YEMEN: a CHILDREN’S EMERGENCY

It is now 18 months since hostilities escalated in Yemen, and the suffering of millions of children and their families has grown worse with each month. Today, more than 21.2 million people – including almost 10 million children – are in need of humanitarian aid, making **Yemen the country with the highest number of people in humanitarian need in the world right now.**

Since the peace talks broke down in August, violence has intensified across Yemen. Schools, hospitals and homes continue to be attacked. According to the UN, **1,162 children have been killed and 1,723 have been injured since March 2015**. 60% of civilian deaths are attributed to Saudi-led coalition airstrikes, with shelling and landmines from the Houthis and other opposition forces also having a devastating effect.

**Humanitarian needs**

*“He was born at the beginning of this war and it was the worst time of my life, nothing was available, no medicine, no food in the market and we had no income. The war has made our life miserable. I was looking for hospitals in Amran and Sana’a to treat my child but because of the war and the airstrikes, I was not able to leave the village.”* **Rana\*[[1]](#footnote-1), mother to twelve month old Khaled\***

Following months of airstrikes and ground fighting, the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate. Due in large part to the efforts of the UK government, the de-facto blockade has eased and a UN mechanism has been set up to fast-track the inspection of goods entering Yemen’s ports. However essential supplies remain extremely low because of conflict-related damage to Yemen’s ports.

Insecurity is stopping key supplies from moving around the country, and high-inflation means that basic goods are out of reach for much of the population. Combined with restrictions on humanitarian access, the humanitarian community is struggling to reach children and their families. 1.3 million children under the age of five are now suffering from acute, life-threatening malnutrition.

With hundreds of health facilities damaged, destroyed, or closed due to shortages of supplies or staff, children are also at risk of dying from treatable diseases.

And it’s not just hospitals. Markets, shops and schools have been damaged or destroyed effectively cutting off essential services to children and families, including education, clean water and sanitation. Some 10 million children do not have access to safe drinking water or sanitation, and around 2.2 million children are out of school, 350,000 as a direct consequence of the armed conflict.

**A protection crisis too**

*“I see the damage everywhere and I see how many people are affected by the bombs. I feel scared when I see weapons and especially when I hear the sound of planes up in the sky. When you hear that sound it means a big explosion will follow and that people will be killed… Hospitals and schools are damaged too. For children there is no education any more. Life is very difficult in Yemen right now.”* **Wahiha\*, 13 years old.**

Children are bearing the brunt of the conflict. **Since the start of the conflict, at least five children have been killed or injured every day,** and across Yemen, children are traumatised by the violence inflicted upon their communities

**There is significant credible evidence that violations of international law have been committed by all parties to the conflict.**

* In August, a report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (HCHR) on the situation in Yemen found clear evidence of possible breaches of international humanitarian law.
* A significant increase in children’s rights violations in 2015 was also reported in the UN Secretary-General’s Annual Report on children and armed conflict.

**The use of explosive weapons often in populated areas continues to characterise the conflict in Yemen.** **When used in cities, towns and villages, even when there is a legitimate military target, the wide area-effect of explosive weapons means that civilians are exposed to unacceptable harm.**

* In 2015, more civilian deaths and injuries from explosive weapons were recorded in Yemen than in any other country around the world. According to Action on Armed Violence, there were 6,119 civilian deaths and injuries from explosive weapons in Yemen in 2015 –93% of casualties were civilians.
* Regular, intensive aerial bombardments and ground attacks are killing and injuring children, destroying the hospitals and preventing medical supplies, food, fuel and other essential supplies from reaching them.

**What can the UK Government do?**

Urgent action is needed to prevent further loss of children’s lives in Yemen. The UK Government should:

* **Support the establishment of an international, independent, impartial mechanism to investigate alleged violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law by all parties to the conflict.** At the Human Rights Council that took place last month, the UK supported additional international experts to complement the Yemeni national commission’s investigation into violations of international law. Whilst this falls short of a full international investigation, the government should ensure that they are independent and have full access.
* **Press all parties to the conflict to agree an immediate ceasefire and intensify support to UN efforts to seek a political solution to the conflict,** which ensures that the rights of children are upheld and addresses economic and social inequalities.
* **Press all parties to permit rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access to affected populations.** Demand that all restrictions preventing the rapid and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance to affected populations are removed.
* Urge all parties to **immediately stop the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas**. The UK should endorse the joint call by the UN Secretary General and President of International Committee of the Red Cross to stop the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas and participate in current international efforts for a political commitment to limit their use.
* **Not sell or transfer arms to any party to the conflict in Yemen** while the risk remains that that they may be used to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law or human rights law.
* **Build on their impressive funding commitments to ensure the effectiveness of the humanitarian response and to push other donors to support** the US$1.8 billion requested under the UN’s 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen.

**Our response**

Save the Children has worked in Yemen since 1963, and is responding to the current humanitarian crisis by providing life-saving assistance and support to vulnerable children and their families in nine out of Yemen’s 22 governorates. We have reached over one million people, including over 600,000 children with food distributions, cash transfers, health care and treatment for malnutrition, water and sanitation, support for education and psychosocial support for children. However, our staff and those of other national and international agencies face daily risks and obstacles in delivering aid.

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1. \*All names have been changed to protect identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)