

YEMEN'S CIVILIANS FACE DEATH AND A CRUSHING SIEGE AS FIGHTING EXPANDS TO THE CITY OF HUDAYDAH AND ITS MAIN ROADS

Violence must end and inclusive peace talks resume

SUMMARY

The Saudi and UAE-led Coalition has intensified its assault towards Hudaydah's city and port, with already devastating consequences for civilians. Despite their assertions, international actors should not believe that this can go on without disproportionate harm to civilians, or with any confidence that it will bring Yemen's conflict to an end.

Hundreds of thousands of people, including women and girls, could be trapped in Hudaydah, without access to adequate food, water and medical care, if fighting continues and the main roads out of the city are blocked. Civilians have suffered so much – from the Houthis as well as from the Coalition and the internationally recognized government. Yet, in September the Coalition's military operations increased civilian deaths, exposed tens of thousands of more civilians to life-threatening injury, and cut off the water supply system to almost 60,000 civilians, increasing the likelihood that civilians will experience hunger in Hudaydah at levels that have not been seen for two years - how can these operations possibly be considered proportionate to the civilian harm that they are causing?

"The signs of famine that struck two years ago are again visible in the district center."

Saeed Saleh, a 50-year old school teacher in Tuhyata district, Hudaydah"

This urgent briefing adds new evidence – from Oxfam's interviews with civilians on the ground – to the warnings that the UN and others have already made.

There must be an immediate cessation of all fighting, and turn towards an inclusive peace process, engaging Yemen's women, youth and civil society.

1. RECENT ESCALATION IN HUDAYDAH

Fighting has been intensifying since early August 2018 in different parts of Hudaydah governorate, mainly in the southern districts of al-Duraihmi and Tuhayta. The second week of September saw Saudi and UAE-led coalition and government forces push further to an area known as 'kilo 10', with the apparent aim of advancing to the main Hudaydah–Sana'a road in the 'kilo 16' area in the east of the city,¹ which could be cut off, blocking civilians' main route of escape from the fighting. By 16 September, they had reached the Victory Row (Qawss al-Nassr) in kilo 10 at the eastern entrance of the city, 3km from kilo 16.

All sides in the conflict are harming civilians. During the first ten days of September, civilians were reportedly killed and injured as a result of air strikes, shelling, ground fighting and landmines. In al-Duraihmi and Tuhyata districts, at least ten civilians were killed and injured, including women and girls, by shelling and landmines between 4 and 11 September.²

Coalition airstrikes, and trenches dug by Houthis have damaged vital water supplies. Mohammed Saif³ reported that there had been no water to his house and dozens of other homes for weeks as a result of damaged water pipes after Houthis dug a defence trench around his area.

Hundreds of families have reportedly fled⁴ from around six villages of al-Duraihmi, some parts of Tuhyata, the south of the city, and more recently from kilo10 and kilo 16. They have joined the 470,000 people⁵ who had already fled from Hudaydah governorate since early June to Hudaydah city and other governorates, including Sana'a, Ibb, Dhamar, and Hajja.

Medical facilities are no longer functioning in the southern districts of Hudaydah, while in other areas they are increasingly threatened by fighting. According to the UN, the recent escalation is endangering the lives of about 90,000 pregnant women and girls in the governorate. Approximately 14,000 of them are likely to encounter pregnancy-related complications requiring emergency care.⁶

2. THREATS OF FURTHER SUFFERING FOR CIVILIANS

The Houthis and Coalition alike are reportedly amassing reinforcements for more fighting. Houthi forces' deployment of weapons and artillery in civilian areas has been frequently reported by residents.

The Coalition has presented no convincing plans to minimize the harm to civilians from its further advance into the city – only empty words. Indeed, recent military operations have only increased civilian deaths and exposure to life-threatening harm and hunger. How can these military operations possibly be considered proportionate to the civilian injuries and suffering that they are causing, when again and again they have failed to bring this catastrophic war to an end? Civilians have suffered so much – and there are grave fears that they will suffer even more in the near future. Oxfam condemns all violence against civilians.

Spotlight on water

On 4 August, a Coalition airstrike hit the Al-Saleef water tank, 60km north of Hudaydah – a main water source for many districts in Hudaydah – depriving 10,000 people of water. In both al-Duraihmi and Tuhyata districts, water pipes and tanks have been damaged, while sewage channels have been sabotaged. People are suffering dire shortages of drinking water; residents in al-Duraihmi report that their water supply was cut off after the water supply tanks were repeatedly hit during 2–7 August.⁷

Saleh Abdu,⁸ 38, from al-Duraihmi said that residents are living in the worst conditions they have seen, as the two main water projects of the district have stopped. 'People are using small tanks in their homes in which they saved some water, but this has now run out, and they have no water to drink. People are not just scared of thirst, but they really fear their children getting infected by the water they get from water trucks, which is yellow in colour and smells bad.'

