Medical NGO says urgent aid needed for Yemen amid surging COVID cases

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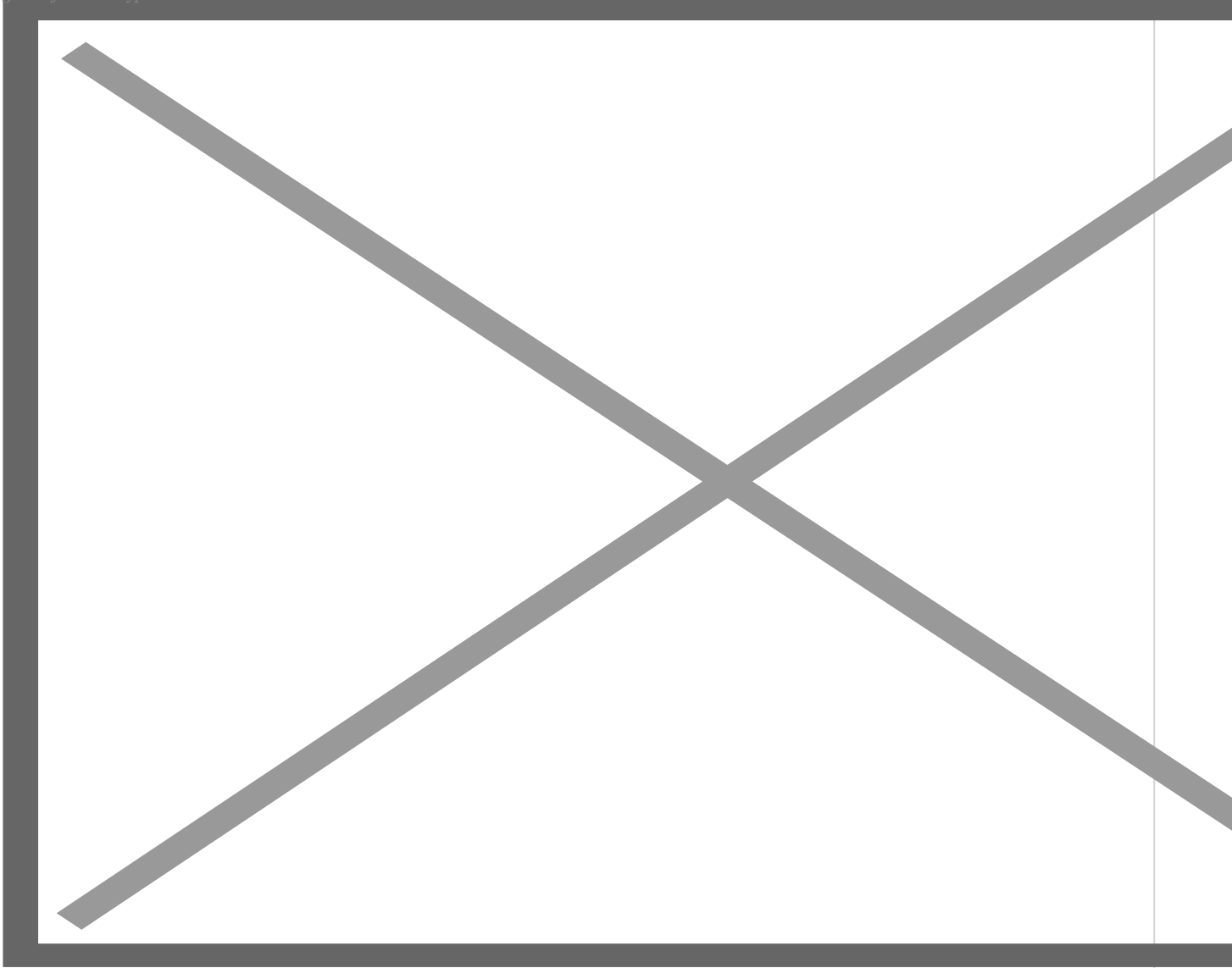
Aden, March 29 (RHC)-- A surging number of COVID-19 cases is increasing the pressure on war-torn Yemen's already strained healthcare system, an international medical charity has warned. Doctors Without Borders (MSF) reported a "dramatic influx of critically ill COVID-19 patients requiring hospitalisation in Aden, Yemen, and many other parts of the country" and called on humanitarians groups and international aid donors to "immediately" scale up activities and funding.

"We are urging all medical humanitarian organisations already present in Yemen to rapidly scale up their COVID-19 emergency response," said Raphael Veicht, head of mission of MSF in Yemen.

"All aspects of the COVID-19 response are lacking and need greater international support, from public health messaging, to vaccinations to oxygen therapy," Veicht said in a statement on Thursday. "Support is needed across the board."

Yemen has been torn by conflict since 2014, when the Houthi armed group took control over large swaths of the country, including the capital Sanaa.

The war escalated significantly in March 2015 when a coalition of regional countries led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates intervened in an attempt to restore the internationally recognized government toppled by the Houthis.

At least 130,000 people have been killed in the fighting, including at least 13,000 civilians slain in targeted attacks, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. The conflict has pushed the country to the brink of famine, with the UN describing the situation as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Shrinking humanitarian budgets last year forced the closure of many programmes, including health services and food distribution, heaping hardship on a country where some two-thirds of the population relies on some form of aid to survive.

In early March, the United Nations had appealed for $3.85bn, but only $1.7bn was offered in a move that was condemned by UN chief Antonio Guterres as a "death sentence."

"Unfortunately, many of the patients we see are already in a critical condition when they arrive," said Line Lootens, MSF medical coordinator in Yemen. "Most patients need very high levels of oxygen and medical treatment. Some patients also require mechanical ventilation in the ICU, which is technically difficult and requires a very high level of care."

While experts estimate the real figure to be much higher, so far the country has reported about 3,900 cases and more than 830 deaths, according to data gathered by the John Hopkins University. On Wednesday, the Supreme National Emergency Committee for Coronavirus called on the government to "declare a [public] health state of emergency in all provinces, prepare health centres and hospital, and provide medical staff with personal protective equipment."

Meanwhile, the country has yet to administer a single dose of vaccine. "While some countries have successfully vaccinated half of their population, Yemen finds itself at the back of the queue for vaccines, highlighting again the global vaccine access inequality, with no one vaccinated in the country to date," said Veicht.

Yemen is among the countries expecting to receive doses from COVAX, an international platform that aims to deliver two billion jabs to the world's poorest nations this year.

The UN-backed facility was hit this week by India's decision to limit its export of AstraZeneca vaccines, many of which were destined to COVAX.

However, UNICEF confirmed that a batch of vaccines that was destined for Yemen is still on track to be delivered next week.

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