



Statement of Abdulwasea Mohammed, Policy Advisor, Oxfam – Yemen

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

Hearing on the Humanitarian Situation in Yemen

March 11, 2021

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and respected Members of the Subcommittee:

I'm truly grateful for the opportunity to testify before you on the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen in my capacity as policy advisor at Oxfam in Yemen.

Oxfam has worked with Yemeni communities for more than 37 years to fight the injustice of poverty, improve water and sanitation services, and strengthen the roles of women and youth in public life. Since the current conflict began nearly six years ago, Oxfam has delivered life-saving assistance and stood up for the rights of Yemenis in spite of numerous security and logistical challenges, which I will explain later in greater detail. Together with our Yemeni partners, we are reaching people in areas controlled by numerous governmental or pseudo-governmental authorities. We work near the frontlines and in small rural communities, wherever need is greatest. In recent years, we have reached approximately three million people with assistance in a variety of forms, ranging from cash to buy food on the local market, clean and safe water, hygiene kits, sanitation services, and longer-term employment assistance – all with a view to promoting gender equality. In order to maintain the independence of our advocacy, Oxfam does not accept US government funding in Yemen.

The economic crisis driving the humanitarian crisis

Prior to the current, ongoing conflict, Yemen was already the poorest and most economically unequal nation in the Middle East, stemming from decades of insecurity, corruption, and lack of investment in equitable development.

The last almost six years of conflict have exposed the deep social and economic divisions in Yemeni society as a handful of elites vie for power at the expense of the vast majority of the country's people. The war has devastated Yemen's physical infrastructure, such as its hospitals and its schools. But just as importantly, it has destroyed the country's social fabric and economic foundations.

The parties to the conflict view the economy as the war's most important battlefield, sparing little thought for the consequences to civilians. They have effectively divided government institutions and monetary systems, weaponizing them both. When the internationally recognized government (IRG) introduced new banknotes, it mandated that liquified natural gas only be purchased with these new notes – reducing access to people living under Houthi control. Likewise, the Houthis' ban on trading these new notes decreased the value of remittances from southern Yemen, affecting the ability of thousands of workers to support their families in the North.

The warring parties regularly pay their soldiers, but not civil servants, whose salaries supported nearly a quarter of Yemenis before this conflict. Some government employees have not received their wages for years. More than half of all Yemenis have lost their jobs; for those lucky enough to still have one, earnings have stagnated amid severe currency depreciation, while prices of basic food and essential items have more than doubled compared to pre-conflict levels. The Internationally Recognised Government of Yemen (IRG) supported by the Saudi/UAE led coalition and the Houthis have played politics with fuel imports causing a recurring cycle of fuel crises over the past years, mainly in the north of the country. The fuel shortages in June of last year are still affecting for the cost of transportation. A joint INGO assessment found that rising transport costs prevented people from reaching aid distribution sites and health centres. Rising fuel prices also affect the prices of food, water, and health services, with severe knock-on effects for food security, nutrition, and public health.

In the south, civilians continue to experience disruptions to basic services, as well as increased incidents of instability and insecurity due to on-going tensions between the IRG and the UAE-backed STC.

Protection concerns

Since 2015, the conflict has forced close to 4 million people to flee their homes and live in settlements with little access to services including water, health and education. In the areas where Oxfam operates, internally displaced persons (IDPs) told us they continue facing risks – women, girls and children in particular experience lack of safety, sexual harassment and gender-based violence while attempting to collect water or wood to make fire to cook with. IDPs also face constant threats and harassment from authorities and host communities to evacuate the areas. With no end to the conflict in sight, these host communities are concerned that IDPs will stay indefinitely, heightening the competition for already scarce resources. Many, if not all, IDP families we support with cash transfers use the funds to pay shops at the end of the month which allow them to provide for their basic needs for the coming month on credit. Without any savings and constantly in debt, many Yemenis' biggest fear is illness – since, without money to afford basic healthcare, even a mild infection or treatable illness could have severe consequences. The lack of income has also forced many families to adopt negative coping strategies, including early marriage, that have further exposed women, girls and boys to sexual abuse, harassment, and incidents of GBV. Vulnerable groups see no point of reporting relevant assaults due to the weak rule of law.

