

COVID-19

GNWP Mitigation and Adaptation Strategy and Appeal

June 2020

Country Update

Yemen

Context and government response:

As of May 31, 2020, Yemen has officially registered 323 cases of COVID-19, including 80 deaths, however the civil registration office at Yemen's interior ministry had listed 623 deaths citing "unknown reasons" since the beginning of May. The observations of doctors at the only dedicated COVID-19 center in south Yemen cast further doubt on official reports, as suspect that these numbers are vastly under representative of the true scale of undetected outbreaks across the country due to a lack of testing facilities, a lack of transparency in the records and the increased prevalence of other diseases such as chikungunya, cholera and dengue caused by heavy flooding in April. According to The Lancet, since the spread of COVID-19, the Yemeni government has not been able to prepare enough locations for isolation at points of entry into the country nor has it been able to fulfil International Health Regulations standards in response to pandemics.

Summary of impact:

It has been reported that more than 500 people have died in the city of Aden in southern Yemen with breathing difficulties. A surge in deaths in May in north and south Yemen indicates that the spread of COVID-19 through community transmission is much more rapid and widespread than is officially reported. Humanitarian aid agencies predict that the virus has been actively circulating in Yemen since March.

Yemen's health system has been devastated by the five-year-long civil war, as 18% of the country's 333 districts have no doctors and no region has the resources and preparedness to deal with COVID-19. Only half of the country's 3,500 medical facilities are functioning, which means that 20 million people lack adequate healthcare, nearly 18 million do not have access to clean water or proper sanitation and medical workers have extremely limited access to protective gear. The protracted conflict has also prevented health and aid workers from reaching rural areas, where populations faced the compounded effects of COVID-19 coupled with ongoing bombings. COVID-19 has also contributed to increases in the price of basic food items and a drop in remittances from migrant workers—one of the country's most important sources of income—since the pandemic began.

The Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels initially responded positively to the UN appeal for a ceasefire, as did neighboring Saudi Arabia, who leads the military coalition in support of President Hadi and the government of Yemen. The Saudi-led ceasefire declared on April 9, 2020 in a bid to stem the spread of the virus, but the ceasefire was short-lived. In the second week of the ceasefire (April 16 to April 23), the Yemen Data Project recorded at least 34 air raids, which represented an increase of 31% in bombings from the first week.

In early April, Saudi air defenses intercepted ballistic missiles over Riyadh and a border city by the Iran-backed groups (Houthis). UN Special Envoy, Martin Griffiths, is holding daily consultations in a bid to clinch a nationwide ceasefire and reported to the UN Security Council that he had been in intensive negotiations with the warring parties in Yemen over a lasting peace deal, with "significant progress" made.

Responses led by women peacebuilders:

Women peacebuilders such as Muna Luqman, Executive Director of Food4Humanity have been calling for a ceasefire and providing water, shelter and food aid to remote villages, and have been successful in calling for the releases of some prisoners during COVID-19. As one of Yemen's first women-led civil society organizations, Food4Humanity has directed support and funding to train 150 young medics in the city of Taiz, with support from the International Civil Society Action Network. Women leaders such as Anjila al-Maamari, President of the Centre to Support Women and Children (CSWC) have been using online and broadcast media to raise awareness about preventative measures, while also coordinating relief, local and international advocacy, ceasefire campaigns and the release of prisoners.