**Yemen’s Spiraling Hunger Crisis is a Man-Made Disaster**

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Life is slipping away for Maimona Shagadar. She suffers the agony of starvation in silence. No longer able to walk to talk, at 11 years old little Maimona’s emaciated body weighs just 24 pounds. Watching over her is older brother Najib, who brought her to this remote hospital in Yemen, desperate to get help. The nurses here fight for the lives of children who are starving. [Nurse] “Because of the war she suffering from malnutrition. Her father is jobless. Most of the families in Yemen are jobless”. [Jane Ferguson] “Every day she says she sees these sorts of cases. People have lost work therefore they’ve no money, therefore there’s just no food in the house.” You were never supposed to see these images of Maimona. A blockade of rebel held northern Yemen stops reporters from getting here. Journalists are not allowed on flights into the area. No cameras, no pictures. [Jane Ferguson] “The only way into rebel held Yemen is to smuggle yourself in and for me that means to be dressed entirely as a Yemeni woman with a full face veil just to get through the checkpoints”.

I travelled across the embattled front lines to see what’s actually happening inside what the United Nations is calling the world’s worst humanitarian disaster. The Houthis cautiously welcomed me in, and once I was there watched me closely. The hunger here and this human catastrophe is entirely man-made. Yemen was already one of the poorest countries in the Middle East and the war has pushed an already needy people to the brink of famine. In the midst of political chaos in Yemen after the Arab spring, Houthi rebels from the north captured the capital Sana’a in 2014 before sweeping south and causing the country’s then President to flee. Neighboring Sunni Saudi Arabia views the Houthis, from a Yemeni sect close to Shia Islam and backed by rival Iran, as an unacceptable threat along their border. So it formed a military coalition of countries in 2015, determined to defeat the Houthis and reinstate the old President. Crucial military support for the campaign is provided by the United States, a long time ally of Saudi Arabia. After three years of aerial bombardment and fighting on the ground, the coalition has so far failed to dislodge the rebels. What the campaign has done, is devastate the economy, leaving two thirds of the population relying on food aid for survival and over 8 million [people on the brink of starvation.

I travelled across this country to see for myself what that looks like. Since ancient times Yemenis have lived securely in villages perched high up on mountain tops, but now they cannot hold off the hunger. Like in Rafea village. [Jane Ferguson] “Because most people in these areas are so desperately poor they cannot afford to transport their children into the towns to the hospitals whenever their malnutrition gets so bad their lives are in danger. And so many of the worst cases are in small villages scattered all around these mountain ranges just like this”. Hannah and her little brother Ali are frighteningly thin. Their grandma tells me food prices shot up beyond their reach when the war started. [Grandma] “One month after the war started we were starving. We are dying from hunger and we don’t know what to do.” Their dad Ahmed picks up occasional work whenever it’s available. But most of the time all he can afford to give them is a smile. Nearby sits Gebran – so frail he can no longer walk.

The Saudi-led coalition imposes a blockade on rebel-held Yemen because they say Houthi rebels are bringing in weapons from Iran. All food coming into the country must get approval from Saudi Arabia. That process is frustratingly slow and has helped push food prices up. Yahya Al Habari is one of Yemen’s main importers of wheat. He says Saudi inspections in nearby ports hold everything up. [Yahya Al Habari] “All our wheat shipments, with each shipment worth about 16 to 18 million US dollars, it stops in Djibouti for 6 to 5 weeks and every single day costs us $25,000 for the ship owners”. Bridges have been bombed and businesses destroyed by air strikes.

Government workers in Houthi controlled areas of the North haven’t been paid in two years. Before the war the Yemeni government was the country’s biggest employer by far. When wages suddenly stopped, millions lost their livelihoods. Stephen Anderson runs the United Nations World Food Program in Yemen. [Stephen Anderson] “A very simple fact is that most of the civil servants as from September 2016 have no longer regularly received their salaries, that’s affecting the civil servants with their families, that’s almost 9 million people out of a country of 28, 29 million”. That’s what happened to Maimona’s family. Her father was a public school teacher, a job that pays middle class wages here. Now, with almost no money coming in, they are destitute. I went back to the hospital to check on her a few days later. Her mother had arrived from their village. [Mother] “My husband now receives half a months salary in one year and when it comes we have debts to pay that are more than the salary. The house is full of kids and we don’t have anything to feed them.” Maimona was feeling better after some treatment. The doctors have saved her life for now, but the money problems that nearly killed her will still be there when she returns home.

