

International action urgently needed to prevent catastrophic deterioration in food security in Yemen

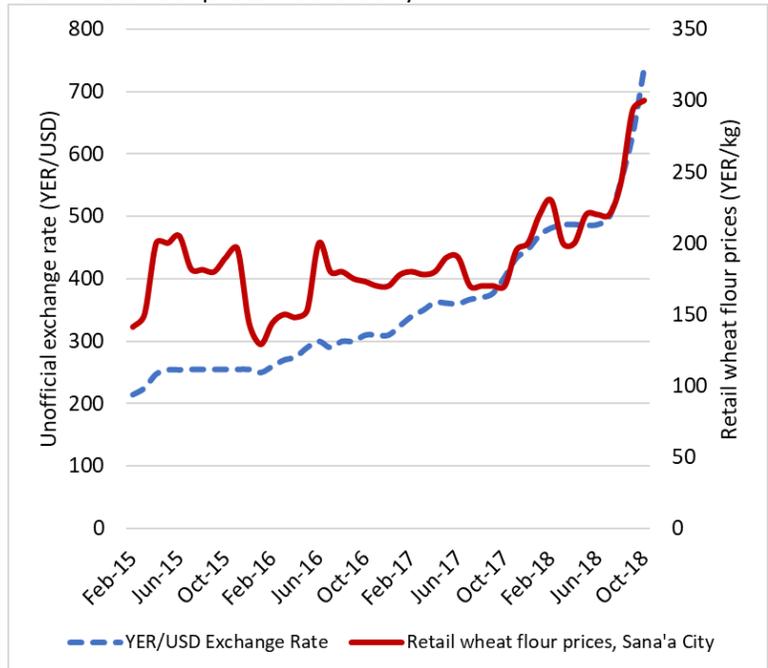
Yemen faces the largest food security emergency in the world and the worsening humanitarian outlook requires urgent action to reduce the likelihood of significant loss of life. More than 15 million people require emergency food assistance each month, many of whom face food consumption gaps large enough to lead to increases in human mortality. The severe depreciation of the Yemeni Rial (YER) since July and closure of key trade routes could result in sharper price increases for food and essential commodities, and further deteriorate the food security situation. Although high-quality data on current outcomes is limited, awaiting improvements in data availability and quality may only confirm the severity of outcomes after they occur. All parties must act now to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and protect human life.

In June, the start of the ongoing military offensive in Al Hudaydah significantly increased the probability that key port facilities would be damaged, or that trade from the ports to urban areas of the country would be cut off for a prolonged period. In FEWS NET's analysis, these events would likely lead to Famine (IPC Phase 5) in Yemen. As of October 2018, this worst-case scenario has not yet occurred, though the threat of significant import disruptions persists. In addition, significant population displacement within and from Al Hudaydah, disruptions to key services and infrastructure, the closure of some crucial trade routes, difficult humanitarian access, continued disruptions to essential livelihoods activities, government restrictions on imports through informal channels, and recent increases in caseloads for cholera and other diseases, continue to impact households' ability to access food.

Separately, significant depreciation of the rial since July has led to broader fears that staple food prices could increase even further beyond the capacity for households to meet their basic food needs. Between July and October 2018, the value of the Yemeni Rial dropped by half, from 496 YER/USD to between 700 and 800 YER/USD. Although staple food prices have largely withstood currency depreciation over the past two years, staple food prices have increased considerably in recent months, including a 35 percent increase since July 2018 in Sana'a City (Figure 1). Households in Yemen typically access a major share of their food by purchasing imported wheat. Sharp price increases, alongside already very low household income, significantly limit households' ability to meet their food needs. As a result, households in worst-affected areas are likely engaging in severe coping strategies and/or face large food consumption gaps. In recent months, humanitarian actors have scaled up to provide essential food distributions to more than seven million of the more than 15 million people requiring emergency food assistance.

The likelihood that food security will deteriorate further in the coming months is highly concerning. First, the risk of significant trade disruption persists. Should humanitarian and commercial imports through Al Hudaydah and Salif stop or drastically decline for a prolonged period, FEWS NET estimates Famine (IPC Phase 5) would become likely in parts of Yemen. The areas where Famine (IPC Phase 5) would be likely to develop most quickly include areas more highly dependent on imports through Al Hudaydah and Salif, particularly those with intensive conflict and high numbers of IDPs, such as Hajjah, Sa'dah, and Ta'izz. In addition, many of the millions who receive humanitarian assistance imported through the Red Sea ports would begin to face more immediate and substantial food consumption gaps as stock shortages begin to limit assistance delivery. Even for areas that can access imports

Figure 1. Yemeni Rial (YER) to U.S. Dollar (USD) exchange rate vs. retail wheat flour prices in Sana'a City.



Source: WFP, FEWS NET

from Aden, a risk of Famine (IPC Phase 5) would persist given the already severe levels of acute food insecurity that would be exacerbated by the increased competition for available goods. Second, given very low levels of foreign exchange in country, well below normal oil revenues, and continued conflict, FEWS NET expects the depreciation of the Yemeni Rial to continue. This could result in further price shocks for essential commodities, increasing the risk of Famine (IPC Phase 5) even in the absence of the physical limitations on imports described above.

Data collection efforts in Yemen are hindered by the ongoing conflict. However, while additional monitoring of food security conditions and outcomes is needed, awaiting improvements in data availability and quality may only confirm the severity of outcomes after they occur. All parties must act now through efforts to end the conflict, increase humanitarian assistance, protect trade, and support the economy of Yemen to protect human lives and prevent a catastrophic deterioration of the world's largest food security emergency.