2a Closure of the main Hudaydah–Sana'a road

If the internationally recognized government and Coalition forces continue towards the main road junction and cut off Hudaydah city from other northern governorates, hundreds of thousands of civilians in the city and its districts,⁹ and millions more in other governorates would be at risk.¹⁰ If fighting concentrates in the city, thousands of families could be cut off from basic supplies and humanitarian aid, at risk of death and injury with no safe routes to escape. They would, in effect, be under siege, with limited fuel meaning that essential services such as medical care could grind to a halt.

Even if the road north of the city leading to Bajil district and the governorates of Hajja, Sa'ada and Sana'a remains open, movement could be very restricted. The high cost of travelling along this very long route would be prohibitive and unaffordable for most families.

Cutting off the road to Sana'a could also undermine the movement of vital supplies to the rest of the country, unless alternative routes could somehow be found.

2b Threats to main ports

Millions of Yemenis will be at risk of starvation if Hudaydah and al-Saleef ports cannot fully function, feeding the main food and medicine supply lines for Hudaydah and other northern governorates. Hudaydah is already one step away from famine, and is experiencing serious crisis levels of food insecurity. Altogether, about two-thirds of Yemenis rely on Hudaydah port for most basic food. Approximately 90% of Yemen's food has to be imported, and 70% comes through this port. Together with al-Saleef, the port received around 85% of all wheat grain imports in 2016.¹¹

About 90% of Yemen's fuel also has to be imported, half of which comes through Hudaydah, Al-Saleef and Hudaydah seaports, which are also crucial for the imports of medicine and other essentials. Given Yemenis' enormous dependence on these ports for vital goods, even temporary or partial disruption could have grave consequences for civilians.

2c Trapped families facing risks of death, thirst and hunger

As clashes escalated during August, hundreds of trapped families faced even more severe shortages of food and unclean water, without access to healthcare and humanitarian assistance. Thousands were caught in shelling and air strikes, making it risky for them to flee or search for water or food, while famine remained an imminent threat. Houthi fighters are reported to be gathering at the city centre, occupying the roofs of houses, schools and other facilities –

putting residents and infrastructure at further risk from air strikes as their homes and schools may be targeted.¹²

Spotlight on al-Duraihmi

The district of al-Duraihmi is 28km south of Hudaydah city, with a population of 17,000, as well as 12,000 displaced people from the coast. Government and Coalition forces control its borders, entry points from the south towards Khokha and the coastline, in addition to Mandhar village, north Hudaydah city, near the airport. The eastern parts towards Tuhyata and the district's centre are under Houthi control. Local sources in al-Duraihmi report that residents have not been able to leave their houses for two weeks, depleting their already insufficient food. Many families have only survived because of the generosity of their neighbours who have donated food. With shops and markets closed, residents are at risk of famine if they completely lose access to food supplies. Even before government forces took over the eastern road, besieged families could not fully use it to move around, because it was continuously targeted by airstrikes, apparently due to the Houthis using it as a supply route. Hundreds of families are without access to water.¹³ Despite the risk, 162 families fled al-Duraihmi on 5 and 6 August, with hundreds more families taking the same route during a ceasefire on 8 August.¹⁴

Saeed Saleh,¹⁵ 50 years old, a school teacher in another district, Tuhyata, described the conditions of people as miserable, lacking access to drinking water and basic food:

'The people of Tuhyata have lost their income as markets and shops have closed. They once received humanitarian assistance from a charity, but the quantity of aid was very limited and could not cover the needs of one neighbourhood in the district.'

2d Rundown health and services and resumption of cholera outbreak

Yemen's conflict continues to create the ideal environment for spreading cholera and other diseases because those suffering from it are not able to access medical care and treatment. Hospital and medical units have ceased functioning in al-Duraihmi or Tuhyata and other areas where clashes are ongoing. According to the World Health Organization, the health situation in Hudaydah is the worst in Yemen.¹⁶ GHO (the Government Health Office) in Al-Hudaydah reported 19,217 AWD/suspected cholera cases from 1 Jan to 10 Aug 2018.

