

THE CATASTROPHIC HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN YEMEN

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After a young man named Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17th 2010 in Tunisia, the 'Arab Spring' happened as a major social movement started in both local and world politics. And then soon after, small authorities in the Gulf and the Middle East started to fall due to ideological dilemmas and poverty. Yemen is a country that has been gravely affected by the 'Arab Spring'. The fall of the political transition was followed by a huge political and humanitarian crisis.

Fighting intensified across Yemen in 2015 between a Saudi-led coalition backing the internationally-recognized government, based in the south, and the Houthi armed movement, known as Ansar Allah, with remaining controls in the capital Sana'a, together with their allies. Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on one hand and Iran's hegemonic ambitions on the other caused Yemen

to go through major catastrophic events. Many war crimes alleged to have been committed by the parties according to international and local NGOs. The intervention of regional countries and competition of global powers like Russia, China, and the US show that Yemen is at a geopolitical crossroad.

As recent clashes in Hudaydah, Ma'rib, Al Jawf, Al-Bayda and elsewhere show that peace remains elusive, the Aden-based separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), which was in alliance with the Yemeni Government, has now taken control of the city, leading to the stalling of the Riyadh Agreement. The STC has recently been taking steps to make local institutions answerable to them.

The humanitarian tragedy caused by the war in Yemen has been overshadowed by the Syrian War. Negotiations that started in late 2018,

in Stockholm, between the government and the Houthis rebels did not give results and the country's humanitarian crisis is on a critical turning point. Callings of UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths on a unilateral ceasefire and UN-facilitated peace efforts have failed to achieve a nationwide ceasefire. Today, the country is in serious political, economic, security, and social problems, while its humanitarian crisis is becoming catastrophic.

Meanwhile 'The Gulf Initiative' and the 'Riyadh Agreement' have not brought about the end of the war. In contrast, the UAE, KSA, and Iran continue to do things according to their interests.

Humanitarian Crisis

Years of conflict have left Yemenis hanging on by a thread, their economy in tatters, their institutions facing near-collapse. According to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, four out of five people, 24 million people in total, need lifesaving aid in what is known as the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Two million Yemeni children are suffering from acute malnutrition, which could stunt their growth and affect them throughout their lives. Moreover, since the start of the year, more than 80,000 people were forced to flee their homes, bringing the total number of displaced people to almost four million; cholera continues to threaten lives with 110,000 people contracting it so far this year, and recent floods have raised the risk of malaria and dengue fever.¹

UN World Food Programme's Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock warned, "The window to prevent famine in Yemen is closing". Citing food security data, he revealed that the worst hunger is concentrated in areas affected by the conflict. Moreover, with only 42 percent of the country's Humanitarian Response Plan fund is available, aid agencies have had to slash assistance to four million people since the beginning of the year. As harassment by armed groups and other security problems have left frontline humanitarian staff in a crosshair, Mr. Lowcock spelled out: "the crisis urgently needs

a political solution" to "help move the country back from the edge of famine". At the same time, the faltering economy – a key famine risk-factor determinant – has rendered food and other basic goods out of reach for millions.²

The conflict has been particularly devastating for Yemen's women and children. It is reported that more than 12 million children and six million women of childbearing age need some kind of humanitarian assistance, while more than one million pregnant women are malnourished. Head of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) mentioned that before COVID-19, two million children were out of school. Now because of the pandemic, schools have been closed around the country, leaving an additional five million children out of school. And we know that in countries blighted by poverty and conflict, the longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return."³

Overall, the conflict has displaced some 3.6 million people. They are living in unsanitary and overcrowded conditions, which make it impossible to practice physical distancing and other measures to contain COVID-19. Again, most of those affected are women and children.⁴

To support the humanitarian response in Yemen and alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people, on June 2nd 2020, the UN held the Yemen Support Conference. Yet, only 1.35 billion of the 2.4 billion dollars pledged was collected at the conference. This means that only half of the promised amount could be collected. It is estimated that it will not be easy to collect more aid during the coronavirus pandemic that the whole world is in. This, coupled with the sharp decline in remittances and donor cuts, raises even more devastating scenarios for Yemen.

Coronavirus Threat

COVID-19 made Yemen's situation even worse. According to UN reports COVID-19 is spreading rapidly across Yemen and about 25% of the country's confirmed cases have died — "five times the global average."⁵

Since Yemen reported the first confirmed case of COVID-19, it posed a terrifying threat to people weakened by years of conflict, with a health system on the brink of collapse. Cases have risen to the hundreds, which, with extremely low testing rates, are likely to be undercounted.⁶

Yemen's embattled health system has been buckling under the additional strain of COVID-19. Only half of all facilities are functioning, and many lack masks, gloves, and other PPE let alone oxygen and other essential supplies to treat the disease. Meanwhile, sanitation and clean water are in short supply, and scores of health workers and frontline aid workers are operating without protective gear, most of whom are not receiving salaries.⁷

According to a UN report the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant reduction – 80 percent by some estimates – in remittances sent by Yemenis working abroad, especially as economic activity slowed down in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, which host a large number of Yemeni workers.⁸

Yemen's currency has collapsed to record lows, leading food prices to rise by over 20 percent since January.

The sharp separation between the South and the North, the ongoing conflicts on different fronts,

the disagreements between actors in the same alliance, the territorial dominance won by the separatists such as the STC, the competition of global and regional powers to control Yemen, and geopolitical interests of big powers are threatening territorial integrity and the legitimate government across the country.

Geopolitical competitions and the interests of global powers are destroying the future of Yemen. Humanitarian consequences of the civil war in Yemen continues to plunge to new depths as the country battles an economic crisis, an increasing risk of famine, and a major outbreak of COVID-19. The war is becoming catastrophic and tragic. People's hopes are running out and Yemen has become sociologically fragmented.

Today, more than ever is a day to demonstrate solidarity with the poorest people in the world and bring peace to Yemen.

Finally, Yemen needs an urgent peace process and the international community should increase pressure on parties on the ground. A comprehensive ceasefire and political discussions must happen as soon as possible. All conflicting parties should prioritize improving the country's humanitarian situation. In this context INGOs and influential mediators should do everything to alleviate the catastrophic situation in Yemen.

Endnotes

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1065292>

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075512>

³ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1064992>

⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1064992>

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/6f29536d719e6bdf4c06400bd7753a87>

⁶ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1065292>

⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1064992>

⁸ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen%20Humanitarian%20Update%20Issue%208%20%28August%202020%29.pdf>