{vii} The communities that Oxfam works with are struggling on a daily basis to get food to eat. This time, the international community must act on early warning signs to protect the lives of millions of Yemenis at risk of extreme hunger, illness and death.^{viii}

Prior to the recent outbreak of conflict, Yemenis were already living in a precarious situation, with unemployment on the rise and many struggling to get enough to eat. Since the 2011 uprising and subsequent political transition, the humanitarian situation in Yemen has deteriorated as the country slipped into a recession.^{ix} As a result of the recent conflict Yemen has now reached the highest rates of hunger ever recorded in Yemen.^x

Conflict and the food crisis are inextricably linked. The fuel crisis in 2014 caused massive shortages of fuel countrywide and a spike in food prices, water, transportation and the cost of cultivation.^{xi} The later removal of fuel subsidies and the severe hardships it created contributed to the escalation of the current conflict.^{xii} Fuel is again running out in Yemen. The violence has effectively ended in-country oil refining. As a result, Yemen is now almost 100% reliant on imports to meet its fuel requirements. Due to import restrictions for the past 4 months, only 20% of domestic fuel needs have been allowed in, and the price of fuel has increased by an average of 400%. The high cost has had a serious knock-on effect on the price of food, and across all sectors of the economy; with a devastating impact on people's livelihoods.

NO FOOD IN THE MARKET

Food is in short supply in most areas of Yemen. Yemen is one of the least self-sufficient countries in the world; importing 80% of the food it consumes (90% of wheat and 100% of rice).^{xiii} "Any disruption of imports would have significant humanitarian consequences" warned the Yemen Food Security Information Systems (FSIS) Development Programme on 17 June, 2015,^{xiv} yet still only 20% of required food imports are entering the country. The blockade on imports and exports imposed by the Saudi-led coalition, a 'commercial cargo embargo',^{xv} has severely disrupted ordinary citizens' access to the food they desperately need.

Even when food enters the country, it is not reaching many local markets due to the scarcity and high cost of fuel and insecurity – all crippling distribution. In Sanaa, communities told Oxfam that wheat flour, wheat grain and sugar had become the hardest food items to find. In Amran and Hodeidah, people mentioned that main sources of protein such as chicken, yogurt and milk, were in alarmingly short supply.^{xvi} Availability of food in the south-western governorates is critically low.^{xvii} This seems primarily due to the intensity of fighting which has restricted imports into the south, as well as the challenge of transporting food overland through active conflict zones. The arrival of the World Food Programme ship in Aden port last week will alleviate the suffering of nearly 1 million hungry people in Aden governorate alone. Much more needs to come in through the port in the coming weeks to address the scale of the food crisis in that region alone.

Food production in Yemen has also been severely affected. Without fuel, factories and mills that process food can no longer operate and water cannot be pumped to irrigate farms. Local production of vegetables has also been affected by the destruction of agricultural infrastructure in north-western governorates.^{xviii}

SOARING PRICES

The reduction of imports, the cost of transportation, the disruption to food production and rise of informal 'black' markets has contributed to a sharp increase in prices.^{xix} Communities in Sanaa are concerned that rising prices and depleting stocks mean that markets could soon stop functioning. In Amran and Hodeidah, communities told Oxfam that soaring prices is the main barrier to accessing food.^{xx} Price of cooking gas has also significantly

Peak Food Prices Across Yemen

Red Beans (kg) YER 550
(USD 2.55) in Taiz in July,
increase by 76%

Wheat (kg) YER 295
(USD 1.37) in Marib in May,
increase by 115%.

Onions (Kg) YER 600
(USD 2.79) in Addaleh in June,
increase by 176%

Sugar (Kg) YER 800
(USD 3.72) in Aden in June,
increase by 274%.

Cooking gas (bottle) YER 8200
(USD 38) in Abyan in June,
increase by 326%

increased and therefore the preparation of meals is also becoming more costly.

Rural areas have been hard hit by rising prices. In Al-Kadhah village, Al-Sukhna district, communities explained that transportation costs to reach the market have increased from YER 1000 to YER 5000. Yahay told us, *“prices increased more in our village compared to Al-Sukhna (district centre). 1kg of wheat costs YER 200 in Al-Sukhna, but YER 250 here in the village”*.

