In 2020, humanitarian access to people in need in Yemen remained extremely challenging. Nearly 60 percent of the people in need (19.1 million people) were estimated to be living in areas that humanitarian organizations consider Hard-to-Reach (HtR) i.e. where safe, sustained and principled deliveries of assistance and services; at a scale commensurate with the assessed needs, were challenged by restrictive regulations and bureaucratic impediments, armed conflict and insecurity and logistical impediments. The HtR areas were predominantly in northern Yemen where most people in acute need of humanitarian assistance were located.

Humanitarian partners reported 4,484 access incidents across 119 districts and 20 governorates in 2020. At least 9 million people were estimated to have been affected by delayed or interrupted assistance at some point during the year. This is an increase from 2019, when 2,380 incidents were reported. The increase reflects improved reporting modalities and a continued negative trend in the access environment since the second half of 2019. Bureaucratic impediments imposed by the parties to the conflict were the most widespread type of constraint, accounting for over 93 percent of the incidents. These affected every aspect of the humanitarian response in possible contravention of obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL) and relevant UN Security Council resolutions to facilitate humanitarian access. The large majority of incidents were reported in areas under the control of the Ansar Allah (AA) based in Sana’a, though there was an increase in the frequency and severity of access challenges reported in areas controlled by Government of Yemen (GoY).

Armed conflict continued to have a devastating impact on civilians and severely constrained access to affected populations. Over the course of the year, active hostilities and frontlines escalated 45 districts, an increase from the 35 districts affected at the end of 2019. In mid-January 2020, armed hostilities escalated in border areas of Marib, Sana'a and Al Jawf governorates, with the frontline encroaching on densely populated areas in Marib Governorate. Moreover, hostilities along existing frontlines, notably in Al Hudaydah, Hajjah, Ad Dhale’e, Al Bayda, Sa’ada and Taizz governorates continued and intermittently escalated during the year. In Aden, Abyan and Taizz there were recurring tensions and clashes. The response to people in conflict-affected areas was most complex where the environment was insecure and the authorities frequently imposed arbitrary restrictions that hindered timely and regular aid deliveries.

The threat of COVID-19 disrupted humanitarian access into and within Yemen. The number of access incidents peaked in March and April when humanitarian organizations faced an unprecedented level of restrictions to their operations. During the second quarter of 2020, movement of personnel into Yemen came to a halt as the international airports in Aden and Sana’a were temporarily closed and travel restrictions in departure countries were enforced. Cargo movements by air, land and sea were severely disrupted, particularly at Hudaydah port, following the enforcement of quarantine measures, which compounded delays due to global supply chain challenges. Within Yemen, while humanitarian partners also reduced operational risks, efforts to maintain life-saving services and to scale up COVID-19 interventions were curtailed by restrictions imposed on ground movements and activities, which mainly affected northern governorates. By the end of September, most COVID-19 related restrictions were lifted though pre-existing bureaucratic impediments continued to hamper efforts to scale up and sustain programming and operational capacity.

Restrictions on the movement of humanitarian personnel and goods within and into Yemen remained the most widely reported constraint for humanitarian operations, with 1,971 and 989 incidents reported respectively. In areas controlled by AA, all types of movements, ranging from aid deliveries to routine staff travel, were challenged by delays and denials of travel permits. Notably, travel permits were

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Analysis

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Partners across Yemen reported that humanitarian movements were blocked at roadside checkpoints. In northern governorates, ad hoc: requirements were increasingly imposed on humanitarian missions at checkpoints, such as requiring national female staff members to travel with a mahram (a male family member) or for the removal of communication equipment from UN vehicles, which sometimes led to the cancellation of missions and deliveries. In southern governorates, movement challenges were mainly incident-based and reported along key access routes outside Aden. These ranged from unpredictable and lengthy inspections of documentation to arbitrary fees demanded for passage. A requirement for humanitarian notification paperwork issued by the Saudi-led Coalition continued to be imposed at the Dhubab checkpoint in Taizz Governorate for movements heading north along the Red Sea coast, despite the voluntary nature of the Humanitarian Notification System.

