

Hundreds of Yemenis Still Without Homes, Victims of Regional Violence
By Sadeq Al-Wesabi, Yemen Times
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Children at an IDP camp in Hajja governorate. Children are some of the most vulnerable in the camps, lacking formal education and exposed to life-threatening diseases.

Over the course of the last 10 years, hundreds of thousands of Yemenis have been displaced from their homes, victims of separate—but similarly violent—regional conflicts in the northern and southern governorates.

This number of internally displaced people, or IDPs, is now more than 500,000, according to the Executive Unit for IDPs Camps in Yemen, a state organization formed in 2009.

Many of these people live in appalling conditions. The camps, the majority of which are in Aden and Hajja, are crowded. Food, water and warm blankets are hard to come by. Outbreaks of malaria, cholera and tuberculosis, among other sicknesses are reported.

In November, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) urged the government to deal with its swelling population of internal refugees. State officials were receptive and efforts are underway but—due to lack of funding and a solid organizational framework—efforts are limping along unevenly.

There have been some achievements.

Notably, in Abyan—where state forces have been successful in pushing back Al-Qaeda affiliates that had been holding power—over 143,000 IDPs (around 90 percent of those Yemenis displaced in the South and about 30 percent of all registered IDPs) have returned to their towns and villages over the course of the past year.

But in other governorates in the South and the North, displaced people still have no house or facilities to return to even if mitigated fighting has allowed for such a homecoming.

The government declared it will draw up a new national policy to tackle the many, related problems that result from the displacements. The proposed action addresses not only the fate of displaced people, but also the difficulties experienced by temporary host communities.

The policy has yet to take any formal shape, Mohammed Harmal, deputy head of Executive Unit for IDPs Camps, said.

“The progress is slow,” Harmal admitted. And for those who are displaced, time is of the essence. IDPs are in need of immediate food, medical care and educational resources.

“This situation is tragic,” Najeeb Al-Sa’adi, head of the Wethaq Foundation for Civil Orientation, a Yemeni human rights organization, said. “[Displaced people] are severely impoverished. The alleged humanitarian aid doesn’t reach them,” he said, citing disorganization and mismanagement as the biggest problems facing aid work in Yemen.

Aid is administered by a coalition of domestic and foreign organizations, including the World Health Organization, the World Food Program and UNHCR. This past December, UNHCR and the Executive Unit for IDPs Camps held workshops in Sa’ada and Hajja—northern governorates that were hit hard during clashes between state forces and armed Houthi affiliates—bringing together displaced people, local tribal leaders and aid workers in conversation.

Zaid Al-Alaya'a, UNHCR senior public information assistant said the organization has been working closely with the government and strengthening the capacity of state institutions, such as the Ministry of Human Rights and the Executive Unit for IDPs Camps.

UNHCR offers assistance—providing mattresses, blankets and dishware among other items—to those who have been displaced, Al- Alaya'a said.

Though some IDPs have been able to return to their towns and villages, aid groups say too many are still homeless, caught between places, in a perpetual state of waiting. The estimated number of displaced people—from both the UNHCR and from the Executive Unit of IDPs Camps—only paints half the picture; the number of unregistered refugees is difficult to estimate.

Though domestic and international organizations are working to provide immediate assistance to IDPs, the final goal should be to bring people home, Harmal said. Everything else is a temporary solution.

"[Our job] isn't limited to giving them a bag of flour, but also helping them to return to their homes safely," Harmal said. "When we do this, we are helping all of Yemen."

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