

Yemeni humanitarian organization helping rebuild lives on conflict's frontlines wins 2021 UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award

Driven by his own experience of displacement, founder Ameen Jubran and his team kept providing shelter and hope to Yemenis fleeing their homes even as fighting reached its peak.

By Tatiana Bure in Hudaydah, Yemen

When Ameen Jubran chose to stay in Hudaydah – the scene of some of the most intense clashes of Yemen's six-year conflict – to help thousands of his compatriots who had fled violence, the decision was driven by his own experience of being forced to run from the fighting.

The first time his family was uprooted came in 2015, at the start of an ongoing conflict that has created one of the world's worst humanitarian crises and displaced more than 4 million people inside the country. As fighting engulfed their hometown of Sa'ada in northwest Yemen, they joined others escaping to the nearby town of Razih.

"There must have been 10,000 people fleeing the town on foot at the same time. Some of us were crammed into the boots of cars, and petrol stations along the way were burning," Jubran, 37, recalled. "It was like something out of a movie scene."

His most terrifying moment came in 2017, when the neighbourhood where they were living in Razih came under heavy bombardment, and their house was rocked by a huge explosion.

"All the glass shattered. I was in the same room as my daughter and saw blood on her hands," he said. As they rushed to get away, Jubran resolved to take his daughter's prized bike with him.

"In the sheer panic and chaos, there was dust everywhere and I grabbed my daughter's bike and ran downstairs. Then I got to the first floor and realised I had taken the bike but forgotten my daughter."

After gathering the whole family, they set out once again in search of safety, this time settling in the capital Sana'a. But the memory of the blind panic and confusion that overcame him as the fighting drove them from their home remains fresh.

These experiences, together with a conviction that Yemenis must help each other through a war that has ground on for more than six years, led Jubran to establish the aid organization Jeel Albena Association for Humanitarian Development.

The organization was founded by Jubran and 14 others who had worked together since their university days in 2007 to help fellow students displaced by long-running conflict. It currently employs over 160 people and is supported by an additional 230 volunteers, many of them also displaced"

Based in the Red Sea port city of Hudaydah, the organization has constructed 18,000 emergency shelters for internally displaced people (IDPs) living in informal sites in and around Hudaydah and another city, Hajjah.

At the height of fighting for control of Hudaydah in 2018, Jubran and his colleagues were forced to relocate their office four times as the shifting frontlines brought gun battles and explosions to their doorstep. But despite the danger, Jubran said they resolved to stay and help.

“The areas where we work are considered to be among the most impoverished, and also the most dangerous,” Jubran explained. “We felt the danger every day, but despite that we had displaced people and others who needed our help. We couldn’t just leave them behind without providing them with assistance.”

By housing displaced families in shelters made from woven *khazaf* palm fronds, which are more ecologically sustainable and better suited to the harsh local climate than man-made materials, they provide employment to hundreds of displaced people and locals – mostly women – who grow, weave, and sell the raw material.

“Shelter is the most basic and important need for the displaced,” Jubran explained. “If they have adequate shelter, it protects the family’s dignity, and they are no longer homeless.”

The organization manages around 90 informal sites hosting between 100 and 1,000 families, providing services such as sanitation and rehabilitating schools to accommodate displaced children.

It also runs a community centre in Hudaydah that offers legal assistance, psychological counselling and vocational training to the displaced and the communities that host them.

In recognition of its dedication to helping internally displaced Yemenis during the conflict, Jeel Albena has been chosen as the global winner of UNHCR’s 2021 Nansen Refugee Award, a prestigious annual prize that honours those who have gone to extraordinary lengths to help forcibly displaced or stateless people.

The award also highlights the extraordinary work done by many local NGOs in Yemen.

The prize will be presented by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, at a virtual ceremony to broadcast at 18.30 CET on 4 October.

The Nansen Refugee Award is named in honour of Norwegian explorer and humanitarian Fridtjof Nansen, the first High Commissioner for Refugees and Nobel Prize winner, who was appointed by the League of Nations in 1921.

Strolling through informal sites dotted with the woven shelters Jeel Albena has supplied, Jubran’s infectious grin is reflected on the smiling faces of those who gather to greet him like an old friend. Many have known him for years and know he understands them.

“We have faced many similar difficulties in terms of being away from loved ones, from friends,” Jubran said. “My experience with displacement impacted me positively in how I deal with other displaced people. I became more in touch with them, and it gave me patience and determination to listen to them, and to really get to know their true needs.”

Despite the enduring sense of optimism that Jubran says sets Yemenis apart and keeps alive their dreams of a peaceful future, he also knows the despair that can threaten to overwhelm those caught up in conflict and driven from their homes.

A few years ago, after six months working on the frontlines during which he was unable to visit his wife and daughters in Sana’a, Jubran suffered burnout and was ready to quit.

It was a conversation with his father that ultimately changed his mind.

“He said, ‘You can’t quit when Yemen is going through its worst humanitarian crisis, displaced people are losing their homes on daily basis and you are still capable of helping them’,” Jobran recalled.

He got in his car, drove to Hudaydah and went straight back to work, and hasn’t stopped since.

“I said to myself that once the war is over, then I can relax.”