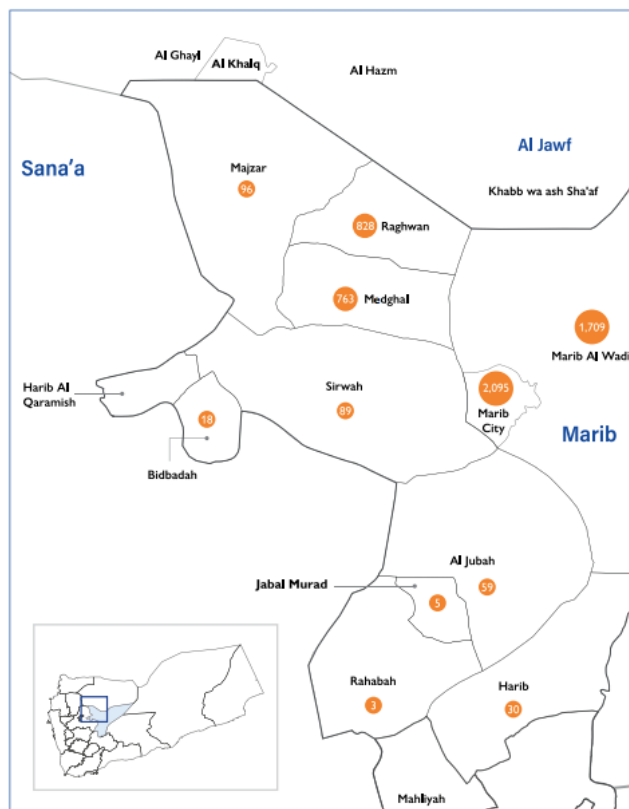


Escalation of conflict in Al-Jawf and Marib governorates

Briefing note – 24 March 2020

Since the beginning of 2020 violence has been increasing across multiple locations in Yemen, including in Nihm (north East of Sana'a), Al Hodeidah, Ta'iz and Sana'a. At the end of February Houthi forces made significant gains in Al Jawf governorate, including taking control of Hazm, the provincial capital. As of mid-March, Houthi forces continue to advance on Marib governorate to the east. This potentially opens a new frontline and if successful in holding newly captured territory, may shift the balance of power more into the hands of Houthis. Fighting between government and Houthi forces in and around Nihm and Al Jawf has led to the forced displacement of 5,700 families (39,900 people) into Marib governorate. IDPs are in need of humanitarian assistance, in particular shelter. Most of the new arrivals have moved to Marib city and the surrounding district. This area is already hosting over 750,000 IDPs from previous conflicts. Humanitarian agencies are attempting to respond but ongoing fighting, as well as pre-existing logistical and bureaucratic restraints, severely hamper operations.



Map by IOM (18/03/2020).

Limitations

At the time of writing, intense conflict is ongoing and therefore the most recent data available is likely to date quickly. There is no displacement data beyond 18 March. This report primarily focuses on developments in and around Al Jawf and Marib however conflict continues (at a lower level) along other frontlines in Yemen, including Al Hodeidah, Hajjah, Sana'a, Taiz and Al Dhali.

Anticipated scope and scale

Large scale fighting in and around Marib city would lead to immense humanitarian need in a governorate that, prior to the recent influx was already hosting over 750,000 IDPs. Fighting in Marib risks further displacement of up to 500,000 people. As fighting escalates humanitarian access may be almost entirely blocked, as major highways into the governorate are cut off. An advance on Marib potentially paves the way for Houthi forces to move south, in the event of failed attempts to reach a negotiated settlement with Saudi Arabia. A successful Houthi takeover of Marib will likely exacerbate conflict with government and Saudi forces along other frontlines as the GoY attempts to suppress further Houthi territorial control.

