

## SPOTLIGHT

## YEMEN

## Insecurity and shrinking humanitarian space



Unrelenting violence and shifting insecurity propelled Yemen to several bleak milestones in 2017: 1,000 days of war, a million suspected cases of cholera, two million people displaced by conflict as of end of year and a humanitarian crisis now widely regarded as the world's most acute.<sup>106</sup>

Conflict continues to be the primary driver of displacement, as a coalition led by Saudi Arabia in support of Yemen's government battles Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthi movement. Of the 3.1 million people forced to flee their homes since the violence escalated in March 2015, two million were still living in internal displacement as of the end of 2017. People have been displaced across 21 of Yemen's 22 governorates, but the overwhelming majority of IDPs come from Taiz, Hajjah, Amanat Al Asimah and Amran.

The new displacements of 160,000 over the course of the year is a relatively small figure, but it masks much larger fluctuations and dynamics in which families flee and return as violence flares and subsides. An escalation of the conflict, including sustained airstrikes and ground clashes has also hampered access to various parts of the country for humanitarians, the media, researchers and data collectors, making it impossible to get a full picture of displacement in the country.

Much displacement takes place locally, and movements across frontlines are rare. Forty-four per cent of IDPs remain within their governorate of origin.<sup>107</sup> Their main consideration when they flee is to move toward areas where they are able to access humanitarian assistance and potential livelihood opportunities, which for many means urban rather than rural areas. Family ties, security concerns and financial restrictions are also factors in deciding where to seek refuge. Movement is prohibitively expensive for most, and fraught with safety risks for all.

The situation in Taiz city illustrates this point clearly. It is an active frontline, and movement in and out of the

old city, which is home to around 600,000 people, is considered very dangerous. The frontline has moved little in the past year, but there has been significant artillery shelling and sniper fire. Movement within the old city, which is held by affiliates to the Saudi-led coalition, is also heavily controlled by checkpoints. Family, tribal and political allegiances also dictate the extent to which people are able to move in and around the area.

Fewer than 200,000 people have crossed Yemen's borders into neighbouring countries in search of protection since the conflict escalated, amounting to less than ten per cent of the overall displaced population.<sup>108</sup> The country's geography and conflict dynamics restrict the options of people trying to flee abroad, effectively trapping them between a hostile party to the north, extensive and highly insecure terrain to the east and impoverished neighbours reachable only via a perilous sea journey to the south. The country's main airport has also been closed to civilian traffic since August 2016. The fact that relatively few people have fled outside the country is likely to have played a significant role in keeping Yemen's crisis off the radar.

Blockades on the import and transport of basic supplies, including food and fuel, have led to shortages and spiralling inflation, further reducing the purchasing power of people with very few resources left. The price of the average food basket has been driven up by more than 40 per cent since the escalation of the conflict, and 8.4 million people are on the edge of starvation.<sup>109</sup> The irregular or non-payment of salaries to around 1.25 million civil servants since August 2016 has led to a breakdown in services and further economic deterioration. Fewer than 50 per cent of Yemen's health facilities were still fully functional as of the end of 2017, and 16 million people struggled to access safe water.<sup>110</sup>

Displaced people are among the most vulnerable to the worsening humanitarian and food security conditions.<sup>111</sup> Yemen's government adopted a national policy on IDPs

in June 2013 that provides a principled foundation for preventing displacement, protecting those affected and promoting durable solutions, but the breakdown in central governance since has impeded its implementation.<sup>112</sup>

Eighty per cent of the country's IDPs live in private dwellings, most commonly with family or in rented accommodation, a potentially protective factor that reflects longstanding trends and the fact that the national policy on IDPs allows for the establishment of displacement camps only as a last resort. The remaining people are accommodated in collective centres and spontaneous settlements established in repurposed schools and health facilities, religious buildings, abandoned premises and makeshift shelters. In some cases, community leaders have actively encouraged such settlements in an effort to ensure IDPs' access to humanitarian assistance and relieve pressure on struggling hosts.

Women and children constitute 75 per cent of Yemen's displaced population, and their protection concerns are particularly acute.<sup>113</sup> Their safety, access to services and livelihoods opportunities are compromised by entrenched inequalities, which puts them at increased risk of abuse and exploitation. Despite social norms that

discourage the reporting of gender-based violence, a 36 per cent increase in access to related services was reported in 2017.<sup>114</sup> Displaced children are at extremely high risk of falling out of education and many become embroiled in negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, recruitment into armed groups and child marriage. A survey conducted across three governorates with large displaced populations in late 2016 found that 45 per cent of marriages involved girls under the age of 15.<sup>115</sup>

As the fighting continues, Yemen has also suffered large-scale outbreaks of preventable diseases. The country hovers on the brink of famine, and 22.2 million people out of the total population of 29.3 million are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance or protection.<sup>116</sup> Meaningful steps to revive peace talks offer the only hope of preventing what already constitutes an unprecedented crisis from deteriorating further into a situation that the UN's emergency relief coordinator has said "looks like the apocalypse".<sup>117</sup>



*Internally displaced people living in the Al-Zuhra district of Al-Hudaydah governorate, Yemen. Photo: NRC, January 2017*