Humanitarian Constraints

Hostilities continue to impose restrictions to humanitarian access and civilians' movement:

Airstrikes, ground fighting and violence continue on various fronts including in Marib, Taizz, and Hudaydah. Continued fighting puts the safety and security of civilians at risk and continues to obstruct movement and access of civilians to basic services and commodities. Fighting is particularly intense – and a particular threat to civilians – in Marib. Sirwah, a district in Marib where the most intense fighting has been taking place, has displaced more than 8,000 people since 8 February only to areas in the east of the governorate. Should fighting continue in Marib, an estimated 385,000 people – most of whom have already been displaced two or more times – will likely be forced to flee again to the east, where they're likely to experience severe limits to basic services including water and food.

Access is one major issue affecting aid operations. Constraints on humanitarian access continue, caused by both insecurity and restrictions that are placed on the movement of personnel and commodities by all parties to the conflict. Bureaucratic impediments place restrictions on Oxfam's access and ability to deliver aid, undermining our humanitarian response in Yemen.

Oxfam and other humanitarian actors in Yemen are working in a severely challenging environment amid increasing dependency on humanitarian aid as the only lifeline for millions across the country.

Restrictions to humanitarian access include barriers directly related to the security situation (closure of roads, the presence of landmines, air strikes and armed clashes, attacks on facilities and personnel, kidnappings, arrests, and the targeted killing of humanitarian workers) as well as intentional, bureaucratic impediments (for instance, interference in beneficiary registration and other activities, attempts to divert aid, long delays and/or denial of visas and permits to allow the movement of international and national humanitarian personnel). In the north and south of the country, authorities continue to delay approvals and impose new regulations which have prevented NGO projects from starting. Oxfam and other humanitarian organizations fiercely defend the principles of impartiality and independence in Yemen. This means that when parties to the conflict, governmental authorities, or armed groups attempt to impose unacceptable conditions on our work, we are sometimes forced to pause the delivery of life-saving assistance while we negotiate. Unfortunately, it is the most vulnerable people in Yemen who pay the price for these delays. Though this situation is unacceptable, I should stress that the shortage in funding, not access challenges, presents the most significant obstacle to reaching people in need.

The Saudi-UAE-led coalition has choked off the movement of people out of Yemen through the closure of Sana'a airport in the north and Mukala airport in the south. As a result, even critically ill people must travel 800km (12 hours) to Aden or 1800km to Seyun airport from Sana'a to be able to fly to seek treatment outside Yemen. Between Aden and Sana'a, there are at least 70 checkpoints where people are stopped for inspection and background checks where, in many cases, they could be delayed for up to 6 hours and denied passage for security reasons. Prior to the escalation of the conflict in 2015, a journey from Sana'a to Aden would take up to 6 hours and a maximum 12 hours to the southern region of Hadhramout. In Taiz city, which has been under siege by the Houthis since 2015, basic services and supplies are not consistently available. To ensure their safety when attempting to access such services and essentials, people are forced to take long detours to avoid dangerous areas (largely due to snipers and the risk of crossfire). This can mean that a journey that would normally take 15 minutes instead takes 2 hours.

Covid 19:

The Coronavirus poses a new and monumental challenge to Yemen's health system. Only 50% of health centres in Yemen are functioning, and even those that are open face severe shortages of medicines, equipment, and staff. With over 20 million people lacking access to health services, over 15 million without access to clean water and sanitation services, and millions living in camps and informal settlements, the implementation of counter-contamination measures (social distancing and hygiene) remain very difficult. More than 16 million people are currently experiencing acute food insecurity, which is further undermining people's immunity against the virus.

Authorities in south and north the country gave up prevention measures months after the first covid 19 case was recorded in April 2020. The first wave already left devastating impacts across the country which were largely unreported. The deadly pandemic spread undetected and people

suffered in silence due to distrust in the health system, social stigma, and economic constraints. Only the severely ill are admitted to medical facilities where tests are conducted. These factors, along with the authorities' refusal to report exact figures of infections, have worsened the mistrust of existing systems. The period during which partial lockdowns and prevention measures were imposed left many people without income opportunities. Many others lost access to markets and basic services. Oxfam's research last year found that remittances coming into Yemen declined by 80 per cent between April and August 2020.

Indications, including official reports, point to a new surge in cases in the south of the country. The authorities in the north maintain a no-report policy under the pretext of preventing public panic. In the south, 260 cases and 20 deaths were confirmed in the first week of March only. That's an over 40 per cent increase in confirmed cases and almost double the number of associated deaths reported throughout the month of February, which saw 116 confirmed cases with 11 deaths.

A second outbreak of COVID-19 would further overwhelm Yemen's already fragile health system, even as the outbreaks of other diseases continue unabated. Mitigating and containing COVID-19 requires a scaled up and coordinated approach by various humanitarian actors alongside the authorities.