Key priorities



+39,900
people displaced since late January



High shelter needs
due to sudden IDP influx and limited availability of space in Marib city



High protection concerns
amidst ongoing conflict, particularly for survivors of SGBV

Humanitarian Constraints



Marib city remains somewhat accessible. Response initiatives are ongoing but limited. Hospitals in Marib governorate have been targeted and there are deliberate attempts to obstruct aid. The situation remains insecure and pre-existing bureaucratic constraints imposed on aid agencies, predominately by the Houthis and to some extent by government authorities, continue to limit access.

District of Marib governorate	IDPs 21 January to 18 March (HH)	IDPs 21 January to 18 March (people est.)
Marib City	2,095	14,665
Marib	1,709	11,963
Raghwan	828	5,796
Madghal	763	5,341
Majzar	96	672
Sirwah	89	623

Introduction

In the final quarter of 2019 violence across Yemen decreased as parties to the conflict focussed on political negotiations (the Stockholm Agreement, Dec 2018; the Riyadh Agreement in the south, Nov 2020; and a separate channel of peace negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis). However, since January 2020, conflict intensified across multiple frontlines, including major clashes along the Nihm frontline, between Sana'a and Marib, which had been at a stalemate since 2016 (Brookings Institute, 26 February 2020; Washington Post, 17 March 2020; Discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

The fighting in Nihm, prompted the Houthis to resume missile attacks on Saudi Arabia in January after an four month ceasefire and the Saudis relaunched airstrikes on Sana'a. Conflict also reignited along the Al Hodeidah and Tai'z frontlines, moving east. In late February 2020, Houthi forces advanced from Nihm to Hazm district, Al Jawf's provincial capital, and neighbouring Al Ghail district. On 1 March Houthi forces took over strategic military bases in Al Jawf and Al Hazm city. This opens the way for further advances towards Marib, home of lucrative gas reserves, the SAFER oil company, and a major Islah stronghold. Conflict continues to intensify across Marib and Al Jawf governorates throughout March 2020 (AI Monitor, 13 March 2020; ICG 17 March 2020; Reuters, 21 February 2020).

Crisis impact

Displacement

Fighting displaced 5,700 families (over 39,900 people) between 21 January to 18 March 2020 from Nihm and Al Jawf to Marib, and internally within Marib. Reporting suggests that few IDPs have remained in Al Jawf (OCHA 12 March 2020; IOM 5 March 2020; 18 March 2020). The vast majority of the newly displaced are in Marib city and surrounding districts. 1,750 families (12,000 people) were displaced by fighting since 1 March 2020. 45% of displaced people have sheltered in informal settlements, suggesting Yemenis are beginning to exhaust local coping mechanisms (traditionally, two thirds of displaced people in Yemen find shelter with relatives or rent their own accommodation) (Data from Sana'a Hub, IOM 18 March 2020; UNFPA, 18 March 2020; ICG 17 March 2020).

Actual IDP numbers may be higher as it is difficult to count people staying with host communities and relatives. Some people also fled to desert areas and are now inaccessible to humanitarians (OCHA, 14 March 2020; AI Monitor, 12 March 2020; Al Jazeera, 07 March 2020; IOM, 05 March 2020; OCHA, 05 March 2020).

IDPs have in most cases already been displaced at least once. They are in need of assistance across all sectors including shelter, health, WASH, protection and food (IOM, 05 March 2020).

Shelter

The majority of newly displaced are staying in informal settlements. Others are in public buildings or with host communities. Shelters are overcrowded, particularly in public buildings. Some families are sleeping on roof tops which are unsafe for children. Informal settlements are mostly comprised of tents and plastic sheets with limited access to WASH facilities, increasing the risk of cholera and other water borne diseases. New arrivals to Marib city are overwhelming local response capacity, with local humanitarian actors already struggling to serve large displaced populations (IOM, 3 March 2020; ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020; OCHA, 05 March 2020).

An unknown number of IDPs in Al-Jawf reportedly fled to the desert. It is likely that many of these people are staying in the open air. Some IDPs from Nilm are reportedly sheltering in caves (IOM, 3 March 2020; ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

On 17 March 2020, rockets fired into Marib City damaged at least 12 homes (CIMP, 18 March 2020).

