House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism

Hearing on The Crisis in Yemen: Part 1

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and Members of the Committee, thank you for convening this hearing on Yemen's humanitarian crisis. Your focus on the humanitarian situation in Yemen is not just admirable, it's critical. The crisis - already regarded as the world's worst - threatens to spiral out of control. Even after years of conflict and suffering, Yemenis are facing unprecedented challenges in 2021. Conflict is raging; COVID-19 is lurking; the economy is imploding; starvation is looming. Against this grim backdrop, the humanitarian response is collapsing as donors turn away from the spiraling needs.

I am here on behalf of my International Rescue Committee (IRC) colleagues in Yemen, our partners, and most importantly the Yemenis we serve. They deserve to have their stories told; to have their experiences factored into policy decisions that will affect their families and their futures. Thank you for giving them this chance to be heard. We are eager to center today's discussion not just on Yemen's cycle of crisis and need, but on the humanitarian, economic and political actions necessary to break it.

The IRC in Yemen

The IRC has been on the ground in Yemen since 2012. Over 400 IRC staff members, almost all Yemenis, and nearly 800 volunteers deliver humanitarian aid and services across nine governorates - including areas under the de facto control of Ansar Allah in the North and of the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG) and South Transitional Council (STC) in the South. Generous U.S. government funding has helped support IRC's work in Yemen for years.

We are one of the largest non-governmental health actors in Yemen, where only half of health facilities are functional and fewer still provide maternal and child health services. Last year, the IRC helped provide health services for over 670,000 Yemenis. We helped more than 14,000 women deliver their babies safely, treated over 28,000 children under 5 for malnutrition, and helped thousands of pregnant and lactating mothers learn healthy feeding practices to prevent malnutrition. We also support 29 mobile health teams to reach Yemenis in remote areas and displacement camps. Take Bodor, an IRC client who has been displaced twice. She recalled, "Life was good before the war. My husband earned enough money to bring in all we needed." But as conflict erupted in Hodeidah in 2018, she fled with her husband, toddler and infant. "We didn't have any money, or even water...the missiles were above us, the bullets were very close to us. We ran." In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, she gave birth to her third child in a displacement camp 200 miles from home. She was supported by IRC staff during the delivery and by mobile health services to screen the family for malnutrition and conduct health follow ups at the camp.

Beyond health, we provide emergency cash to help Yemenis meet immediate needs while also offering agricultural training and supplies, business skills training, and job training to bolster self-sufficiency. Last year, we provided small business startup grants to Yemeni women. One program participant, Arwa, was

struggling to feed her children after their father died and the family was taking on debt. After receiving cash assistance from the IRC to meet the family's immediate needs, Arwa enrolled in IRC business skills training and received a grant. She opened a grocery store, providing her community with access to food during the pandemic and her family with a stable source of income. The IRC also supports women and children who have been victims of violence with nearly 94,000 women visiting safe spaces last year, where they can receive psychosocial support.

2020's Triple Emergency: Conflict, COVID-19, and Economic Collapse

The UN has labeled Yemen the world's worst humanitarian crises since early 2017. The IRC has put Yemen at the top of its annual Watchlist for three years running. But while the situation in Yemen is protracted - going on 7 years - it is hardly static. The bottom continues to drop out because the relentlessness of this conflict and the cruelty with which it is conducted have eroded Yemenis' resilience and coping strategies. Last year, a triple emergency of conflict, COVID-19, and economic collapse pushed the country to the edge of what the UN warns could be the worst famine the world has seen in decades.

After a relative lull in 2019, conflict activity spiked again in 2020 threatening civilians and civilian infrastructure. Airstrikes by the Saudi and Emirati-led Coalition rose by 82% in 2020 compared to 2019[1] - the first increase in three years. The number of frontlines exploded from 33 at the start of 2020 to 49 by year's end.[2] The conflict is complex - at once a fragmented set of hyper-local power struggles and an internationalized conflict with regional and geopolitical implications. Yet one truth is painfully simple - Yemen's civilian population bears the brunt. Last year, conflict drove over 170,000 Yemenis from their homes, bringing Yemen's total Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) population to a record 4 million - the fourth-largest number of IDPs anywhere in the world.[3] As we meet today, three million Yemenis[4] are at risk of displacement in Marib city alone, including 1 million who had fled to the governorate in search of safety. [5]

