Humanitarian food assistance to be cut by 50 percent in Houthi-controlled areas in April 2020

Beginning in April, an estimated 8.5 million beneficiaries in northern Houthi-controlled areas (Figure 1), who have been receiving nearly full rations of food assistance monthly, will face a 50 percent reduction in assistance as a result of the restrictive operating environment faced by the World Food Program (WFP). This will significantly reduce access to food among already food insecure populations and increase the magnitude and severity of acute food insecurity. While Famine (IPC Phase 5) is not the most likely scenario, the risk of Famine is expected to increase due to the compounded negative effects of the partial loss of assistance, rising food prices, and a recent escalation in conflict. An outbreak of COVID-19 in Yemen would likely further increase acute food insecurity and mortality. Action to end the conflict is ultimately needed to decrease the size and scope of emergency assistance needs.

Since 2015, WFP has provided humanitarian food assistance to an increasing number of beneficiaries, reaching nearly 13 million people per month as of late 2019. Most humanitarian assistance in Yemen is provided in the form of monthly in-kind food or commodity vouchers equivalent to approximately 80 percent of total energy needs. Throughout 2019, however, WFP and other humanitarian actors have reported increasing operational constraints in northern Houthi-controlled areas. As a result of mounting impediments, beginning in April 2020, WFP will shift from monthly to bimonthly food assistance distributions for the approximate 8.5 million beneficiaries in Houthi-controlled areas, with the result being an effective 50 percent reduction in assistance.

Cuts to humanitarian food assistance will significantly reduce access to food for households across much of northern Yemen. Reduced assistance levels are expected to increase beneficiaries’ market dependence, though most will be unable to further expand income-earning opportunities to compensate for the loss of food assistance. Due to this limited ability of beneficiaries to expand their purchasing power, food prices are not expected to rise significantly as a direct result of the assistance cuts. However, food prices are expected to continue increasing due to the ongoing currency depreciation and declines in food imports. Most households will likely rely increasingly on the cheapest available staple grains, further reducing dietary diversity; they are also likely to engage in increasingly high cost coping strategies in an attempt to compensate for the partial loss of assistance.

In many Houthi-controlled areas, Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or Crisis! (IPC Phase 3!) outcomes already exist at the governorate-level. Following distribution cuts, this classification [Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse] will expand to an increasing number of households, though a deterioration in area-level outcomes is not expected in the next 1-3 months. Beneficiaries who face assistance cuts are likely to engage in consumption-smoothing strategies; however, because the amount distributed will not be sufficient to cover needs for two months, many households will experience increasing consumption gaps and/or engage in more severe coping during the time leading up to the next distribution. As these more severe consumption gaps will be experienced intermittently, excess mortality indicative of area-level Emergency (IPC Phase 4) outcomes is unlikely to be observed in the near term. Furthermore, given that distributions are being cut in response to the restrictive operating environment, it is anticipated that WFP faced difficulty reaching all worst-affected households. Therefore, among those who were reached, some beneficiaries may have relatively more coping strategies still available to support current levels of...
consumption in the near-term. The loss of assistance and repeated intermittent reliance on unsustainable coping strategies is, however, still anticipated to lead to a deterioration in food security status over time.

Given population size and current levels of assistance provision, governorates with the highest number of people who will experience reduced food access include Hajjah, Sa’dah, Ibb, and Sana’a City, and concern remains high for Hajjah and Sa’dah where area-level Emergency (IPC Phase 4) outcomes already exist. Across impacted governorates, an increasing number of households are likely to face Emergency (IPC Phase 4) and Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5) outcomes by mid to late 2020, and deterioration to Emergency (IPC Phase 4) at the governorate-level will be increasingly likely. However, given that the constrained operating space has restricted food security and nutrition data collection, it is difficult to identify all areas in which deteriorating food security would be expected.

Although the threat of COVID-19 has led to negotiations for a cease fire, high levels of conflict persist across the country. Of particular concern are areas of Sana’a, Marib, and Al Jawf due to the escalation of conflict since January 2020. In Ma’rib, a high and increasing number of displaced persons seeking refuge in and around Ma’rib City are of concern. An intensification of conflict is possible in the coming months, and the ongoing insecurity and possible changes in the control of contested areas may further impede the delivery of timely humanitarian assistance.

As of April 8, no cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed in Yemen. However, in response to the threat, authorities in both northern and southern areas have enacted control measures, including restrictions on movement across land borders and increased screening and quarantine measures at ports. No significant disruptions to trade or humanitarian operations have so far been reported, but if such measures delay the movement of goods, this could result in lower market supply and disrupted provision of assistance. Furthermore, an outbreak of COVID-19 would rapidly overwhelm health systems, where the capacity is already severely limited. Given high levels of co-morbidity across Yemen, poor access to health care, and the likely negative effects of the virus on food security, increased mortality would be likely.

Throughout Yemen – an environment in which protracted conflict has severely disrupted livelihoods, reduced income-earning opportunities, and significantly increased prices of food and non-food commodities – millions of people face difficulty meeting their basic food and non-food needs, even in the presence of large-scale humanitarian food assistance. With the impending cuts to assistance deliveries, the scale and severity of acute food insecurity in the world’s largest humanitarian crisis will deepen. Although Famine (IPC Phase 5) is not the most likely scenario, the risk of Famine is anticipated to increase over time due to the rise in acute food insecurity and continued pressure on market systems. Famine (IPC Phase 5) would be possible in the event that food imports are significantly disrupted for a prolonged period of time, or in the event that conflict or other movement restrictions significantly disrupt the flow of goods to inland markets. Until there is lasting security, allowing for economic growth and a return to normal livelihood activities, persistent high levels of assistance needs are anticipated in Yemen.