The Saudi-led bombing campaign and blockade have brought Yemen’s economy to its knees. The Houthis also make life difficult for aid workers to get access to the most needy. Mistrust and harassment of foreign aid organizations is pervasive. They are on the ground here but most international staff stay in the capital. [Jane Ferguson] “Camps like this are very close to the fighting and the intensive air strikes just over there. International aid workers cannot access areas as dangerous as this very often and even Yemeni aid workers often struggle to help these people”.

Meanwhile the crisis is spiraling, with the number of people going hungry rising by the day. Lise Grande heads up the UN’s humanitarian efforts in Yemen. [Lise Grande] “Most of the 8.5 million people that we describe as being pre-famine, the reality of their life is that when they wake up in the morning they have no idea if they will eat that day, no idea. 8.5 million people are in that category. The UN estimates that by the end of this year if there is not an end to this war another 10 million Yemenis will be in that same situation, that’s 18 million innocent civilians who are the victims of this war, and that’s why all humanitarians are saying enough is enough, there has to be a political solution and all the parties to the conflict have to sit at that table and agree on how to stop this”.

The warring parties are not yet listening that call. Last month an offensive for Hodeidah City, currently controlled by the houthis, was launched by the Saudi-led coalition. Almost all the food coming in to rebel-held Yemen travels through that port. A battle risks shutting it, and cutting off supplies to millions. If they hope to survive, the malnourished children arriving into Yemen’s hospitals will need to hold on even longer for this disaster to ease. The truth is, many of them won’t outlive this war. For the PBS NewsHour I’m Jane Ferguson in Sana’a, Yemen.

**American-Made Bombs in Yemen are Killing Civilians**

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Inside rebel territory in Yemen the war rains down from the sky. On the ground, front lines have not moved much in the past three years of conflict. Instead an aerial bombing campaign by the Saudi-led and American backed coalition hammers much of the country’s north – leaving scenes like this dotted across the capital city Sana’a and beyond. A few weeks before I arrived, this gas station was hit. Security Abdul Al Badwi was in a building next door when it happened. He says 6 civilians were killed. [Jane Ferguson] “He cannot explain why they would have targeted something like this.” Elsewhere in the city a government office building was recently hit. Another pile of rubble. Another monument to the civilian deaths in this war. [Jane Ferguson] “When this building was hit, it was mostly clerical workers in offices who were injured, and you can still their blood smeared all over the walls as they were evacuated after the air strike.”

In 2014 Yemen rebels called Houthis Houthis seized the capital and much of the rest of the country. The Houthis are supported by Sunni Saudi Arabia’s arch rival Shiite Iran, so the next year the Saudis mobilized a coalition of arab militaries to defeat the group. The Aerial bombing campaign has not managed to dislodge the rebels, but it has hit weddings, hospitals and homes. The US military supports the Saudi coalition with logistics and intelligence. The United States also sells the Saudis and their coalition partners, many of the bombs they drop on Yemen. In the mountains outside the capital we gained exclusive access to the site where Houthis store unexploded American made bombs. Like this 200lb mark 84 bomb, made in Garland, Texas. It landed in the middle of the street in the capital we are told. One of the men told where each was found in Sana’a. [Houthi official] “One month ago it landed near the Sadaqa Bridge, close to the Central Bank of Yemen. It didn’t explode.” He also showed me the fin of a Mark 82 bomb, used to guide it to its target. Back in the city, the Houthis also let us see a storage site with the remains of American-made cluster bombs. Cluster bombs are among the most deadly to civilians, filled with baseball-sized smaller bombs that scatter over a larger area. Any that don’t explode stay where they fell, primed and often wounding civilians like land mines. The Houthis have also targeted civilians. Throwing anyone suspected of opposing them in jail.

