

OXFAM MEDIA BRIEFING 21 May 2015



Garbage and backed-up sewage litter the streets in Al Sikh Osman, Aden (April 2015). Photo: Oxfam

Clean water runs dry amid conflict in Yemen

Even before the conflict escalated in March 2015, more than 13 million people did not have access to clean water in Yemen. Oxfam estimates that an additional 3 million peopleⁱ may now have no choice but to drink dirty water, as fuel shortages, driven by the closure of land, sea and air routes in to Yemen, reach critical levels, shutting down local water supply systems. Sanitation is also a growing concern as garbage collection services have collapsed and local authorities lack the fuel required to operate sewage systems. Oxfam is deeply concerned that a serious outbreak of life-threatening illness and disease will take hold in Yemen unless national, regional and international stakeholders begin working together to bring about an end to the violence and urgently address the country's fuel requirements.

No fuel, no water

The latest escalation in conflict in Yemen has left the country in ruins. Airstrikes that began on 26 March 2015, and which are now entering their third month, and intensified fighting between parties on the ground, have taken nearly 2,000 lives and injured more than 7,000 others. More than 500,000 people have been displaced while thousands more remain trapped, unable to flee as fighting continues throughout the country.

In March, the coalition closed land, sea and air routes, devastating a population already facing a protracted crisis. Under normal circumstances Yemen is reliant on imports to meet more than 80 percent of national food consumptionⁱⁱ and more than 50 percent of its national fuel requirement.ⁱⁱⁱ Combined with the closure of Yemen's main refinery, critical fuel shortages are now shutting down Yemen's local water infrastructure, leaving millions without access to clean water.

Before the conflict escalated, Yemen was already home to one in three of those in need of humanitarian assistance in the Middle East.^{iv} At the end of 2014, more than 60 percent of the population were already in need of aid and more than 10 million went hungry every day, including 850,000 malnourished children. As many as 8.4 million lacked access to adequate health care and some 13 million people, more than half the population, did not have access to clean drinking water.^v

Now, after nearly two months of intense fighting, the need for urgent humanitarian assistance is increasing by the day. An additional two million people do not have enough to eat, bringing the total to 12 million. Access to adequate healthcare has declined to dangerous levels as at least a dozen hospitals have been damaged in the fighting and many more lack the medical supplies, personnel and fuel required to function. People in need of medical assistance are also unable to access care due to a lack of transportation means.

Before the conflict escalated a limited infrastructure of water supply systems provided piped water directly to the homes of just one in three Yemenis.^{vi} Now even this struggling infrastructure is being forced to shut down. More than 40 percent of the water supply systems Oxfam supports in Al Hodeidah and Hajjah in western Yemen, which normally provide clean water to more than 70,000 people, are no longer operating due to fuel shortages. If the rest of the country is as badly affected, Oxfam estimates that at least 3 million more people could be without access to clean water in rural areas. This would bring the total people without access to clean water up to 16 million, nearly 65 percent of the population of Yemen. Yemen's urban centres are also badly affected. Local authorities in 11 cities, including Aden, Al Hodeidah and Sana'a, have requested assistance from humanitarian organizations for the provision of more than 2 million litres of fuel to keep their water supply systems in operation.

Ongoing airstrikes and ground fighting are also directly impacting access to clean water. Newly displaced people fleeing Oxfam's programme areas in Sa'ada have recounted that 19 of the 27 water supply systems Oxfam constructed over the past three years have been destroyed by airstrikes or lack the fuel needed to operate. These normally provided clean water to more than 150,000 people. Oxfam has also documented five water systems in Hajjah that have been damaged in fighting over the past two months, one of which is a solar-operated system that Oxfam directly supports and was able to rehabilitate. The four remaining water supply systems have also been damaged beyond simple repair and continue to be out of action. Damaged access routes and continued fighting make it next to impossible for humanitarian organizations to respond or to repair the damage being done to critical systems.

A dangerous lifeline

As a result, an increasing number of households have no choice but to drink unsafe water, which brings with it a real risk of life-threatening illnesses and the spread of disease. Availability of clean water sources is especially low in rural areas, where, under normal circumstances, only 21 percent of households have water piped inside their dwellings and 99 percent do not use an appropriate method to treat drinking water.^{vii}

The breakdown of local water systems means that millions more people now have to rely on unprotected makeshift wells or deliveries by water truck. But water trucking is becoming increasingly difficult to source as it is also reliant on fuel to pump water up from the ground before it is treated. Oxfam has been monitoring the price of a 4000 litre water truck in four governorates in Yemen and has found that increasing demand and fuel scarcity have together pushed the prices out of reach the majority of households. Where the price of a water truck delivery was \$9.30 in parts of Al Hodeidah before the conflict, it is now \$37.20. In Sana'a, where a delivery cost \$20.90 before the conflict, it now costs \$46.50.

Taiz has not been spared either:

'There's a severe water problem in Taiz, specifically drinking water, which usually requires purification in the water plants. But they are not functioning at the moment due to the lack of fuel, so we're relying on the water trucks but even they are not available due to lack of fuel and fighting in the streets. It takes 4 to 5 days to get water delivered and the prices have increased exponentially,' informed Ishlal, mother of three in Al Mujilia district, Taiz.

