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Fears of "highly catastrophic" COVID-19 spread in Yemen

Yemen's health system has been devastated by years of conflict and COVID-19 deaths are reported to be surging in Aden. Sharmila Devi reports.

The COVID-19 outbreak in Yemen will be "highly catastrophic" unless the authorities change course to apply mitigation measures in a country that is already highly fragile after more than 5 years of conflict, Altaf Musani, WHO's representative in Yemen, told *The Lancet*.

"Based on recently applied models for the context in Yemen, we are estimating in a worse-case scenario with no mitigation measures 28 million people infected, at least 65 000 deaths, and around 494 000 hospitalisations", said Musani in a telephone interview from Sanaa. "It is a deeply alarming situation, highly catastrophic if people do not make serious behavioural changes [and] if we do not make some course corrections."

As of May 16, Yemeni authorities had reported only 19 deaths and 126 cases. But WHO is operating under the assumption of full-blown community transmission and is working to persuade authorities to introduce more mitigation. Médecins Sans Frontières, which runs a COVID-19 centre in Aden, said that from April 30 to May 17 it had admitted 173 patients, at least 68 of whom had died. Officials in Aden had reported at least 385 deaths of people with COVID-19-like symptoms from May 7 to May 14, according to Save the Children. "COVID-19 is pushing this country even further into the abyss. The surging deaths in Aden suggest that the virus is spreading far faster and further than the number of confirmed cases", Xavier Joubert, country director of Save the Children, said in a press release.

Yemeni authorities, particularly in the north, have been loath to admit the full scale of the outbreak, said a health worker who did not want to be named because of fear of reprisal. Aid agencies have reported harassment and detention of staff as well as delays in obtaining permits. "The authorities are trying to hide but every day there are more dead bodies and it is out of control", said the health worker.

Only half of the country's health facilities were operational before the COVID-19 outbreak. Some health staff are now refusing to work because of a lack of protective equipment, and some hospitals have been refusing admission to patients presenting with COVID-19 symptoms, such as respiratory problems and fever, said Save the Children. "Hospitals are closing down and patients being turned away or left to die", said Joubert. "It is impossible to impose full lockdown because people live hand to mouth and need to get vital supplies", said the health worker. "But health staff are working without protection and there is still normal life. And because of the vulnerability of the population, more younger people aged between 40 and 50 years are dying, unlike in Europe and the USA."

> **"…'The surging deaths in Aden suggest that the virus is spreading far faster and further than the number of confirmed cases'…"**

24 million people (80% of the population) need of humanitarian assistance, and Yemen is struggling with overlapping outbreaks of cholera, chikungunya, and diphtheria. Schools have shut but most Yemenis are circulating freely—eg, at mosques and markets—but often from the necessity to get food and water.

The Saudi-backed coalition based in Aden in the south announced a ceasefire because of COVID-19 last month but there have been incidents of conflict between their forces and the Iranian-aligned Houthi movement headquartered in Sanaa in the north, as well as between the coalition and separatist forces in the south.

Musani said WHO and UN leadership were working hard to support authorities to do more. "We have really been trying to work with the authorities here in order to say the virus is circulating unchecked in Yemen and all countries are facing different phases of their epidemic cycles", he said. "In Yemen, we collectively need to gain a stronger foothold of where the virus is circulating and its devastating impact on lives and livelihoods."

Further compounding Yemen's challenges is a lack of humanitarian funding, which has led to the reduction in incentive payments that were made directly to health-care workers. "The health-care workforce is more than 50 000 [people] Yemen-wide and they were not necessarily getting their salaries consistently, so the humanitarian community jointly with health authorities designed a financial support package within several categories", said Musani.

"That money goes straight into the pockets of health-care workers; we do not provide that money centrally to government. There are a few cadres of the health workforce that are protected for a couple more months such as cholera workers and support to malnutrition and a few therapeutic feeding centres, but largely our programmes do not have the necessary funds to maintain such support."

WHO and other UN agencies have appealed for more COVID-19 funding, including medical support and equipment estimated to cost US$179 million. Saudi Arabia will host a donor pledging conference in partnership with the UN on June 2 that aims to address the humanitarian needs in Yemen.

Sharmila Devi