Up to 31 July, there were 165,817 cumulative suspected cases, with 290 confirmed cases and 293 deaths. Hudaydah registered the highest rates of suspected cholera cases of any governorate.¹⁷ Since the beginning of 2018, Al-Hudaydah governorate reported 16% of the total suspected cholera cases in the country, with a total of 14,910.¹⁸

The recent attacks on Al-Thwara hospital on 2 August, a major cholera treatment centre, badly affected the efforts to prevent a cholera outbreak. In addition, internally displaced people (IDPs) in Hudaydah are living in unclean places including abandoned houses and schools, making them more vulnerable to cholera. Medical facilities in Hudaydah are struggling to meet people's health needs, and their services range from limited to unavailable.¹⁹

3. ON TOP OF EVERYTHING ELSE: THE MONTHS HUDAYDAH'S CIVILIANS HAVE ALREADY SUFFERED

All the above threats come on top of everything Hudaydah's civilians have suffered in recent months – and since this terrible conflict began. The war has fuelled an economic crisis, including hikes in the costs of basic food items and non-payment of full public sector salaries.

This has been pushing millions of people to the edge of famine. Inside the city, prices of food and basic supplies are skyrocketing as the local Yemeni currency further depreciates against foreign currencies, and people in Hudaydah severely lack access to resources to cover even basic needs.²⁰ The Ikhawan Thabet Industrial company, employing around 6,000 workers, and around 40²¹ other factories and businesses stopped working in Hudaydah due to the conflict and its recent escalation.²²

Most Hudaydah residents rely on fishing activities to meet their needs, but with frequent targeting by Saudi-led Coalition forces of fishing boats, many fishermen have lost their main livelihood.

Facing increasing food insecurity, families inside the city and affected districts reduce their daily intake of food. Their limited income means that they are not able to stock food for even one day ahead. Many male breadwinners have put the responsibility of household rationing and its management on women, who have a near impossible job of feeding large families. Most now report that typically families eat two small meals, one in the morning and one in the evening.²³

The rise in the price of fuel in the city has reached unaffordable levels; 20 litres of petrol costs 8,500 YR (14 USD), up from 6,500 in the last months of August and July. ; and diesel 9,000 YR (15 USD); the price of 20 litres of petrol and diesel reached 20,000 (33 USD), 16,000YR (27.11 USD); respectively during 15–19 September. This situation has complicated the operations of medical and health facilities as they rely on electricity generators for about 12 hours, and another 12 hours of electricity from public power stations.

An owner of a fuel station in Bait al-Faqih district said that clashes had stopped the arrival of oil in northern districts. Many of his customers are farmers who have been waiting for fuel to pump water to their farms. Their crops are at risk of drought, he said, stating that the oil companies in Sana'a from which he buys are demanding higher prices.

Due to the closure of the main road that links Khokha to Hudaydah city, all residents of Khokha have to travel to Aden to collect their basic supplies of food and fuel, receive medical care and find work as fishermen and labourers. They travel long distances to reach Aden, a 280km journey. Many of the patients' report being stooped by UAE-backed Security Belt forces,²⁴ who at times prevented them from reaching Hudaydah and imposed security procedures that humiliated them. It is reported that the UAE-backed forces daily stop tens of trucks loaded with people for up to eight hours at times, and some of those travellers are patients seeking medical treatment in the city.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Oxfam calls on:

- All conflict parties should implement an immediate ceasefire, participate in peace talks and back an inclusive process which includes Yemeni women, youth and civil society without further delay;
- All parties must ensure the full functioning of al-Hudaydah and Al-Saleef seaports, keeping them open to commercial imports of food, fuel and medicines and humanitarian aid;
- All parties must ensure safe and unhindered humanitarian action to reach people in need with life-saving supplies;
- All parties must ensure respect for International Humanitarian Law and take every possible measure to:
 - Protect civilian men, women and children;
 - Protect civilian infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and homes;
 - Allow safe passage for those who want to escape the fighting; and
 - Ensure that roads from Hodeidah remain open to civilian traffic including humanitarian and commercial goods.
- The UN Security Council and the Coalition's international partners should demand an immediate de-escalation of violence and an end to the assault, before it continues to Hudaydah city or beyond, and an unconditional ceasefire by the Coalition and all Yemeni forces, including Houthi forces;
- The UN Security Council and the international partners should support the Special Envoy's efforts to establish a genuinely inclusive peace process, engaging Yemeni women, youth and civil society, and reflecting the international community's commitments to women, peace and security;
- The UN Security Council and the international partners must call on all parties to the conflict to ensure that Hudaydah and Al-Saleef ports remain fully operational, and key roads remain open, so that that food, fuel, medicine and other essential goods can move freely across the country.