Unsafe water and poor sanitation in Yemen are the cause of many life-threatening diseases. Cholera, malaria, schistosomiasis and worm infestations pose a serious risk, especially to children. UNICEF has warned that 88 percent of diarrhoeal disease is caused by unsafe water, poor sanitation and unhygienic practice.^{viii} Vulnerable children in Yemen suffer from bouts of diarrhoea several times a year, and while it does not always kill, it can impair physical and mental development, leaving them vulnerable to other diseases, like acute respiratory infection, and compound already persistent malnutrition.^{ix}

Making matters worse, piles of rotting garbage now fill the streets in many urban centres as collection services have collapsed amid ongoing conflict, further increasing health risks. Local authorities have also told Oxfam that they lack sufficient fuel to maintain the pumping and treatment of raw sewage, posing yet another grave threat to public health. A serious outbreak of disease is looming if water and sanitation concerns are not immediately addressed.

This cannot continue

Oxfam estimates that at least 16 million^x people, or 65 percent of the population, could now be without access to clean water and adequate sanitation in Yemen. Imagine the entire combined populations of Berlin, London, Paris and Rome^{xi} trying to cope under piles of rotting garbage without access to clean water and adequate healthcare. Yemenis have the right to a better life, but they face an increasing risk of life threatening illness and disease. This is a direct infringement of their right to health and wellbeing, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

Despite the challenging circumstances, aid continues to work in Yemen, where there is access. Amid ongoing conflict, Oxfam is working alongside UNICEF and other partners to

provide clean water to more than 640,000 people in Aden and more than 400,000 people in Al Hodeidah. Collectively, humanitarian organizations are providing clean water to nearly 2 million people.

But many more are left out. In Aden alone there are 200,000 people who had clean water before the escalation in conflict, and are now without.

Oxfam is deeply concerned, as Yemen's hospitals are in no condition to adequately cope with an outbreak of a water-borne disease. Unless national, regional and international stakeholders work together to find a durable solution to the conflict and immediately address increasing fuel scarcity, access to clean water and sanitation, Yemenis could be headed for a deadly outbreak of disease, which could potentially take more lives than the conflict itself.

Recommendations:

Donors, the Friends of Yemen and Yemeni stakeholders should:

- **Bring an immediate end to the fighting**, respect a permanent ceasefire and find a peace deal that reflects all members of society, including women and youth. Divisions in Yemen cannot be overcome through military means and ultimately only dialogue and a negotiated solution can lead to the peace required to facilitate the delivery of aid and basic services to those in need.
- **Immediately re-open land, sea and air routes** into Yemen to ensure the delivery of regular fuel imports, upon which Yemen is reliant to meet more than half of its consumption of fuel under normal circumstances.
- **Provide aid through a diversified group of donors** for the immediate rehabilitation and future expansion of existing local water systems, in order to maintain access and to increase coverage to reach at least one in two in 2016.
- **Immediately invest in Yemen's long underfunded healthcare infrastructure** and engage with humanitarian organizations to urgently rehabilitate existing infrastructure and to improve access to essential lifesaving healthcare services for vulnerable women, men and children, particularly in remote rural areas where services are currently non-existent.

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NOTES

- ii WFP (2014) 'Comprehensive Food Security Survey', <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp269771.pdf>
- iii United States Energy Information Administration (2014) <http://www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=ym>
- iv According to UN OCHA's latest figures from the: 1) 2015 Syria Strategic Response, 2) 2014 Syria Regional Response, 3) 2014 Iraq Strategic Response Plan, 4) 2014 Gaza Preliminary Needs Update, 5) Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016, and, 6) the 2015 Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview, there are a total of 40.49 million people in need of urgent humanitarian assistance in the Middle East, 15.9 million – or 39 percent – of whom are in Yemen.
- v UN OCHA (2014) '2015 Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview', December 2014, http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/2015_HNO_Yemen_Final_0.pdf
- vi UNICEF (2014) 'Yemen National Social Protection Monitoring Survey', http://www.ipc-undp.org/pub/eng/Yemen_National_Social_Protection_Monitoring_Survey_2012_2013.pdf
- vii Ibid.
- viii UNICEF, 'Water Sanitation and Hygiene', http://www.unicef.org/wash/index_healthandeducation.html
- ix UN OCHA (2014) 'Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan', February 2014, https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/CAP/HRP_2014_Yemen.pdf
- x This estimation has been calculated using the prevalence rate (48%) of those who had access to clean water before the conflict, projected onto the rural population of 16.2 million (World Bank), which indicates that approximately 7.7 million people had access to clean water in rural areas of Yemen before the escalation of conflict. Taking 40% of this figure, the prevalence of those now without access to clean water as a result of the conflict in Oxfam's programme areas, suggests that an additional 3.1 million could be without access to clean water in rural areas only. Oxfam currently does not have access to the data required to make a projection for urban areas, which would result in a higher estimation.
- xi According to 2013 censuses, the population of Berlin is 3.5 million, London 8.3 million, Paris 2.2 million and Rome 2.7 million. These urban centres combined are thus home to roughly 16.7 million people, approximately the amount of those currently estimated to be without access to clean water and adequate sanitation in Yemen.