Last year, conflict killed over 2,000 civilians[6] - one in four was a child - adding to a total of 130,000 Yemenis killed as a direct consequence of the conflict.[7] Nearly 40% of bombings hit civilian sites.[8] In 2020, Yemenis were most likely to be killed or injured in their own homes than in any other structure.[9] Residential areas in Yemen were hit by airstrikes, on average, every three days as people were being urged to stay home to avoid COVID-19.[10] Women and children are particularly affected when violence reaches residential areas; over one-third of women and children killed or injured in 2020 were in their home when the attack happened.[11]

[1] "Yemen Data Project Air Raids Summary January 2021," Yemen Data Project, January 2020, https://us16.campaign-archive.com/?u=1912a1b11cab332fa977d3a6a&id=ecf5725e8d.
[2] "Humanitarian Needs Overview Yemen 2020," UN OCHA, February 2021, p. 6, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen_HNO_2021_Final.pdf.
[3] Ibid.
[4] "Yemen: Greater Aid Presence Urgently Needed in Ma'rib as Displacement Increases," UN IOM, February 26, 2021, https://www.iom.int/news/yemen-greater-aid-presence-urgently-needed-marib-displacement-increases.
[5] "Yemen: Ma'rib Situation Update," UN OCHA, February 27, 2021, p. 1, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Ma%27rib%20Situation%20Update-Final27022021.pdf.
[6] "2020 Annual Report," Civilian Impact Monitoring Project, February 2021, p. 2, https://civilianimpactmonitoring.org/onewebmedia/2020%20CIMP%20Annual%20Report.pdf.
[7] "Heavy clashes rage in central Yemen; dozens killed," AP News, February 14, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-yemen-sanaa-e6014b42d6e25ef1997e1347ab5ec61b.
[8] Assessment by the Yemen Data Project based on air raids in 2020 where the target could be identified.
[9] "2020 Annual Report," Civilian Impact Monitoring Project, p. 8.
[10] IRC analysis of data from the Yemen Data Project, which documented 113 air strikes hit residential areas in 2020.
[11] "2020 Annual Report," Civilian Impact Monitoring Project, p. 6.

But far more Yemenis have died and continue to suffer due to the indirect impacts of conflict. The fighting has dismantled the Yemeni economy, unraveled health care, and destroyed water, sanitation, and agriculture systems. Last year alone, 18 health facilities came under fire, an increase from 2019 despite the pandemic.[12] On average, an airstrike hit a farm or marketplace every 10 days amid a hunger crisis.[13]

This is a shocking indictment of the warring parties, who have spurned international humanitarian law with impunity - creating enduring harm for civilians. A 2020 report from the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen found that war crimes have likely been committed by all sides to the conflict and yet there have been no meaningful attempts at accountability.[14]

Violence and civilian harm continue to rise as we gather today - from fighting in Marib and Taiz to airstrikes in Sana'a this week, reminding us that Yemenis are dealing not just with the war's destructive legacy but its continued daily realities.

The conduct of the war has triggered an economic freefall and the collapse of social services, leaving a perfect storm for COVID-19. COVID-19 unleashed a new crisis within a crisis in Yemen where 50% of the health facilities are offline and specialist care, ventilators or oxygen are in short supply. Two-thirds of the population (20 million people) lack basic healthcare.[15] It will be years before we understand the full scale of the disease in Yemen given massive under-testing. However, Yemen has one of the world's highest case fatality rates at 26%.[16]

COVID-19 is not the only or even the most urgent health threat facing Yemenis, but at the peak of the outbreak health facilities became overwhelmed by COVID-19 and some had to turn people away. As health facilities struggled to function or people chose not to seek health care for fear of contracting the disease, untreated minor illnesses became life-threatening. IRC found a 12.5% decline in patients seeking care for malnutrition at IRC-supported clinics during peak COVID-19 months compared to the same period in 2019 even as malnutrition was rising.

The indirect impacts of the pandemic on the Yemeni economy were arguably more disastrous. Years of conflict and neglect had already left the economy on the verge of collapse. A public budget deficit since late 2016 - together with infrastructure destruction - halted payments to most civil servants and caused basic public services to collapse. Since the war began, the rial's value has tumbled by around 75% in the South and by two-thirds in the North.[17] The pandemic's disruption of supply chains drove up food prices, exacerbating the effects of the rial's collapse. The country's dependence on imports, including 90% of its food, made it particularly vulnerable to disruptions in the global economy.[18] At the same time, humanitarians reported the price of staples like wheat and cooking oil surged by 25%. Yemenis, including those receiving emergency cash assistance from the IRC, suddenly found their income secured them less and less for their families. Moreover, Yemenis faced widespread losses in income while the pandemic's impact globally led to an 80% drop in remittances from abroad – a lifeline for the 80% of Yemeni families living in poverty.[19]