While costs are increasing, people’s access to money is plummeting. Few people produce their own food and Yemenis need cash to buy their staple food, such as wheat, sugar and oil. Most people no longer have access to regular incomes, as businesses are shut due to the conflict. 60% of the workforce and two thirds of the population rely on the agricultural sector for employment. This sector has been one of the hardest hit by rising costs of fuel needed for irrigation of fields as well as insecurity, destruction of agricultural infrastructure and restrictions on exports due to closed borders.

DESTRUCTIVE MEASURES

‘Destructive measures’ are being used by families to cope with food shortages, impacting on people’s health and safety.^{xxi} This includes consuming less nutritious food, eating less food during meals, reducing the number of meals, and restricting adults’ consumption to try and provide for children. Over 6 million people in Yemen are severely food insecure and coping by limiting their diet to almost exclusively wheat, rice, oil and sugar; A further 6 million people, the moderately food insecure, are able to supplement this with a few vegetables, a little bit of meat, dairy or pulses and fruit on 1 day a week.^{xxii}

Children are at particular risk. Yahay in Al Suknah district, Hodeidah Governorate says: *“Although my wife is ‘nifaas’ (just gave birth) and doesn’t have to fast [during Ramadan], she is fasting from necessity. There is not enough food for her to breastfeed the baby”*.

Even before the recent violence, 41% of Yemen’s children had stunted growth due to malnutrition and Yemen had the second highest malnutrition rate in the world.^{xxiii} Since the escalation in violence in March 2015, an additional 650,000 children, pregnant and lactating mothers are now acutely malnourished bringing the number up to a staggering 1.5 million requiring nutritional services.^{xxiv}

Most Yemenis are now forced to rely on negative and sometimes irreversible coping strategies such as begging, selling productive assets, over reliance on credit and loans for food and health care, marrying girls at a very young age, and putting children to work. Even before the recent escalation in violence, 22.7% of children were involved in some form of child labour.^{xxv}

During interviews with displaced families in Sanaa, 60% told Oxfam that they cope through begging, shoe polishing and hoping for charity. The only source of food for two of the three locations was one cooked meal a day from a local organisation.^{xxvi}

CONCLUSION

If the conflict in Yemen is allowed to continue, the current food crisis could lead to the deaths of thousands. The brutal conflict and restrictions on imports should end, and rapid action is needed to reverse this food crisis. Undeniably, humanitarian agencies are facing challenges to provide assistance to those in need, yet there are creative and practical ways of tackling Yemen's food crisis that could be applied; to help people access food, build-up and protect their assets and increase their self-sufficiency. However, this requires an immediate lifting on import and export restrictions, safe access to communities at risk and sufficient funds. **The humanitarian response is only 15% funded, and the Friends of Yemen – a group of donors including the US and European and Gulf states – has not met since the current escalation in the crisis.** International diplomacy, humanitarian aid and the protection of civilians on the ground, is urgently needed. Without far stronger international pressure, the conflict is unlikely to be resolved and could become protracted. Only a negotiated solution to the conflict can ensure access to adequate quantities of food for all 13 million who are going hungry every day.

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Endnotes

ⁱ [12.9 million food insecure people. OCHA Yemen: Humanitarian Catastrophe, Situation Report, No.13, 30 June, 2015](#)

ⁱⁱ [OCHA Humanitarian Bulletin: Yemen, Issue 36, 10 March, 2015](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ FAO defines food insecurity and vulnerability as follows (FIVIMS, 2004): Food security: individuals in a household have (at all times) physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. **Food insecurity: individuals are undernourished as a result of their lack of access to adequate food and/or inadequate food utilization. This includes those whose food intake falls below their minimum calorie requirements as well as those with energy or nutrient deficiencies resulting from inadequate or unbalanced diets.**

^{iv} “Without urgent action, the number of acutely malnourished children could rise to 1.3 million in the coming weeks, including 400,000 potential [Sever Acute Malnutrition] SAM cases” [Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview 2015 \(Revision\)](#) June 2015, P.20. Based on global rates this could lead to 120,000-200,000 deaths from SAM.

^v Oxfam carried out a rapid assessment in three schools in Sanaa where communities displaced by the conflict are currently living. The assesment included 20 people, 10 men and 10 women during 4 FGDs.