I travelled deep into Yemen’s countryside to find out more how the bombing campaign is affecting peoples’ lives there. This is what I found: a Doctors Without Borders cholera treatment center completely destroyed by an airstrike the day before. It was just about to open its doors to patients. The war has made it harder for people to access clean running water, leading to the worst cholera outbreak in modern history. Now every time the rains come, people fall ill. [Jane Ferguson] “Cholera is a seasonal disease here in Yemen, and that’s why the aid organizations re getting ready for the worst of the cholera season coming up. This facility was brand new.” No-one was killed here but the loss of the precious medical facility, filled with life-saving equipment, is devastating. [Lise Grande] “It’s quite clearly a contravention of humanitarian law. There is no question about that.” The United Nations warns the Saudi-led coalition on the location of thousands of humanitarian facilities across the country, requesting that they don’t bomb them. Lise Grande is the UN development Program coordinator in Yemen. [Lise Grande] “When you look at the total number of requests that we have in, and the total number of violations, there have been few violations compared to the requests but when those violations occur they are serious indeed”.

In a refugee camp closer to the fighting along the Saudi border, people told me they were attacked by warplanes in the last camp they lived in. In 2015 Mazraq refugee camp was bombed by coalition jets. Radia Hussein lost a grandson in the attack and walked for days to get here. [Radia Hussein] “They attacked the camp with three missiles in one day and then we ran away.” On the road to the refugee camp several bridges had been bombed.

Anger towards America is growing in rebel-held areas of Yemen. Most of the people here, whether they support the Houthis or not, know that many of the bombs being dropped are American. It provides a strong propaganda tool for the Houthi rebels, who go by the slogan ‘Death To America’. Dr Ali Al Motaa is a college professor. He did his doctorate in the US but is a strong Houthi supporter. [Dr Al Motaa] “The missiles that kill us, American made, the planes that kill us, American made, the tanks – Abrams – American made. You are saying to me, ‘where is America?’ America is the whole thing.”

Despite desperate efforts to end the fighting in Yemen, the violence is getting worse. The Saudi-led coalition launched an attack on Houthi-controlled Hodeidah city last month. The city is home to hundreds of thousands of Yemenis and aid organizations warned that the attack could kill many civilians. As the bombs began to fall, these people fled to the capital Sana’a. [Dura Issa] “My house is a traditional house and when the bomb landed the gate was blown off and the roof was gone.” Dura Issa’s house was hit. Her family got out alive, but she is now homeless, trying to care for her severely disabled son. [Dura Issa] “I don’t know where to stay tonight. We don’t have money for a hotel, we cannot afford it. We left in a hurry, scared. We left everything.” Ahead of the battle, the coalition warned civilians to get out. [Mohammed Issa] “The coalition announced on the TV that we have to leave. They didn’t tell us anything, they just told us go out. The Houthis made trenches. My house is next to the sea and the battles are there.”

Millions of Yemenis are just like him, living in fear of the battle raging near their homes, or an airstrike killing them and their families. Both the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition have disregarded innocent civilian life in this war. Every bomb that falls on a hospital, office building or home causes more unease about where they came from. For the PBS NewsHour I’m Jane Ferguson in Sana’a, Yemen.

**Critical Yemeni Port City Clings To Fragile Truce**

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Both sides fighting in Hodeidah battled one another right up until the Tuesday deadline for a ceasefire. Houthi rebels still control the city, but they are being encircled. Yemeni fighters loyal to the internationally recognized government, supported by Saudi-led coalition war planes and heavy weaponry, are fighting to take it over. We were given rare access to the city, through the one road in and out not yet cut off by the fighting, and watched closely by the Houthis. Piles of earth and metal container dragged across the road – the first sign that this is a war zone.

