

Yemen could face famine in 2018 as war continues, aid agencies warn

BEIRUT/ROME (Thomson Reuters Foundation) – Already battered by three years of war, Yemen is in danger of tipping into famine in 2018 if fighting continues to disrupt imports of food aid, aid agencies warned.

In the worst-case scenario, the war-torn nation “faces a risk of famine” if there is prolonged and significant disruption to imports through its two Red Sea ports, said a specialist U.S.-based agency.

More people are predicted to go hungry in July 2018 than in the same month last year, added the Famine Early Warning Systems Network in its latest analysis, which focuses on projected food needs for July.

A Saudi-led military coalition fighting the Iran-backed Houthi movement had closed key ports, Hodeidah, which is the country’s main entry point for food and humanitarian supplies, and Saleef, in early November.

The U.S.-backed coalition accuses Iran of sending weapons to its Houthi allies through Hodeidah. More than 10,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

Yemen, a nation of 28 million people, imports more than 85 percent of its food and medicine.

The ports have temporarily re-opened for 30 days, and cranes arrived on Monday to help with the aid flow, but it’s unclear if they will stay that way, said Stephen Anderson, Yemen country director for the World Food Programme (WFP).

“If the ports are restricted again we could face a catastrophic loss of life if we can’t get supplies to people,” he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Hodeidah on Monday.

Yemenis are facing “an extremely bleak outlook”, with continued conflict, high fuel and food prices and disease concerns such as the cholera outbreak and the spread of diphtheria, Anderson added.

Disrupting humanitarian access would deepen what the United Nations already calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis, said Rosanne Marchesich, a Rome-based emergency response team leader at the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

In 2017, 17 million Yemenis, or about two-thirds of the population, were considered hungry, with 6.8 million needing immediate, adequate and sustained food assistance, WFP said.

The numbers have gone up with 8.4 million now on the brink of famine, it added.

With 70 percent of the rural population dependent on agriculture for food and income, sustaining production is crucial, FAO's Marchesich told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

Yet, below average rainfall, fighting and limited, expensive inputs such as fertilizers, have pushed down yields, she added.

Yemenis have exhausted strategies to cope with the crisis and some are selling off their assets for short-term survival, deepening poverty and food insecurity, she warned.

Reporting By Heba Kansa and Thin Lei Win, Editing by Ros Russell and Jared Ferrie; Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, corruption and climate change. Visit www.trust.org

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