

Yemen still starved of food and fuel after month-long suspension of blockade

REPORT

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Despite last month's temporary lifting of the Saudi led-coalition blockade of Yemen's northern ports, in the past three and a half weeks only 18 per cent of the country's monthly fuel needs and just over half its monthly food needs have been imported through these ports, Oxfam said today.

These ports provide most of the goods the country needs to import with 80 per cent of all goods coming through Hodeida, one of the northern ports. Ninety per cent of the country's food has to be imported. The arrival of much-needed new cranes in Hodeida is very welcome and crucial to speeding up supplies through the port. But the continued restrictions of vital supplies further endangers the 8.4 million people living on the brink of famine.

Oxfam warned of a catastrophic deterioration in what is already the world's worst humanitarian crisis and the site of the largest cholera outbreak on record. The organization said that the lives of 22 million people in need of aid will continue to deteriorate if there is not a significant rise in the imports of the vital food, fuel and medicine. On the 19 January the blockade will have been lifted for a month and Oxfam is calling for all ports to remain open to the uninterrupted flow of commercial and humanitarian goods.

Shane Stevenson, Oxfam's Country Director in Yemen, said: "The wanton disregard on all sides of this conflict for the lives of ordinary families struggling to cope after more than a 1,000 days of war is nothing short of an international scandal. This is a war waged with 21st century hi-tech weapons, but the tactic of starvation is from the Dark Ages. The international community must come together and take a stand against barbarism."

While the blockade has been temporarily lifted, 190,000 tonnes of food arrived at the main northern ports between 20 December and 15 January, compared with the estimated monthly food needs of 350,000 tonnes, according to the UN, shipping agencies and port authorities. Fuel imports over the same period were 97,000 tonnes compared with an estimated monthly fuel needs of 544,000 tonnes.

Fuel tankers and bulk cargo vessels of grain have docked but no container vessels have arrived, meaning that foods essential for survival, such as edible oil, have not entered the ports for some time.

Last month the price of imported cooking oil went up by 61 per cent in Al Baidha, 130 miles south east of the capital Sana'a. The price of wheat rose by 10 per cent across the country over the same period. Food prices have been rising since the conflict started. In Hodeida in the west of the country, the price of barley is three times higher than it was before the conflict, maize is up nearly 140 percent in Hadramout over the same period and the price of sorghum has doubled in Taiz.

Due to the fuel shortages and uncertainty of imports, one of Yemen's major food companies has reduced its grain milling operations and another is struggling with milling and distributing food inside the country. Companies face arbitrary restrictions by parties to the conflict when moving food around the country.

The food and fuel import crisis is exacerbated by a collapse in the country's currency which has seen a dramatic drop in the exchange rate from 250 rials per US dollar to 500 in recent weeks. This will put more pressure on prices and hit the poorest and the families of the estimated 1.24 million civilian servants who have not received, or only occasionally received, a salary since August 2016.

Oxfam said that not only should the blockade be permanently lifted but there should also be an end to unnecessary restrictions on cargo ships coming into port. It called for an immediate ceasefire, an end to arms sales that have been fuelling the conflict and called on backers of the war to use their influence to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table.

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