

Yemen: amid major roadblocks, an 'unprecedented' response to an unprecedented tragedy

Despite continuing challenges in Yemen, the United Nations and partners have provided a robust humanitarian response to the world's largest humanitarian crisis, thanks to major donor support. However, as the situation continues to worsen for civilians across the country, aid agencies [warned on Monday](#) that international aid efforts must be sustained to avoid a major catastrophe and called for a political end to the conflict.

During a high-level event at UN Headquarters in New York, chaired by UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock, officials of the humanitarian and donor communities exchanged views on the scale of the need, what has been accomplished so far, and the roadblocks which remain across Yemen.

A tragedy of unprecedented proportions

The event started with the UN Humanitarian Coordinator [Lise Grande](#) stating that "there is no other place in the world where people are suffering so greatly".

The unprecedented scope and depth of the crisis in Yemen, now in its fourth year, has been repeatedly reported: three-quarters of the population require some form of basic assistance to survive; over 2 million internally displaced; 16 million in need of medical help. The figures are near-impossible to grasp.

The Humanitarian Coordinator painted a concrete picture: "One child is dying every 10 minutes because of the conflict... 70 per cent of girls are being married before 18 as a coping strategy... 8.3 million people have absolutely no idea when they wake up in the morning where their meal will come from... one in four Yemenis are malnourished..."

She also explained that the country's currency, the Yemeni Rial, has [depreciated by 300 per cent](#) compared to pre-crisis rates. "If the depreciation continues, we believe 12 million people could be at risk of starvation", she stressed.

Conflict in Yemen – already one of the poorest countries in the world before the crisis – escalated in March 2015, when an international coalition led by Saudi Arabia intervened militarily at the request of the Yemeni presidency. Airstrikes and ground-fighting have become a daily occurrence for millions of civilians. "It is officially estimated that 16,000 people have been killed," said Ms. Grande. "The real numbers are probably a lot higher," she added.

Hundreds of thousands of families no longer have a regular source of income –

including teachers, health workers, water and sanitation workers and other public servants. They have not been paid a regular salary in two years.

The Humanitarian Coordinator noted that the situation is particularly desperate in Hudaydah, an opposition-held governorate in western Yemen, where “vulnerability levels” are the worst and where, in the past three months alone, half a million people have been forced to flee their homes.

The world’s largest humanitarian response

Lise Grande stressed that “humanitarians have been and will continue to do everything they can do” to address these devastating levels of need.

To date, the humanitarian response, called “very efficient” by Mr. Lowcock, has achieved a lot. This led several of the high-level representatives attending the event, including the Yemeni Minister of Foreign Affairs and various top donors, to congratulate the humanitarian community.

According to Ms. Grande, the more than 150 relief organisations in Yemen are reaching “more people in absolute terms and a higher percentage of the population than in any other humanitarian response” in the world.

To name only some of the achievements listed by the Humanitarian Coordinator, every month, 8 million Yemenis receive food assistance; 1.7 children and pregnant or lactating women are receiving nutritional support; millions are receiving emergency cash transfers; over 1 million people are receiving protection services; and a third cholera outbreak was avoided with medical teams responding within 24 hours, instead of one week as was the case in 2017.

The Director-General of the [World Health Organization](#), Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, noted that 11 million people have been reached with vital health services, including vaccinations against cholera, diphtheria and polio. In addition, 2,000 disease surveillance sites have been established with trained personnel so any response required can happen in a timely fashion.

The expansion of the humanitarian operation across the country was made possible thanks to three factors, said the Humanitarian Coordinator: deconfliction, strong collaboration with the Government and local actors; and the support of donors above all.

Priorities ahead and remaining roadblocks

Ms. Grande listed three priorities for humanitarian organisations: reduce hunger and roll back malnutrition; prevent another cholera outbreak; and protect civilians at any cost.

She also provided the international community with a long list of requirements, topped by the need for the warring parties to stop fighting. “Humanitarians cannot solve the conflict in Yemen, only politicians can,” she stated.

Humanitarians cannot solve the conflict in Yemen, only politicians can – UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen, Lise Grande

Other requirements included: the need for ports to remain open, the creation of a line of credit for importers of basic commodities, the creation of a medical aid corridor, the transfer millions of dollars in cash directly to families in need, as well as additional unearmarked funds for the response to continue.

These requirements were echoed by the other high-level speakers of the event, including WHO's Dr. Tedros, Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees [Kelly Clements](#), and the CEO of Save the Children International Helle Thorning-Schmidt who said that "saving lives in Yemen is an uphill battle" due to the many challenges faced by aid groups.

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), organizer of the event, impediments to humanitarian action include movement restrictions, attempted interference and harassment, fluctuating commercial import levels, and collapsing basic health, education, water and sanitation services.

Closing the event, the United Kingdom, Canada Kuwait, the USA and Denmark pledged their continued support to the international response to the Yemen crisis.