NOTES

- 1 Alaraby Al-Jadeed, Yemen, September 18, 2018. Yemen pro-govt forces renew assault on rebel-held Hodeida. Available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/9/18/yemen-pro-govt-forces-renew-assault-on-rebel-held-hodeida>
- 2 Interviews with residents.
- 3 For protection reasons, names have been changed.
- 4 Interviews with residents.
- 5 OCHA-Yemen: Humanitarian update, to September 6, 2018.
- 6 UNFPA, 8 August 2018, Escalating hostilities threaten thousands of pregnant women in Yemen's Hodeidah, available at: <https://yemen.unfpa.org/en/news/%E2%80%9Ci-felt-i-was-hell%E2%80%9D-%E2%80%93-escalating-hostilities-threaten-thousands-pregnant-women-yemens-hodeidah>
- 7 Interviews with affected residents in addition to ground resources.
- 8 For protection reasons, names have been changed.
- 9 Local estimates of families who remained in the governorate after waves of displacements, August 2018.
- 10 Northern governorates are populated by about 17–18 million people, according to Sana'a-based Chamber of Commerce, meeting with Oxfam US, July 19, 2018.
- 11 L. Alles (2017). Missiles and Food: Yemen's man-made food security crisis. Oxfam. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/missiles-and-food-yemens-man-made-food-security-crisis-620388>
- 12 Interviews with residents.
- 13 Local sources and interviews with affected residents.
- 14 Local sources and interviews with affected residents.
- 15 For protection reasons, names have been changed.
- 16 Middle East Monitor, July 2018: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180703-who-health-situation-in-hudaydah-worst-in-yemen/>
- 17 UN news, August 1, 2018 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/08/1016072>
- 18 WHO: Situation updates on Hudaydah 1–7 July 2018: <http://www.emro.who.int/yem/yemenifocus/situation-updates-hudaydah.html>
- 19 WHO: Situation updates on Hudaydah 1–7 July 2018: <http://www.emro.who.int/yem/yemenifocus/situation-updates-hudaydah.html>
- 20 Local sources and interviews with affected residents.
- 21 1- IKwan Thabet Industrial Group (Includes three major factories),2- RedSea Mills , 3-I-Mursi Corporation for Fish Freez and Export,4-Al-Ghrassi company for Agriculture Products Exports ,5-Al-Hamadi Company and Fridge, 6-Al-Oudi industrial compound of three factories in areas of kilo7, kilo 10 and kilo 16,7-Al-Owami company for haberdashery exports, 8-Al-Kahlani for Cosmetics production,9-Al-Razi Woods,10- Paystar Factories, including Mineral waters Plant, 11-Shamsan Papers Factory, 12-Oils Factory, 13-Al-Awadhi Plastic Plant,14-Al-Hajaji Companies, 15-Bahadi Fabrics Factories, 16-Al-Shaqaeq Plastic Factory, 17-Nakhalan Central Fridge, 18-Nana Milks and Icecream Factory,19-AlQaid Vimto Factory,20-Al-Pheel Plastic and Paper Factory, 21- Al-Rahabi Irons Factory, 22-Al-Khaleel Irons Company,23-Al-Khaleel Factory,24-Siam Haberdashery Group,25-Al-Yousfi Fridges of Fish and Bananas Export , 26- Teham Plastic Bags Plant , 27-Maeen Tiles Plant, 28-Al-Noor Blocks and Tiles Factory , 29-Regional Fridge for Fish and Banana Exports, 30-Abdullah Fadhel Company and Stores ,31-Axial weight Station, 32-Agricultural Nursery, 33-Al-Faqih Woods Stores ,34-Muhammed Maqrani Foundation (includes three Ice production Factories), 35-Al-Saqaf Foundation (includes two Ice Production Factories) 36-Warehouses of WHO, UNICEF and WFP, 37-Al-Hubaishi Company and Stores, 38-Public Authority for Roads and Bridges, 39-Yemen Oil Company's Gas Stores , 40-United Company for Concrete, 41-Al-Swaidi Waterpipes Factory.
- 22 Local sources.
- 23 Interviews with residents in Hudaydah and its districts
- 24 A southern military brigade named a 'Security Belt', backed by the UAE in terms of supplies of military equipment and financial resources.

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