

YEMEN

An overlooked crisis with no end in sight

SPOT
LIGHT

The political and security situation in Yemen deteriorated dramatically in 2015, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis shows few, if any, signs of abating. Violence displaced eight per cent of the country's population, or 2.2 million people, during the year – more than in any other country in the world – and people fled their homes in all but one of its 22 governorates.⁴ Humanitarian and protection needs among IDPs and the rest of the civilian population are acute, and neither the national nor international response have gone far enough in addressing them.

The only unaffected governorate, Socotra, was hit by two freak tropical cyclones that traversed the Gulf of Yemen in November. Between them, cyclones Megh and Chapala forced 56,000 people to flee their homes across three governorates, and by the end of the month around 23,000 people remained displaced.⁵

By the end of the year, people were living in displacement in every region of Yemen, an unprecedented situation in the country's history.

Humanitarian needs were already acute before the conflict escalated in March 2015. Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Arab world. It has few natural resources, weak governance and social services, high youth unemployment and almost 50 per cent of its population of 26.8 million lived below the poverty line in 2014.⁶ Half of the population, of whom 70 per cent live in rural areas, had no access to safe drinking water and three-quarters no access to safe sanitation.⁷ Gender inequality is widespread. Yemen has ranked last in the World Economic Forum's annual global gender gap report in each of the ten years it has been published.⁸

The escalation of violence made human suffering and the country's displacement crisis significantly worse during the year. As of the end of 2014, there were around 334,000 people displaced.⁹ By the end of 2015, the figure had increased more than seven-fold to more than 2.5 million. The upsurge in violence has largely been attributed to the Saudi-led military intervention in the conflict. The sharp deterioration in living condi-

tions, however, is predominantly the result of sea, land and air blockades of commercial and humanitarian imports.¹⁰

Taizz, Amran and Hajjah governorates had the highest number of IDPs, between them accounting for 900,000.¹¹ Many more people may have wanted to flee, but found a range of physical, economic and social obstacles prevented them from doing so.

Flagrant disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law, and indiscriminate warfare that has targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure, were the main triggers of displacement. The destruction of infrastructure including hospitals, schools, markets, shops and water supplies has left 82 per cent of Yemen's population in need of humanitarian assistance, including 14.4 million people who suffer from food insecurity.¹² Calls for an independent international human rights monitoring and reporting mechanism have gone unheeded.¹³

The majority of IDPs live in overcrowded rented accommodation, schools and other public spaces, or tents and other forms of makeshift shelter.¹⁴ They face a wide range of protection needs and vulnerabilities including lack of shelter options, lack of safety and security, harassment, lack of livelihood options, gender-based violence, loss of documentation, food insecurity and limited access to healthcare, education, water and sanitation.

Displacement has also forced many families to separate, and there are large numbers of unaccompanied minors.¹⁵ IDPs have few livelihood options, and most are dependent on charity or humanitarian assistance for survival.¹⁶

Cyclones Megh and Chapala brought the equivalent of five years' of rainfall to Hadramaut, Socotra and Shabwa governorates in just two days, leading to flash floods and widespread devastation.¹⁷ More than half of those who fled their homes returned within a month, and the majority of the 22,970 people still displaced were living with host families or in rental accommodation.¹⁸



Internally displaced children play in front of a school in Sana'a hosting some 200 IDPs, mostly from Saada governorate. Photo: Charlotte Cans/OCHA, June 2015

The warring parties have enforced import and movement restrictions, which have led to scarce commodities, fuel shortages and price hikes, and left the country with little or no capacity to rebuild or repair damaged homes and infrastructure. The damage the cyclones inflicted is relatively small compared with destruction the conflict has caused, but people in Yemen are highly vulnerable to such shocks, which compounds the risks they already face.

The international media and political discourse have widely overlooked the human narrative and widespread suffering in Yemen, and there has been little political resolve to stop the violence and improve humanitarian access. As a result, and because of competing crises in the region such as Syria, the response is seriously underfunded. Even if a stalled peace process bears fruit in 2016, economic and political recovery will take many years.

Given that there are no prospects for return or other durable solutions in sight, there is high risk that displacement will become protracted and IDPs' resilience to future shocks, including environmental hazards, will be further compromised.