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Yemen's health system has "collapsed", warns UN

The ongoing conflict is exacerbating the effects of COVID-19 as aid agencies warn of a worsening humanitarian situation. Sharmila Devi reports.

Yemen's health system has "collapsed" under the COVID-19 pandemic, with shortages of oxygen and personal protective equipment adding to humanitarian needs—including nutrition, water, and sanitation—for millions of people, the UN has warned. "[COVID-19] tests remain in short supply, aid agencies in Yemen are operating on the basis that community transmission is taking place across the country, and only half of the health facilities are fully functioning", Jens Laerke, spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said in a press briefing on May 22. "Yemen's health system needs significant assistance to counter the threat."

He warned that more than 30 key UN programmes risked closing in the coming weeks because of a lack of funding, including COVID-19 rapid response teams that were funded only for the next 6 weeks. "If we do not get the money coming in, the programmes that are keeping people alive and are very much essential to fight back against COVID-19 will have to close", he said. "And then the world will have to witness what happens in a country without a functioning health system battling COVID-19." Up to US\$2 billion was needed for this year, and the UN and Saudi Arabia will co-host a virtual pledging event on June 2 to support fundraising.

Yemen's conflict, which has killed more than 100 000 people and almost destroyed the health system since 2015, has already caused what the UN says is the world's worst humanitarian crisis. 24 million Yemenis, or 80% of the population, are reliant on aid. Diseases such as cholera, diphtheria, dengue, measles, and malaria, as

well as a polio outbreak, have hit the country in recent years.

25% of the population, including 2.1 million children and 1.2 million pregnant and lactating women, have either moderate or severe malnutrition, says WHO. Nearly 1.5 million families depend on food assistance to survive, the majority of whom have no

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visible means of support. Thousands more people have cancer, diabetes, or other chronic conditions, for which treatment is limited. In 2014, rebel Houthis, known officially as the Ansar Allah movement, took control of Yemen's north and captured the capital Sanaa, forcing the UN-recognised government there to flee to Aden. Since 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of mostly Arab countries has been battling the rebels to reinstate control.

As of May 23, 2021, there were 6653 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1305 deaths reported to WHO, and 18 555 vaccine doses administered. However, extrapolation of the results of a WHO seroprevalence study in Aden indicated "that the infected number of cases is way more than those reported", the WHO Yemen Country Office said in an email to *The Lancet* on May 20. "COVID-19 has placed additional pressure on existing facilities and resulted in underuse of health services, complicating the delivery of services to prevent other diseases. There will be growing food insecurity and limited hygiene and sanitation services, particularly for women and children", WHO said in the email.

The pandemic was further compounded by a continued lack of public awareness and adherence to protective measures, such as physical distancing and mask wearing, Marc Schakal, programme manager for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Yemen, told *The Lancet*. "Last year, during the first wave, there was a lot of panic and staff didn't come into work at public hospitals, forcing some to close. This hasn't happened during this second wave, but still staff are paid very irregularly, if at all, with a big impact on morale", he said. "Also, some hospitals are turning suspected COVID-19 patients away, including pregnant women due for delivery, just because they have COVID-like symptoms."

More would be known about the trajectory of the pandemic in about 2 weeks, he said. There had been a decrease in admissions to MSF facilities during Ramadan, which ended in mid-May, but normal daily life and circulation of people has now resumed. Schakal also worried about a spillover effect from donor cuts. "We've already seen some [non-governmental organisations] decreasing their presence and more people coming into our centres from much further away, so our catchment area is increasing", he said. Adding to the humanitarian burden are Saudi military measures preventing ships from delivering supplies. In the USA, in a letter dated May 20, a group of Democratic senators urged US President Joe Biden to take "immediate and decisive action" to end what they called Saudi Arabia's "blockade tactics" that have prevented food, medicine, and other crucial deliveries.

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