COVID-19 in Yemen: A Human Tragedy?

On April 10, 2020, Yemen recorded its first COVID-19 case.¹ Four months after the country’s first COVID-19 case was confirmed, the fear of aid agencies and health workers has been realised: the war-torn country’s healthcare infrastructure is collapsing under the strain of the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating Yemen's already-fragile humanitarian situation.

Five years of conflict between the Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led coalition, as well as repeated outbreaks of cholera, malaria, and dengue fever, has ravaged Yemen’s healthcare system, leaving the population vulnerable to the novel coronavirus. According to the BBC, “many of the country’s 3500 medical facilities have been damaged or destroyed in airstrikes, and only half are thought to be fully functioning.”² The country’s hospitals do not have access to proper medical equipment: medical workers

are in need of personal protective equipment (PPE), and barely 500 ventilator machines—of which only 157 are fully functioning—are available for a population of 27.5 million people.\(^3\) In addition to these shortages, limited testing has hampered the ability of medical workers and aid agencies to monitor the spread of the virus; the WHO estimates the need for 9.2 million testing kits for Yemen's whole population to measure the severity of the pandemic on the ground.\(^5\) Along with the deficiency in testing, the lack of transparency in reporting cases in both rebel and government-controlled areas suggests that the true number of COVID-19 cases in Yemen is much higher than that reported.\(^6\)

Yemen's dire economic situation resulting from both the civil war and the pandemic, however, eclipses its health crisis.\(^7\) The civil war has already left most of the Yemeni population poor and malnourished: 24 million people depend on humanitarian aid to survive,\(^8\) and most civilians cannot even afford soap and clean water to safeguard themselves from the coronavirus.\(^9\) The pandemic has now decimated people's livelihoods: “one in every four vulnerable families have lost all income and half have seen their incomes drop by over 50%.”\(^10\) This lack of income, in addition to inflation, has made food scarce for civilians. According to UNICEF, the pandemic is increasing the risk of acute malnutrition among children: the number of malnourished children under

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\(^4\) BBC News, “Five Reasons Why Coronavirus Is So Bad In Yemen.”


\(^8\) BBC News, “Five Reasons Why Coronavirus Is So Bad In Yemen.”


the age of five is predicted to rise to 2.4 million.\textsuperscript{11} Hunger is thus as big a fear for Yemenis as contracting COVID-19.

The unsettling reality is that Yemen’s compounding public health and economic woes are the product of regional power struggles and world inaction. Although the United Nations brokered a temporary ceasefire between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi rebels to protect the Yemeni population from the coronavirus, the Saudi-led coalition soon restarted its military campaign, increasing airstrikes by 30% the week of April 20, 2020.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has continued its land, air, and sea blockade of Yemen, a move that has restricted the supply of much needed humanitarian aid during the pandemic.\textsuperscript{13} The United States too has done nothing to alleviate the suffering of Yemenis: instead, it has cut aid to Yemen, citing the diversion of funds by Houthis,\textsuperscript{14} and continues to provide arms to the Saudi-led coalition despite its violation of international humanitarian law and human rights.\textsuperscript{15} The lack of international concern for Yemen is further illustrated by the recent United Nations fundraiser held on June 2, 2020: although 29 countries and the European Commission pledged 1.35 billion dollars to the cause, the amount fell short by half.\textsuperscript{16} The biggest contradiction of the fundraiser was that Saudi Arabia, despite being responsible for most civilian deaths and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} BBC News, “Five Reasons Why Coronavirus Is So Bad In Yemen.”
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Bethan Mckernan, “Health Workers’ Worst Fears Confirmed As Covid-19 Reaches War-Torn Yemen.”
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Richard Stone, “Yemen Was Facing The World’s Worst Humanitarian Crisis. Then The Coronavirus Hit.”
\end{itemize}
destruction in Yemen, emerged as the largest donor, contributing 500 million dollars to aid for Yemen.¹⁷

The ACHRS calls on the United Nations and the international community to increase aid to Yemen during its worsening humanitarian crisis. We ask the UN and the international community to broker a permanent ceasefire in order to protect Yemen from further devastation, to criticise the Saudi-led coalition’s continued violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, and to persuade the United States and other countries to discontinue arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition.

The ACHRS remains committed to advocating the end of the Yemeni civil war and to preserving Yemeni human rights. The toll of the five-year conflict is alarming, and without any intervention, Yemen will teeter closer to collapse. We cannot have such a catastrophe on our collective conscience.