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[12] Ibid, p 2.
[13] IRC analysis of data from the Yemen Data Project, which documented 30 air raids hit farms and 7 hit markets in 2020.
[14] "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014," Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, September 28, 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26315&LangID=E.
[15] "Humanitarian Needs Overview Yemen 2020," p. 6.
[16] "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," UN WHO, March 8, 2021, https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/ye/.
[17] "Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, Briefing to the Security Council on humanitarian situation in Yemen," UN OCHA, February 18, 2021, https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-mark-36.
[18] "Humanitarian Needs Overview Yemen 2020," p. 6.
[19] "Humanitarian Needs Overview Yemen 2020," p. 6.

The net result - three in five Yemenis could not afford basic household items, according to an IRC survey conducted at the height of the pandemic. Yemenis surveyed were more worried about hunger than COVID-19. Yemenis are taking on debts which they can't afford to repay, reducing the amount of food they are eating, and selling off assets like land or livestock. Some are sending their children to work or to beg in the streets or marrying off daughters to drive down household expenses.

A fuel crisis erupted over disputes over import revenues, igniting a new phase of economic havoc. Fuel shortages left the population struggling to reach markets, access health facilities and other vital services and jeopardized the availability of clean water and electricity, including for health facilities reliant on fuel for generators. Rising fuel costs also raise the cost of humanitarian operations, further stretching limited funds. Yet, hundreds of thousands of metric tons of fuel sit on ships just offshore of Yemen's port of Hodeidah - held hostage as the warring parties bicker over revenues. This is just the latest example of deliberate economic warfare. Critical air and sea ports have been closed for years and those that are accessible are subject to onerous inspection regimes and other restrictions and constraints - choking the flow of commercial goods into a country nearly entirely dependent on imports.

While there were some improvements in 2020, humanitarian actors like the IRC continue to face a byzantine set of bureaucratic constraints and administrative delays, in both the North and the South. These impediments complicate and slow our efforts to deliver principled, needs-based assistance to Yemenis. These types of constraints accounted for over 90% of all access incidents in 2020.[20]

It can take months to obtain visas for aid workers, line ministry approvals needed to launch programs, and the permits required to travel to program locations and conduct assessments. IRC staff must get through 50 checkpoints on the 300-mile road from Aden to Sanaa - slowing the journey on this key transport route. Unclear processes and capacity constraints at the few accessible air and seaports slow the import and offloading of critical - often perishable - humanitarian supplies like food and medicines. The IRC has had USAID-funded supplies sit in ships off of Aden port for weeks or even months, awaiting the permissions to offload - keeping desperately needed pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies out of Yemen's understocked clinics and hospitals.

The expected arrival of the first COVID-19 vaccines in Yemen this spring brings new urgency to resolve these constraints. COVID-19 does not abide by areas of control and vaccination campaigns will require a harmonized approach across the country. This would require improved access in both the North and the South as well as coordination to minimize bureaucracy, particularly the movement of humanitarian staff and supplies into the country and between and within areas of control.

Due to these compounding factors - Yemenis are worse off in 2021 by almost all measures than at any point in the conflict and famine warnings are ringing again - louder than ever. There is perhaps no better indicator of the crisis in Yemen than the cyclical famine risk - a result of a confluence of the conflict, economic and political trends I have already mentioned.

Right now, 16 million Yemenis - a full half the population - are going hungry. Half a million may be experiencing famine-like conditions with 5 million more on the brink.[21] Half of all children under the age of 5 are acutely malnourished - the highest levels ever recorded and 400,000 children are at risk of dying

[20] IRC analysis of UN OCHA's updates "Yemen: Humanitarian Access Snapshot" from January to December 2020.
[21] "Yemen: Acute Food Insecurity Situation October - December 2020 and Projection for January - June 2021," IPC Info, http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1152947/?iso3=YEM.

without treatment.[22] Acute malnutrition can have life-long implications; it can permanently impair physical and cognitive development and leave the immune system compromised, creating greater risk of disease and infection. As such, malnutrition is robbing a generation of Yemenis of their childhoods and jeopardizes their chances for healthy, productive adulthoods.

To describe this unraveling as a tragedy would miss the point. Yemen's cycle of crisis is not an accident, not an unavoidable disaster. It is the predictable outcome of political failure and a war that has put civilians - and the systems that sustain them - in the crosshairs.

