

## **Stepping up our response in Yemen is a moral imperative**

### **Opinion article by**

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Four-month-old Saleh is fighting for his life as he battles severe acute malnutrition in a hospital in Al Hudaydah. As conflict rages around the country, his mother Nora, aged 22, cannot procure enough food or clean water to keep her six children healthy.

In Yemen today, a triple threat of conflict, cholera and the risk of famine is destroying the lives of 21 million people. Yemen is now home to not only the world's largest hunger crisis but also its worst cholera outbreak, which is affecting more than 500,000 people.

The crisis in Yemen is man-made. It is propelled by a conflict whose tactics involve imposing suffering on civilians and destroying life-sustaining institutions. Cholera has now reached almost every governorate of the country and has already killed 2,000 people, at least 40 per cent of them children. The crippled health system is now on its knees as it battles the outbreak, with clinics and hospitals facing shortages in staff, medicine and equipment.

In this conflict, as in so many others, it is civilians who bear the brunt of the violence. Since March 2015, the UN Human Rights Office has documented 13,829 civilian casualties, including 5,110 killed and 8,719 injured. The overall number is probably much higher. Millions of people have seen their homes, schools, market-places and entire towns destroyed by bombs and shelling, forcing families to flee for their lives towards an uncertain future. Half of the Yemen's hospitals and health clinics are destroyed or closed.

Yemen's economy is being decimated through unwarranted restrictions on the flow of commercial and humanitarian goods into the country. Infrastructure that is vital for the

transport of goods, has been damaged. Seventy per cent of businesses have stopped functioning. One million civil servants have not been paid for more than 10 months, even though the money has been made available by the Central Bank. Two million children have been forced from their schools, risking a lost generation. And the level of sexual and gender based violence has risen dramatically.

Despite these immense challenges, 122 humanitarian organizations—two thirds of them national NGOs—have scaled up and are now operating in every governorate of Yemen, reaching for example 4.3 million people each month with food aid.

But this is not enough. To ramp up support to Yemen, to ensure access to people who need it and to bring an end to the suffering, we call for four priority actions.

First, to protect and save lives and to restore dignity, humanitarian organizations require unfettered access to reach vulnerable people. The Security Council reiterated its call on all parties to the conflict in Yemen, to provide safe, sustained humanitarian access and to respect international humanitarian law in its Presidential Statement of 15<sup>th</sup> June 2017. As underlined by the members of the Security Council on 12<sup>th</sup> July, it is imperative that all parties, now turn these words into action. The brave volunteers, aid workers and health workers who try to deliver aid, save lives and protect people in the midst of violence must not be a target of attacks by fighting parties. Even wars have rules, and the leaders of the warring parties and their proxies, must do a better job of imposing them.

Second, international donors must follow through on their funding pledges. In April 2017, the Governments of Switzerland and Sweden, and UNOCHA, held a Yemen crisis pledging conference opened by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, where donors generously pledged US\$1.1 billion. Three quarters of this amount has been disbursed. However, the response requirements have now been upped to US\$2.3 billion in light of the mounting cholera outbreak, leaving nearly a 60 per cent funding gap.

These funding gaps have life or death consequences. The World Food Programme, which aims to deliver food to 7 million hungry people, will face disruptions in food delivery in a month if more funding doesn't come in. Aid agencies are now having to re-orient precious resources to the cholera crisis, which could threaten famine prevention efforts. Lives are hanging in the balance - there is no time to wait.

Third, all parties to the conflict must ensure that no restrictions are placed on the import of critical commodities into Yemen — namely life-saving food, nutritional treatments and medicine. It is of paramount importance that the port of Al Hudaydah be kept open and safe, as it is the principal entry point for the majority of Yemen's imports and humanitarian supplies. Limitations to the free movement of civilians seeking assistance must also be lifted, including by immediately opening Sana'a International Airport and the air space over Yemen. The closure has resulted in people dying simply because the assistance they need is unavailable in the country.

Ultimately, of course, the suffering in Yemen will only end when conflict ceases. The need for peace has been reiterated by the Secretary-General, and all members of the Security Council. We urge all stakeholders to make progress on finding an inclusive peaceful solution, one where women are included throughout the process. The people of Yemen have suffered enough — we must be unrelenting in our efforts to meet the life-saving and protection needs of 21 million people who make up over three-quarters of the entire Yemeni population. It is our collective moral imperative to do all we can to bring their suffering to an end.

\*Stephen O'Brien served as UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs from 1 June 2015 – 31 August 2017. The current UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock, took office on 1 September 2017.