Protection

Civilians are highly vulnerable to the impact of the ongoing conflict in Al Jawf and Marib. The number of civilian casualties has been on the rise since the start of the year country wide. In February, 187 civilians were killed or wounded, a 20% increase on the previous month. Civilian casualties from Al Jawf and Marib likely made up a high proportion of the 187 civilian casualties recorded in February 2020. On 15 February, at least 30 civilians were killed by airstrikes in Al Jawf, including at least 19 children. There are growing concerns casualties could increase back to 2018 levels (UNSC, 12 March 2020; Discussions with operational actors, February 2020).

Health

The number of war-wounded in Sana'a, Al-Jawf and Marib increased due to the conflict. Precise figures on injuries are currently unavailable. However, many injured civilians were transported to hospitals in Al Jawf and Sana'a following fighting in al Hazm city on 1 March 2020 (OCHA, 05 March 2020). At the beginning of February, the two main hospitals in Marib were badly damaged and it is unclear if they are still operational, threatening vital health services for the local population (UNSC, 12 March 2020; OCHA, 05 March 2020).

It is unclear to what extent people are able to access health care. Some hospitals are providing services and medicine free of charge. However, people report being unable to visit hospitals as they cannot pay for health care (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

Children who have fled conflict and are now living in IDP sites show signs of physiological distress and need psycho-social support (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

WASH

Operational actors report the need to rapidly scale up water trucking to support newly displaced people. In December 2019, 60% of IDPs already depended on water trucking as their main source of water. Some new IDP sites currently have no water points (CARE, December 2019; Discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

Sanitation and hygiene conditions are generally poor and open defecation has been reported in heavily populated areas. With regard to sanitation conditions, some sites are considered worse than others however there is no data to help distinguish where WASH needs are most severe (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020; CARE December 2019).

Food

There is no data available on the specific food needs of the population affected by the recent upsurge in violence. Food security levels are at least IPC Phase 3 in both Al-Jawf and Marib. The influx of IDPs will exacerbate existing food needs among both displaced and host community populations.

Nutrition

Inside IDP communities there are reports of young children in very weak physical conditions, including cases of malnutrition, despite the presence of health partners (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020). The most recent SMART survey, updated in 2019, shows GAM prevalence of 10% and SAM prevalence of 1% for Marib governorate (Nutrition Assessment Summary, 2019). It is likely that these statistics worsen as the IDP population rises and access to sufficient and varied food supplies is further reduced.

Education

On 17 March rockets were fired into Marib City damaging one school, limiting access to education for up to 1,000 families (CIMP, 18 March 2020). Due to the coronavirus outbreak schools were ordered to close from 18 March until further notice (Al Jazeera, 19 March 2020).

Impact on critical infrastructure

Houthi forces have reportedly targeted hospitals in the recent escalation of fighting. At the beginning of February, the Al Jafra Hospital and Al Saudi Field Hospital in Marib governorate were badly damaged. The hospitals serve a population of about 15,000 people. A mobile clinic was also damaged. It is unclear to what extent the facilities are now operational (OCHA, 05 March 2020; NRC 17 February 2020).

Two bridges on the border between Sana'a and Marib governorates were damaged due to airstrikes on 15 and 18 March, limiting movement of people and goods (CIMP, 18 March 2020).

Vulnerable groups affected

People in hard to reach areas

Following the heavy fighting that took place around Al Hazm, the capital of Al Jawf district, the majority of people fled to Marib. Those who were left behind mostly include the more vulnerable who likely did not have the physical or financial means to leave their homes (OCHA 12 March 2020; ECHO, 11 March 2020). Al Hazm is largely inaccessible to humanitarian actors, exposing remaining residents to health risks, especially those with chronic diseases.