Never More Challenges; Never Less Support

Yemenis are trapped in an increasingly hellish cycle in which donors spring into action to treat the worst symptoms - to prevent Yemenis from starving. But the international community fails to offer Yemenis adequate resources or tools for resiliency or recovery, fails to halt the economic collapse or the conflict that drives the needs in the first place. Inevitably new shocks emerge and vulnerable Yemenis are forced to confront them with fewer resources, less resilience. And the cycle of famine and misery restarts - worse than before. If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different outcome, it is hard to think of the international community's approach to Yemen as anything shy of crazy.

2018 - when Yemen last faced famine - provides the most recent example. The donor community came through with quick and generous funding that significantly scaled up the humanitarian response and shored up the Yemeni economy - making food, fuel, and other critical goods more accessible and affordable to more Yemenis. Donors funded nearly 90% of the humanitarian response plan.[23] These steps were critical - they averted famine and saved lives.

But once again, the international community applied the same approach - dealing with the urgent but leaving root causes to fester. Yemenis were left to carry unfathomable burdens. As such, vulnerable Yemenis and Yemeni institutions were ill-prepared for the gut punch of 2020 and the cycle started again.

Despite last year's mounting challenges and longstanding vulnerability, Yemenis received dangerously little support. Donor funding fell to $1.9 billion in 2020 - only half of the nearly $3.4 billion needed and half what donors gave the year before.[24] The impacts were swift, dramatic, and measurable. Humanitarians were forced to scale back food distributions, cut health services in over 300 facilities and halt specialized services for hundreds of thousands of women and girls.[25] The number of people reached with humanitarian assistance every month plummeted from an average of 14 million in 2019 to around 10 million in 2020.[26] In total, about 9 million people have been affected by reductions in food assistance since April. The funding crunch was compounded by USAID's March 2020 decision to suspend "non-life saving" humanitarian assistance, including most health and hygiene programming, in areas controlled by Ansar Allah. The Ansar Allah-controlled North hosts the largest number of people in need.

[22] "Yemen: 'Toxic mix' imperils lives of under-fives with acute malnutrition," UN News, February 12, 2021, https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1084572.
[23] "Yemen 2019," Financial Tracking Service, UN OCHA, accessed March 8, 2021, https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/675/summary.
[24] "Yemen 2020," Financial Tracking Service, UN OCHA, accessed March 8, 2021, https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/925/summary.
[25] "Yemen Humanitarian Update Issue 9," UN OCHA, October 7, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-issue-9-september-2020-enar.
[26] "Yemen 2020 response round up," UN OCHA, 14 February 2021, https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/yemen/card/12BiuxVlyU/

History is set to repeat itself in 2021. Last week's donor conference raised only half of the funds required and left a $2 billion shortfall.[27] According to the UN, $1.9 billion is needed to just avert famine.[28] But only a total of $1.7 billion was raised for this year's full humanitarian response plan.

Despite these challenges, as we do all over the world, humanitarians can and do deliver principled and effective programming in Yemen every day. Last year, the humanitarian response reached more than 10 million people a month across each of Yemen's 333 districts - underscoring it is lack of funding, not lack of access, that poses the greatest threat to the humanitarian response.[29]

Breaking the cycle of crisis

Without a step change in the international response, this latest cycle will bring new levels of horror to what it means to live in the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Preventing famine and keeping people alive is imperative and it is possible. The response effort in Yemen has the infrastructure and knowledge base to quickly and significantly scale up. Humanitarians brought Yemen back from the brink of famine in 2018, including by helping to cure a higher percentage of children with severe acute malnutrition than any comparable response.[30]

But if once again our efforts begin and end there, we cannot expect a different outcome. Humanitarians will remain overwhelmed by the need in the absence of diplomatic efforts to stabilize the economy, end the violence and start a meaningful political process. We will be back here in two or three years' time making similar pleas.

Recent policy changes by the U.S. to pivot from a failed war strategy to invigorated diplomacy - including ending support for offensive operations, pausing arm sales, and appointing a new special envoy - are welcome steps. The U.S. should urgently build on them toward a wider reset that addresses the humanitarian, economic, security and political dimensions of the Yemen conflict and crisis.

