

Aid workers warn more Yemeni women will die as UN cuts maternity funding



Sanaa, June 8 (RHC)-- Yemeni women are already losing their lives in childbirth and thousands more will be put at serious risk as reproductive health services in the impoverished country are forced to close due to UN funding cuts, doctors and aid workers warn.

A deadly war imposed by a Saudi-led military coalition against Yemen since March 2015 has made at least 80 percent of the 28-million-strong population reliant on aid to survive in what the UN has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The UN is the main provider of reproductive health services in the war-torn country, but it has been forced to cut back its operations due to a funding shortfall.

Last month, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) halted providing reproductive services in most of the 180 facilities it supports in the Arab country, leaving about 320,000 pregnant women without care.

According to Nestor Owomuhangi, deputy representative of the UNFPA in Yemen, at least two pregnant women, whose local maternity facilities shut down, have lost their lives in childbirth.

“Complications cannot be handled at home. They have to be attended by a skilled health worker,” Owomuhangi told Reuters on Thursday, adding, “Where you have no specialized care to at least check the dangerous signs of pregnancies, that’s our worry.”

Owomuhangi’s remarks were made after the head of the UNFPA, Natalia Kanem, called on international donors at a conference on Tuesday to donate more to fund its operations, warning that Yemeni women “cannot afford to wait.”

The UN agency said it had only managed to secure 41 percent of the \$100.5 million it needs to fund its operations this year, even as it struggles with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a population already weakened by malnutrition after five years of the brutal war.

The U.S.-based Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), a nonprofit conflict-research organization, estimates that the Saudi-led war has claimed more than 100,000 lives since its onset. The war has also displaced some 3.6 million other Yemenis so far.

Separately, Jan Egeland, the head of the Norwegian Refugee Council, for his part, said millions of Yemenis were “staring down the double barrel of starvation and a global pandemic.”

The UNFPA has been the main supporter of reproductive healthcare in the impoverished country, equipping maternity wings and funding the pay of 3,800 workers, who provide care to around two million women.

The UN Population Fund has called for \$59 million to protect the health and safety of Yemeni women and girls.

Last month, the UNFPA called for nearly \$60 million to urgently protect the health and safety of women and girls in Yemen, where figures show that every two hours one woman loses her life in labor. It warned more than 48,000 Yemeni women could lose their lives from complications of pregnancy and childbirth due to critical funding shortages and the possible shutting down of reproductive health facilities.

It further stressed that an additional \$24 million was also needed for the COVID-19 response to protect health workers and help women and girls have access to reproductive health services in Yemen.

According to UNFPA, nearly half of all health facilities in Yemen are not functioning or only partially functioning, and “only 20 percent of health facilities provide maternal and child health services due to staff shortages, lack of supplies, inability to meet operational costs, or damage due to the conflict.”

Furthermore, equipment and medical supplies are insufficient or obsolete, the UN agency says, adding that health workers have not been paid, or have only been irregularly paid, in more than two years.

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