

On first official visit to Yemen, new UNICEF Regional Director voices concern over child malnutrition

SANAA/AMMAN, 24 January 2012 – UNICEF Regional Director Maria Calivis concludes today a two-day visit to Yemen where she saw first-hand the impact of malnutrition on children's health.

"This year alone, half a million children in Yemen are likely to die from malnutrition or to suffer lifelong physical and cognitive consequences resulting from malnutrition if we don't take action. Malnutrition is preventable. And, therefore, inaction is unconscionable," Calivis said. "Conflict, poverty and drought, compounded by the unrest of the previous year, the high food and fuel prices, and the breakdown of social services, are putting children's health at great risks and threatening their very survival."

With 58 per cent of children stunted, Yemen has the second highest rate of chronic malnutrition among children in the world after Afghanistan. Acute malnutrition affects as many as 30 per cent of children in some parts of the country, nearing the levels observed in south Somalia, and twice as high as the internationally recognized emergency threshold.

Malnutrition, along with poor health services, is also to blame for most of the recent deaths of 74 children from measles among 2,500 children affected by a recent outbreak of the disease, according to government figures. While most children would recover from measles within two to three weeks, children with malnutrition can suffer serious complications which can lead to death.

Yemen also has one of the highest rates of death among children under the age of five in the Middle East and North Africa region, at 77 per 1,000 live births. This means that some 69,000 children die every year before their fifth birthday.

Calivis, who is visiting Yemen officially for the first time since her appointment as Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa in December 2011, met with high-level Yemeni officials to look at ways to boost aid for children in the country.

"Now more than ever is the time for a renewed commitment to a better, peaceful future for Yemen's children. As the country prepares for the next phase, it is essential that children are given top priority in the political agenda. Their needs need to be met and their rights upheld," she said.

UNICEF appealed for nearly US\$50 million to be able to meet children's urgent humanitarian needs in 2012. Fighting malnutrition features high on UNICEF's priorities for the new year, along with ensuring children have access to education, primary health care services, safe drinking water, adequate sanitation and are protected from violence, exploitation and abuse.

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Note to the editor:

Maria Calivis became Regional Director for UNICEF Middle East and North Africa on 5 December 2011. Her full bio and a high-resolution picture are available on:

http://www.unicef.org/media/media_49878.html

About UNICEF

UNICEF works in more than 190 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments. For more information about UNICEF's work visit: www.unicef.org

For further information, please contact:

Mohammed Al-Asaadi, UNICEF Yemen, malasaadi@unicef.org, +967-711-760-002

CharbelRaji, UNICEF regional office for the Middle East and North Africa, craji@unicef.org, +962-79-7315788