First, increase aid's scale, reach, and effectiveness with more funding and innovation. First, the U.S. should lift the USAID suspension on humanitarian assistance in the North - both to free up more funding and to bolster U.S. moral authority to push others to reconsider their contributions to fill the dangerous funding gap. The U.S. should support the Swiss and Swedish (this year's donor conference co-hosts) proposal for a follow-on conference in three months' time. But pledges on paper will not save lives. The U.S. should rapidly disperse funds to frontline humanitarians who are on the ground and ready to scale up operations and pressure other major donors to do the same. To enhance aid effectiveness, the U.S. should expand cash programming, a key intervention for fighting poverty, empowering women, and strengthening local economies and boost UN reforms to simplify and expand the treatment of acute malnutrition.

Second, protect and expand humanitarian access across Yemen. Operational NGOs need coordinated, sustained, high-level engagement between UN and donor countries with Ansar Allah in the North and

[27] "Financial announcements," UN OCHA, March 1, 2021, https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/20210103-YemenHLE2021_AnnouncementsResults.pdf.
[28] "WFP Chief warns of looming famine as Yemen faces countdown to catastrophe," UN WFP, November 11, 2020, https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-chief-warns-looming-famine-yemen-faces-countdown-catastrophe.
[29] "Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, Briefing to the Security Council on humanitarian situation in Yemen."
[30] "2019 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan," UN OCHA, February 2019, p. 8, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_Yemen_HRP_V21.pdf.

with the IRG and STC in the South to remove bureaucratic and administrative barriers. The scale and reach of the humanitarian response would grow significantly if the U.S. and partners could push all Yemeni authorities to streamline the processes and timelines for moving humanitarian goods and staff into and around the country and for securing project permissions and travel permits. Working with the UN and in consultation with humanitarian actors - to ensure consistent, principled messaging - the U.S. should galvanize donors to establish senior-level humanitarian dialogues with officials in the North and the South building on previously agreed benchmarks and measures. The need to plan for COVID-19 vaccine distribution brings new urgency to this effort.

Third, secure a nationwide ceasefire. An immediate halt to the fighting would protect civilians, allow for the delivery of lifesaving aid to ward off famine, and to distribute COVID-19 and other vaccinations in line with UN Security Council resolution 2565 passed last month. A pause in the fighting would create the breathing room necessary to initiate discussions and decisions on economic reforms and revenue sharing. And it is a critical first step toward achieving a political settlement. The U.S. should use all diplomatic levers to secure a ceasefire, including pressing other states with influence over the warring parties to similarly halt arms sales.

Fourth, rationalize the system for imports and deliver an economic rescue package. Economic recovery cannot wait until the conflict ends. Yemenis need access to affordable food and other staples now. The U.S. and its partners should prioritize brokering a revenue sharing deal that facilitates the lifting of import blockages and reopening of air and seaports. Such an arrangement would speed up and increase the flows of critical commercial imports like food and fuel - driving down prices. And the proceeds could restart salary payments to Yemen's civil servants, which would have the dual benefit of generating income for millions of Yemenis and beginning to rebuild capacity of state service delivery. At the same time, the U.S. should press key donors to deliver an economic rescue package to stabilize the currency.

Fifth, and most significantly, catalyze a sustained and effective political process beyond the ceasefire. Ceasefires are fragile and temporary at best. A sustained political settlement is the only pathway out of the humanitarian crisis. But efforts to this end have been elusive. The U.S. - together with the UK as the "penholder" on the file - should lead the Security Council toward a new peace process resolution, one that is more forward-looking and more centered on the needs of the Yemeni people. At the same time, the U.S. should push for a more inclusive dialogue that represents Yemeni society including women and youth.

Today, the UN Security Council is holding a debate on conflict-induced starvation and hunger. But as we mark three years this spring since the passage of UN Security Council 2417, there has been no accountability for the man-made food insecurity crisis in Yemen. Yemenis are not starving; they are being starved.

Humanitarians have stayed and delivered in Yemen through each crisis and scaled up to mount the largest humanitarian operation in the world. But our ability to do so is now under threat most directly from a lack of funding. International support is needed now more than ever. Yemenis cannot wait for a political solution to receive aid.

But, after six years, neither can they wait while we continue to tinker at the margins; while we continue to keep Yemenis alive, but without hope for a better life; while we perpetuate the insanity.

Our humanity compels us to stave off famine. As the conflict enters its seventh year, our logic must compel us to lift our line of sight above the symptoms of this crisis and shift towards addressing the crisis at the source by stabilizing the economy, building resiliency, and ending the fighting. Now is the time to do both the urgent and the important to end the cycle. Time is running out for millions of Yemenis.

I offer my sincere thanks to the Subcommittee for its commitment to Yemen and Yemenis and for giving me the opportunity to share the challenges facing my IRC colleagues and our clients. I look forward to answering your questions.