The movement of humanitarian supplies into and within Yemen was constrained by irregular clearances, taxes and transportation restrictions. Partners continued to face effective double customs charges for clearance of cargo that was transported from Aden, where it was cleared by the GoY, to areas administered by the Sana’a-based authorities, where fees were charged for tax exemption documents. In mid-2020, the Logistics Cluster was refused permission to undertake road transport on behalf of partners in northern governorates while partners faced increasing interference in the contracting of warehouses and transportation from private companies. Disruptions arising from import controls imposed by parties to the conflict in GoY-controlled areas and restrictions imposed by the Sana’a-based authorities continued to severely hinder the timely delivery of life-saving supplies in northern governorates. In areas controlled by the GoY, cargo movements continued to be challenged by a multitude of security and military actors involved in coordinating movement clearances across southern governorates, especially in Aden. Finally, restrictions imposed by all sides for crossline humanitarian missions continued to obstruct efforts by partners to reach people in need in a timely and efficient manner.

Pervasive interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities challenged a timely, needs-based and principled response. Some 1,216 separate incidents of interference were reported in 2020. The vast majority of the incidents was reported in northern Yemen, though an increasing number of incidents involved forces and actors in GoY-controlled areas. The incidents predominantly involved attempts to restrict, control or otherwise influence the selection of implementing partners; procurement, transportation and distribution modalities; beneficiary selection, targeting and registration; and project design and other programming elements such as needs assessments and monitoring.

Assistance for up to 9 million people were affected by delays and refusals of NGO project sub-agreements. By the end of 2020, 77 non-governmental organizations (NGO) projects targeting up to 4.5 million people and worth about US$170 million were reported to remain unimplemented, in part or in full, due to approvals that were pending with the authorities. With the AA, only 60 per cent of sub-agreements (SAs) were reported approved during the year following a delay of an average of between 150 and 170 days. In comparison, 80 per cent of SAs with GoY were reported approved with an estimated average delay of between 90 and 110 days. Approvals across Yemen followed attempts by the authorities to interfere in project design, activities, targeting, budgeting and other elements of programming that often contravened humanitarian principles and organization and donor rules and regulations. Protection and programming for displaced people as well as “soft” activities involving awareness-raising and other community-based interventions were particularly challenged. Delays were also the result of a variable application of unclear processes between ministries and governorate offices.

Restrictive regulations further reduced humanitarian space. The regulatory environment continued to close in on humanitarian organizations in northern Yemen, where the authorities issued about 180 regulations and directives that often contravened humanitarian principles, organizations’ rules and regulations and contractual agreements with donors. Similar to 2019, when about 170 directives were reported, the directives and regulations demanded the sharing of sensitive and protected information about beneficiaries and organizations, and changes or restrictions to programmes and activities, and sought to impose restrictions on movements and meetings and to demand levies. In areas controlled by the GoY, there was an increase in attempts to restrict humanitarian operations, although at a lesser scale and severity. For example, during 2020 a government entity unilaterally suspended all camp coordination and management activities and blocked imports of associated cargo.

Humanitarian organizations continued to be targeted with violence and hostilities with 96 incidents were reported. The number of incidents of violence targeting humanitarian personnel, cargo and facilities reduced in 2020, when 96 incidents were reported, from 529 incidents in 2019; the decrease was largely due to a sharp fall in reports involving humanitarian cargo. However, the severity of the violence remained much the same. Incidents ranged from physical assault, detention, intimidation and other forms of mistreatment of humanitarian personnel, to confiscation and theft of humanitarian assets and the occupation of humanitarian premises. Female aid workers were, in particular, subject to temporary detention and intimidation at checkpoints in northern governorates when travelling without a mahram in the last half of 2020. Most incidents involved AA (54 per cent), 18 per cent involved the GoY and affiliated actors, and 27 per cent of incidents were perpetrated by unknown actors. The latter were believed to be linked with to media campaigns against aid organizations ongoing since late 2019, which included incitement to violence against organizations.

The UN, NGOs and international donors are continuing to enhance and coordinate engagement with the authorities in Yemen to build, maintain and improve a safe, sustained and principled humanitarian response across Yemen. Engagement with AA since late 2019 has shown some progress, notably in facilitating the approval of SAs and international NGO principal agreements (PAs), the implementation of coordinated needs assessments, and rescinding a 2 per cent tax imposed on NGO projects. Decisive steps are needed to establish a more permissive and accountable environment for humanitarian operations. Advocacy with the GoY has similarly focused on addressing key challenges posed by bureaucratic impediments. Decisive progress has been achieved on SAs and PAs, and in establishing coordination frameworks with the government to effectively prevent and trouble-shoot operational challenges. Engagement has also focused on civil-military coordination with the military and security forces to ensure a safe and principled humanitarian response.