^{vi} [A Dangerous Delay, Joint Agency Briefing, 18 January, 2012](#) and [From Crisis to Catastrophe Joint Agency Briefing Note](#), 6 October, 2014

^{vii} http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/world/middleeast/uns-yemen-mediator-depicts-grim-scene-of-deprivation.html?ref=middleeast&_r=1

^{viii} “Without urgent action, the number of acutely malnourished children could rise to 1.3 million in the coming weeks, including 400,000 potential SAM cases” [Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview 2015 \(Revision\)](#) June 2015, P.20

“The food security situation in Yemen has sharply deteriorated since March 2015” now 6.8 million people are facing crisis situation (IPC phase 4). “Further deterioration is likely unless there is an immediate and lasting end to the conflict” IPC Indicative Acute Food Insecurity Situation Overview in Yemen, June 2015, Yemen Food Security Information Systems Development Programme

^{ix} The World Bank Yemen Overview, 2013

^x Data collected from 2013, when the population of Yemen was just over 19 million and food security was 22%. Not only has total number of food insecure increased, the current situation also produced the highest proportion of food insecure to-date with 51.6% of the population affected. World Food Programme (WFP), [Comprehensive Food Security Survey: Yemen](#), November 2014; WFP, [Comprehensive Food Security Survey: Yemen, 2012](#) ; WFP [Comprehensive Food Security Survey: Yemen, March 2010](#); [OCHA Yemen Food Security Status 2009-2013](#); Förch W, [Yemen: Secondary Data Analysis on Food Security and Vulnerability, August 2009](#), WFP; and Ward, C. [The Water Crisis in Yemen: Managing Extreme Water Scarcity in the Middle East](#), I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2015.

^{xi} For more information about the effect of the 2014 fuel crisis, see Oxfam briefing note: [Yemen in Crisis: How Yemen can survive the fuel crisis and secure its future](#), Oxfam briefing note, 24 June 2014

^{xii} In response to the fuel crisis in 2014, the Government of Yemen sought to realign the government budget and access a bailout loan from Saudi Arabia which would provide additional \$350 million to the most vulnerable through Yemen’s Social Welfare Fund to mitigate the rise in fuel prices for the poor. Unfortunately before this money materialised The Government realigned the budget by removing the longstanding fuel subsidy which had kept the price of fuel artificially low, but cost the government one third of its revenues. However this caused fuel prices to rise overnight by up to 95%. SWF payments had been severely delayed throughout 2014. The mass dissatisfaction that this caused motivated and facilitated the Houthis rapid takeover of parts of the country. One of the first things the Houthis did when they seized control of Sanaa city was to reinstate the fuel subsidy.

^{xiii} Yemen does not have the ability to produce the crop products they currently consume, considering current water and land productivities as well as available (i.e. unused) water and productive land. Mariana Fader, Dieter Gerten, Michael Krause, Wolfgang Lucht, and Wolfgang Cramer, ‘[Spatial decoupling of agricultural production and consumption: quantifying dependences of countries on food imports due to domestic land and water constraints](#)’, *Environmental Research Letters*, IOP Publishing, 26 March 2013

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- ^{xiv} IPC Indicative Acute Food Insecurity Situation Overview in Yemen, June 2015, Yemen Food Security Information Systems Development Programme
- ^{xv} <https://www.wfp.org/node/647041> 20 may, 2014
- ^{xvi} During a rapid assessment conducted by Oxfam in June 2015. Information was collected during 6 focus group discussions which included 11 people in Amran district and 20 people in Hamir District of Amran Governorate and 20 people in Abs district of Hodeidah. Fifty per cent of the participants were women.
- ^{xvii} In particular, Aden, Abyan, Addaleh, Lahj, and Shabwa WFP weekly market monitoring
- ^{xviii} IPC Indicative Acute Food Insecurity Situation Overview in Yemen, June 2015, Yemen Food Security Information Systems Development Programme
- ^{xixxix} All food price data is taken from the WFP, [Yemen Weekly Market Situation Update](#) reports from first week of May, 2015 till first week of July inclusive. The reports in April did not includedata for all Governorates.
- ^{xx} Oxfam rapid assessment, June 2015
- ^{xxi} World Food Programme (WFP), Comprehensive Food Security Survey: Yemen, November 2014
- ^{xxii} WFP, Comprehensive Food Security Survey: Yemen, November 2014,
- ^{xxiii} WFP, Comprehensive Food Security Survey: Yemen, November 2014,
- ^{xxiv} [Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview 2015 \(Revision\)](#) June 2015,
- ^{xxv} UNDP, Human Development Report, 2014
- ^{xxvi} The name of the local organisation is the Mawada Foundation