When troops loyal to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pushed inside the city in November, the battle reached into ordinary peoples’ homes and neighborhoods. [Jane Ferguson] “Yemeni troops backed by the coalition are just about 500 yards in that direction. This neighborhood which has been hit by airstrikes is a residential one, filled with civilians.” This apartment building took a direct hit two weeks ago people told us. The house next door was also hit. 13 year old Mohammed Qudayish showed us the cuts on his body he received while running for his life. [Mohammed Qudayish] “Yes I was afraid, my sister died. I ran away when the strike came but the shrapnel followed me. Then we went to the neighbors and I was running and bleeding.” His grandma needed surgery to remove shrapnel from her body. Little Mohammed collected parts of the missile that his house and killed his sister. The US sells the Saudi-led coalition the majority of the weapons it’s using in this war.

And take a look at this. Throughout Hodeidah, murals like these, condemning the United States for it’s part in the war in Yemen. Mohammed is one of a growing number of children injured in this war. Across town in the Al Salakhan Hospital battle-scared youngsters fill the rooms. Too young to understand the war, all they know is their playgrounds have become death traps. Those like 10 year old Aisha Mohim. She was playing inside her house when a stray bullet hit her and ended up lodged in her foot. In a nearby bed lays 8 year old Qadiffa Baria. Still traumatized, Qadifa doesn’t speak. She was injured when an airstrike hit the street she was playing in. Her father struggles to bear he pain. [Qadifa’s father] “I go out every day to look for work as a laborer at sunrise. And when I was out that day a missile hit nearby my house and her brother died instantly. My daughter’s leg was broken, and she had shrapnel all over her back.” The shrapnel passed right through Qadifa’s torso, so now she needs to have a colostomy bag attached at all times. [Qadifa’s father] “I feel insane. I am poor and have nothing. I am a laborer and I don’t have anything. Nothing. Nothing at all.”

This hospital is supported by Doctors Without Borders, or MSF according to their French acronym, one of only a few charities inside Yemen still willing to keep international staff in Hodediah. According to Frederic Bertrand, MSF’s head of mission here, hospitals desperately need their support. [Ferederic Bertrand] “Many civilians that have been caught between fire, people that have been victims of gunshot, shrapnels, explosion, air strikes. We are supporting one of the hospitals inside the city. The front lime that got closer to our hospital make difficult the access for the patients and also out capacity to increase the care according to the needs.”

Across town Hodeidah’s main hospital, Al Thura, is packed with people hoping to find help. With the fighting just yards away it can barely cope, overwhelmed with people desperate for all kinds of medical care. [Jane Ferguson] “This hospital is very close to the front line here in Hodeidah and it is absolutely packed. It treats people for everything from malnutrition to war wounds.” Ofah Hadi, a nursing student, lost six extended family members when an airstrike hit her apartment building. She also lost her left leg. [Ofah Hadi] “When I woke up after the operation I found myself in the ICU. I tried to move my legs. My right leg moved, but the left didn’t. I knew the moment I tried to move my leg, and when the doctor told me to try to move my toes I tried to hold myself together. Later my father came to check on me and he told me, ‘I am your father standing here next to you and I will be your leg’.”

The fighting here doesn’t just risk the lives of those inside the city. Hodeidah’s Port is a lifeline for millions across Yemen. Most of the food imported into rebel-held Yemen comes through this port, and if fighting were to reach here and shut it down, the UN says it could bring with it the biggest famine of a generation, with millions of lives at risk. In Sweden the talks resulted in a handshake agreement by both sides to eventually pull their troops out of Hodeidah. But it’s a fragile agreement, yet to be honored.

Back in Sana’a, I asked the political leader of the Houthis, President Mohammed Ali Al Houthi, if he will really withdraw troops. [Mohammed Ali Al Houhti] “This is one of the conditions, yes. That the military forces withdraw and keep only the police, according to what was planned. Nothing has been declared yet, but within 10 to 12 days of ceasing fire these steps will start. The first step is to cease fire and then gradually there will be more steps towards this.”

At the end of the first day, the ceasefire is still holding in Hodeidah, for the most part. Turning this moment of peace into a lasting chance for Yemen’s people to put their lives back together again is the next, difficult step. For the PBS NewsHour, I’m Jane Ferguson, in Hodediah, Yemen.