Female headed households

There is a high proportion of female headed households amongst the displaced, some living with other families, others living alone. Unaccompanied female headed households are especially vulnerable to harassment. Unaccompanied women in camps reportedly have to depend on male neighbours to access water or food distributions, increasing the risk of dependency and exploitation. Due to overcrowded shelter conditions, some women are sleeping outside in the open air (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

People with disabilities

Data on the number of people living with a disability, either pre-existing or as a result of conflict, is not available. However, people living with disabilities are present in all IDP sites. There are currently no disability focused response initiatives. Some people with disability are often forced to rent accommodation in Marib city, which places them at higher risk of falling into debt (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

Migrants

Migrants from East Africa are often discriminated against. They are often accused of carrying disease, committing criminal acts and being a threat to the local population. As more IDPs arrive to Marib city and surrounding areas, there is a risk of growing tension between migrant populations and other groups (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

Muhamasheen

The Muhamasheen are a minority ethnic group that often make up communities on the edge of larger cities, including Marib. They have historically been politically, socially and economically marginalised by the government. They do not have access to legal documentation and struggle to access basic services including health care and education. They regularly rely on host community support for access to food and water, but this is often denied (The New Arab, 17 May 2016; Minority Rights, March 2020; ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

Humanitarian and operational constraints

Access to parts of Al Jawf are inaccessible due to logistical and security constraints. Ongoing conflict is severely hampering access. At the beginning of March, the Yemen Red Cross was unable to carry out a medical evacuation and the ICRC reported being unable to deliver medical supplies to Al Jawf Hospital. Poor mobile services and low levels of partner capacity also hamper the response (ICRC, 7 March 2020; OCHA, 05 March 2020).

An unknown number of displaced people reportedly fled to desert areas that are hard to reach for humanitarian actors (OCHA 12 March 2020).

Aggravating factors

Coronavirus

In what is generally perceived as a necessary measure, international humanitarian actors have been blocked from entering the country, in an attempt to limit the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. Since 16 March flights have been suspended and road travel has also been limited. Cargo imports will likely continue (ACAPS, 23 March 2020; TNH, 17 March 2020).

Should cases of coronavirus reach Yemen there is a high risk that the disease will spread quickly, exacerbated by overcrowded living conditions and inadequate sanitation facilities. This will place enormous burden on an already weak health care system, as well as divert the attention of local and international organisations away from their current humanitarian activities. An outbreak of coronavirus in Yemen could result in hundreds of thousands of deaths (The Guardian, 18 March 2020).

On set of rainy-season leading to a spike in cholera cases

The rainy season is due to begin in April. Rainfall could exacerbate the spread of disease, particularly amongst crowded IDP populations, such as in Marib city. The spread of cholera is of particular concern. In the first two months of 2020 over 55,000 cholera cases were reported countrywide. Although Marib governorate has not been amongst the regions previously most affected by cholera, the growing displacement figures amidst

ongoing conflict heighten the risk of a cholera outbreak during the rainy season (Oxfam, 9 March 2020). Heavy rain and flooding could also block humanitarian access.

Displacement patterns impacting tribal dynamics

In the Marib and Al Jawf governorate tribal affiliation is commonly the most important social tie. As conflict continues to drive displacement, tribal groups may be forced to mix, potentially exacerbating the risk of conflict between different communities, particularly as resources become further stretched. There is a risk that tribal groups from more southern districts are likely to reject any IDPs perceived as northerners from entering their region. There are suggestions that in attempt to avoid being displaced into a different tribal community, people are in some instances choosing not to move and instead staying closer to conflict frontlines, potentially placing themselves at higher risk (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

Past conflict and displacement

Marib governorate already hosted 750,000 IDPs who have fled violence from across the country since the start of the war in Yemen in 2015, the highest IDP population anywhere in Yemen. IDPs in Marib are spread across 24 IDP sites (formal camps and informal settlements). Over five years the population of Marib has increased from around 3,600 people to well over one million. Marib's infrastructure and public services have already been struggling to cope with the influx of people (OCHA 12 March 2020; Quantara, 05/08/2020; CARE, December 2019).