In response to the outbreak, Oxfam has scaled up activities to enhance water management systems, make water, sanitation, and hygiene services more accessible to communities, and led public health promotion campaigns.

The Role of the United States

Since the conflict escalated in 2015, the policy of the United States has generally reflected the views and prerogatives of Yemen's neighbours and regional powers more than the needs and aspirations of Yemenis. The Obama administration's decision in 2015 to support the Saudi/UAE led coalition, including through the sale of arms and mid-air refuelling of coalition aircraft, undermined the credibility of the US to push the parties toward peace. As it became clear that the parties, including the coalition, were committing regular violations of international humanitarian law and acting with indifference to the humanitarian crisis, ongoing US support through the Trump administration has contributed to the widespread impunity that the parties enjoy to this day. US condemnations of the Houthis' violations have rung hollow in light of similar violations and misconduct by close US allies and security partners.

The recent announcements by President Biden to end US support for the coalition's offensive operations are welcome. It is important that the US follow through on these commitments, suspending the sale of bombs, missiles, aircraft, and other weapons that have been or could be used in Yemen until there is a sustainable peace. Ending US arms sales will not end the conflict, but my hope is that it will restore US credibility and reinvigorate international diplomatic efforts to move toward a political settlement.

I want to acknowledge the extraordinary role that the United States Congress has played in recent years to support principled humanitarian action and inclusive peace in Yemen. In the legislation you have advanced, the advocacy you have conducted, and the oversight you conduct such as through today's hearing, your engagement has been thoughtful, bold, and focused. I am grateful for your contributions and I hope that Congress will continue to support peace and relief in Yemen.

Recommendations to the US government:

- **Pressure all parties to the conflict to de-escalate the conflict and resume peace talks.** The parties should agree to a ceasefire and focus on protecting and providing safe access to vulnerable people, fighting the spread of Coronavirus, and enabling critical lifesaving humanitarian activities to continue.
- **Work with authorities in Yemen to stabilise Yemen's economy and to find measures to address the payment of salaries and loss of livelihoods for displaced and conflict-affected people, including as a result of measures introduced to address Covid-19.**
- **Pressure warring parties to stop weaponizing fuel and using it as a means to deny civilians access to essential services.** The US must urge the internationally recognized government of Yemen and Saudi Arabia, which enforces the blocking of fuel ships on the government's behalf, to immediately lift restrictions and allow fuel to enter through Hodeidah, given the profound humanitarian impacts which are already being felt by the civilian population. The US must also work in the United Nations Security Council and with allies to pressure the Houthis to stop implementing policies that contribute to or exacerbate fuel shortages and inflate prices. The US should also work at the Council to condemn warring parties' using fuel as a tool of economic warfare and hold both sides accountable for their role in creating fuel shortages.
- **Pressure warring parties to effectively work with the UN Special Envoy to put in place a longer-term solution for fuel and other commercial imports.** In the short term, an urgent temporary solution must be reached to ensure the flow of commercial imports of fuel to ease the humanitarian situation. Discussions about the use of revenues from Hodeidah, Ras Isaa and Salif ports and the disbursement mechanism to pay public sector salaries across Yemen must be expedited. With Yemen facing a worsening hunger crisis and Covid-19 still a serious threat, the urgency of the situation requires an immediate de-escalation and pressure must be put on parties to resume negotiations as called for by the UN Special Envoy to Yemen.
- **Pressure the internationally recognized government and Saudi Arabia to open all ports and airports across Yemen – including Sana'a Airport.** The full operation of ports is essential in order to ensure that fuel and other humanitarian and commercial goods can enter both northern and southern Yemen. Restrictions must be removed so that food, fuel and humanitarian aid can safely move across the country.
- **Maintain and resume humanitarian funding for critical life-saving humanitarian programming in Yemen such as food distributions and cash assistance, health and water, sanitation, and hygiene awareness.** Do not neglect or halt essential non-COVID-19 responses for example, dengue and cholera responses, the latter of which will be critical as the rainy season approaches. Funding for protection programs and integrated livelihoods programs, which reduce aid dependence, are also critical. While USAID should work closely with implementing partners to address and confront unacceptable conditions imposed by the parties, it should not impose broad-based suspensions of funding.
- **Pressure warring parties to prioritize people's safety, adhere to international humanitarian law, and maintain unimpeded and safe access to humanitarian aid,** including through the movement of humanitarian personnel and civilians.