

**Q&A with UNHCR Yemen Representative Jean-Nicolas Beuze
for UNHCR Canada spring newsletter 2021**

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1. What are the factors that are driving food insecurity in Yemen?

The intensifying conflict and the fuel embargo have made the Yemeni economy collapse and prices of food and other commodities skyrocket. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we assessed that 80 percent of the Yemeni population was relying on humanitarian aid for their daily survival. If it is difficult for Yemeni families to find their bread and butter under these circumstances, you can well imagine that families displaced by the conflict – one out of eight Yemeni – are particularly at risk of hunger. Having lost their homes and their livelihoods, they struggle to make ends meet. One out of four of these displaced families is headed by a woman, who due to socio-cultural norms, is most of the time deprived of any livelihood opportunity. This is why UNHCR is primarily targeting these displaced families in its response – especially those headed by women, older persons or persons with disabilities.

2. What are the resources and supplies you need more urgently right now to help address food insecurity?

Our cash assistance programme targeting the most vulnerable displaced families is the most dignified way of helping Yemenis protect themselves from the famine. We know from our assessments that 97 percent of those receiving our cash use a portion of it to buy food – mostly rice, sometimes onions or tomatoes, and bread. We also know – and this is extremely worrisome – that without our cash, most families will cut their spending on health care, education and products for newborns. Many parents told us they would stop eating to make sure their children have something. But many told us also that they may have to pull their kids out of school and put them to work or marry them.

3. You have previously described the challenges for refugees and internally displaced people accessing basic essentials during the pandemic, including medical care, hygiene products and running water. How are you helping people in need cope with the ongoing challenges of this public health emergency?

Refugees, mainly from Somalia, and local families displaced by the conflict are amongst the poorest in Yemen. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country, they were already struggling to buy food, pay rent or send their children to schools. With the slowing down of the economy, they were the first to lose their jobs in the informal sector. Being displaced requires daily impossible choices: to eat or to keep a roof above one family's head. Under such extreme circumstances, buying medicines or soaps can only be but deprioritized. Deaths are a daily occurrence in these communities where other communicable diseases are also spreading, from cholera to malaria. Many have told me that they do not have the means to bring sick relatives to a health facility and would not have the means to pay for medicine. Again, our cash program increases the choices they can make, and 70 percent have told us they use part of it for health care and buying potable water.

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4. According to the International Organization for Migration, some 172,000 people were newly displaced in Yemen during 2020 due to several factors, including the ongoing conflict and natural disasters. What kind of support has UNHCR and its partners been able to provide to these individuals and their families?

UNHCR is at the forefront of the immediate response for these families who have recently lost everything in the conflict. Our first line of response is two-fold: emergency shelter to protect them from the elements and cash for families to buy food. You cannot imagine how having a shelter is critical for women or children to be protected against risks in the communities; for persons with disabilities to retain a bit of dignity and not be exposed to others' preying; and, for older persons who long for a safe and private space as they struggle with the ailments of ageing. Unfortunately, I must be frank: it is difficult to get sufficient funding to deliver these emergency shelters in a timely manner and of sufficient quality to last as they too often are not seen as a priority by some of our donors.

5. Sadly, there was no significant progress towards peace in Yemen in 2020. How is the ongoing conflict continuing to affect the ability to deliver humanitarian aid to the Yemeni population?

Operating in a conflict environment is always a challenge. Imagine, 14 new frontlines were opened in 2020. We must always prioritize the safety of our own staff and of our partners, and every mission to assess needs or to deliver lifesaving assistance must be carefully evaluated. The constant new displacements also require us to be very reactive and we do not always initially have partners, warehouse with shelter material, or functioning banks in locations where such displacements occur. Each displacement is a new challenge, but our extensive presence on the ground in multiple locations positions us as frontline responders. I must repeat it once again: the end of hostilities is needed NOW. Yemen cannot continue on this track, or one faces a major human catastrophe that will haunt us all.

6. What are some of the key priority areas of focus for UNHCR to further help refugees and internally displaced people in Yemen in 2021?

For Yemenis displaced by the conflict our top priorities remain cash and shelter, while other humanitarian partners focus on other aspects of the response. UNHCR, however, is the sole agency taking care of the 130,000 refugees in the country. From food to health care or education, refugees have little or no access to public services: they rely on us for their survival. Unfortunately, in a context where humanitarian needs for the local population are so immense, refugees tend to be forgotten. I have had the opportunity to say it in the past: however generous may be the Yemeni communities, Yemen is not a place for refugees to find a durable and dignified solution to their plight. The majority of them – from Somalia or Ethiopia – will not be able to return safely to their homes. So what will happen to them if UNHCR is not given the means to support them in exile in Yemen?

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7. As you reflect back on your first year in Yemen, is there a particular moment that has resonated with you as you have visited with refugees and internally displaced people?

Speaking to displaced families – or to our local partners helping them against all odds – is always very emotional for me. I know that many of our readers would be equally moved beyond words by the stories I have heard. Two women called Fatima have left a strong impression on me. The first is a 14-month Somali baby girl in Aden. Her father was worried as she was not keeping any food, not even milk. At the health clinic supported by UNHCR, she was weighted. Five kilos. Half the weight of a baby of her age. This is severe malnutrition. The other Fatima is a shy Yemeni woman met in an insalubrious collective shelter. Her face still bearing the marks of burns she sustained when a bomb fell near her on her way to the market to buy food. I know we are doing our best to help both of them and millions of other, but is it sufficient? What kind of future do they have?

8. What can Canadians do to continue to support UNHCR in its efforts to help people in need in Yemen?

Continue supporting us, UNHCR, and other humanitarian partners, in Yemen and elsewhere as every loonie matters. It is thanks to you that we can be there for the two Fatimas and many others. Get also mobilized to push Canadian decision-makers to help stop the war in Yemen and to increase their foreign aid contributions. COVID-19 showed us that nobody will be safe without everyone of us being safe. It is not the time to abandon communities that have been hit by conflict, poverty or natural hazards. Of course, I also think of Canadian families who have been hit hard by the pandemic and its socio-economic consequences. But in an interconnected world, I am confident that Canada and Canadians will continue showing their solidarity with fellow Canadians and people on the other end of the planet like Yemenis.

9. Are there any other key points that you wanted to highlight or mention about your experiences so far in Yemen?

Being here on the ground, and being confronted with challenges that seem insurmountable, is, I will be honest, sometimes disheartening. Knowing that Canadians are behind us, however, give us all strength to continue going the extra mile to make the difference in the lives of millions of displaced Yemenis and Somali refugees. I know that we can count on you to stand with us as we deliver life-saving interventions in Yemen.

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