Marib governorate has been relatively free from conflict over the past five years, therefore it has remained a common area of transit for migrants from East Africa who are moving towards Saudi Arabia. An estimated 30,000 migrants live in Marib (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

Response capacity

International response capacity

In areas where IDPs can be reached, humanitarian agencies are stepping up response initiatives. At the beginning of March, rapid response teams were deployed to provide first aid to injured civilians and some people were transferred to hospitals in Sana' and Al Jawf (OCHA, 05 March 2020). A reception centre has been established in Marib City to help with the process of IDP registration. However, as people scatter across the governorate recording everyone is proving challenging. UN agencies are distributing food supplies, hygiene kits, shelter and NFI supplies. Mobile protection and reproductive health teams have also been deployed to the city. Some level of psychological support is being provided and attempts to identify the most vulnerable women and girls are ongoing with the aim of referring

them to more specific support units. Survivors of SGBV are amongst the displaced though there are very few response initiatives to support these people. There are no specific shelters available to support people who have faced SGBV (IOM, 3 March 2020; UNFPA, 18 March 2020; ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

Efforts are reportedly underway to relocate IDPs away from Marib city to Al Mil IDP camp due to lack of space inside the city. Al Mil camp has a hosting capacity of 1,400 households and is likely already at its limit. However, local authorities have indicated they plan to expand it further (IOM, 3 March 2020).

Local and national response capacity

The Yemeni Red Cross is supporting emergency response to people affected by the recent outbreak of conflict in Marib and Al Jawf. It is not clear to what extent the agency is active or how much ground they are able to cover (ICRC, 7 March 2020).

Coping capacities

Operational actors have reported an increase in early and forced marriage as a coping mechanism across Yemen. Early marriage cases are likely to rise among displaced families. Early or forced marriage is particularly common **amongst the historically marginalised Muhamasheen** (ACAPS discussions with operational actors, March 2020).

Information gaps and needs

- Many displaced are living with host communities. Little information is known about their needs or the needs of host communities.
- It is difficult to distinguish between the difference in living conditions and the severity of needs across different locations hosting IDPs.
- There is no information available regarding the way in which the ongoing conflict is impacting access to and availability of education.
- Health facilities have been damaged during the conflict. However, it is not clear to what extent health facilities are operational and able to meet the needs of the population.
- There is no information on the specific needs of vulnerable groups. Displacement data has not been disaggregated according to sex and age.
- There is no information on protection issues, including information on incidents of sexual and gender-based violence, child recruitment or other forms of exploitation.

Outlook

The Houthi takeover of Al Jawf city and surrounding areas has emboldened the group to advance on Marib governorate. Should the Houthis assume full hold of the governorate, they will secure control of the country's main gas and oil supply as well as key trade routes. It is possible that such a strong display of Houthi force prompts the Saudis to seek a negotiated settlement to end the conflict. The advance on Marib potentially marks a crossroads in the trajectory of the Yemen conflict. If the opportunity to reach an agreement is missed at a time where the balance of power has shifted in favour of the Houthis, there is a high risk of Houthi forces advancing into other parts of country including into southern governorates in an attempt to take Aden. In anticipation of such a move, STC forces are reportedly expecting a collapse of government positions and making preparations for violent confrontation with the Houthis in the south. Should Houthi forces continue to make territorial gains, there is a risk that conflict will increase along other key frontlines including Al Hodeidah and Taiz, as the government pushes back. Conflict between Houthi and Saudi forces may also intensify along the Saudi border areas of Al Jawf governorate. There would likely be a heightened risk of the use of missile attacks inside Saudi Arabia, as well as a widespread resumption of airstrikes on Yemen and a spike in ground combat. The Houthi push in to Marib potentially marks the beginning of new and even more severe phase of the Yemen war, that would give way to widespread displacement of over 500,000 people, an increase in scale and severity of humanitarian needs, amidst further reduction in humanitarian access (ICG 17 March 2020; Al Monitor, 13 March 2020; Washington Post, 25 February 2020; Al Monitor 12 March 2020).

This analysis benefited from support by the IMEDA programme, a UK Aid project funded by the UK government.