

# DISABILITIES ON THE RISE IN YEMEN



“The most important thing is that our new house has doors,” said Besma’s mother. “The last house didn’t even have doors.”

When Besma, her mother and father, and her two sisters were displaced from their village to the city three years ago, the only place they could afford to rent was a house in such disrepair that some of the rooms did not even have a roof. It offered little shelter from the sweltering sun that beat down on them during the day. Meanwhile, at night, the cutouts in the walls that should have been filled with doors and window screens served only as entryways for animals. “If we weren’t dealing with the rats, then we were dealing with the cats,” Besma’s father said.

When the sun finally set and the family gathered around their fan to sleep at night, they would be startled awake by the street cats who came in, attracted to the fan’s meager breeze that brought a little respite from the stifling humidity of Yemen’s coastal climate. At daybreak, Besma’s father should have gone out to look for work. He longed to bring in enough income to move his family to a better home—but he was also afraid to leave his wife and three young daughters alone, exposed to the elements, and without even the most basic door to secure their home in a country at war.

The dilapidated house was most dangerous for Besma, the family’s middle child. Besma was born in 2013, two years before Yemen’s war started, with severe disabilities. Barely able to see or hear, she also can’t speak or walk. Her needs consume most of her mother’s time and attention each day—dressing her, feeding her, taking her to the bathroom, changing her diapers, and ensuring her safety. In the house where the family lived during their first two-and-a-half years of displacement, this meant Besma was at risk at any moment that her mother’s eyes turned to another household need.

“Besma spends most of her time on the floor,” her father explained. “We worried about her constantly because of the roaches and the rats. Rat droppings were everywhere in that house; of course, Besma didn’t know any better, so if we weren’t watching, she would eat them and get sick. The floor was also uneven, so she was always falling and hurting herself when she tried to get around, and since the house was crumbling, parts of the roof or the wall would sometimes fall and hit her on the head. Without doors, we also worried that she might manage to get herself into the street.”

Around the time of their displacement, Besma’s household and other members of their extended family began fellowshiping with Yemeni disciples of Christ living in the same city. This year, after other disciples made a visit to Besma’s household, they began praying and asking God how they could come alongside



the family to better accommodate Besma's special needs. Within a short time, an opportunity came and the body of Christ was able to help them move to a simple, clean home with secure doors and windows. "Now we even have an air conditioner," Besma's mother said. "We have everything."

Besma is one of around 4.8 million people in Yemen who suffer from at least one disability, according to the United Nations (UN). That's up from about three million before Yemen's war started in 2015—though a lack of official data makes these estimates impossible to verify. With a total population of 30 million, this means that over 15 percent of Yemen's population is currently living with a disability—an increase of more than 50 percent from the pre-war estimate.<sup>1</sup>

Handicap International's Advocacy Advisor Yasmine Daelman attributes the dramatic increase in disabilities among Yemenis to "conflict-related injuries caused by the widespread use of explosive weapons, but also to the indirect consequences of the conflict, such as diseases going untreated due to disrupted or inaccessible health services." Daelman also emphasizes that people with disabilities are the most marginalized in crisis-affected communities like Yemen, where they live "Unshielded, Unseen"—the title of a report her organization recently produced in partnership with the Arab Human Rights Foundation.<sup>2</sup>

According to Daelman, people with disabilities in Yemen are afraid to go outside. "They live in constant fear of being injured, as they are unable to escape from explosions or armed clashes," she said. "Physical, sensory, and intellectual limitations can all prevent a person with disabilities from escaping the violence. Many people with hearing disabilities, for example, have sustained conflict-related injuries because they couldn't hear and understand what was happening."

Daelman explained that conflict and displacement also increase the risk of people with disabilities being separated from their caregivers. "Sometimes, they may even be abandoned," she said. "People with physical disabilities, for example, are often unable to flee and so when a family has to escape the violence, they are sometimes left behind."<sup>3</sup>

The proportion of Yemenis living with disabilities is likely to continue increasing through 2022. A truce in Yemen's conflict that began in April has reduced casualties from airstrikes, shellfire, and shooting—however, landmines and unexploded ordinance continue to kill and maim civilians.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Save the Children reported on June 30th that landmines and unexploded ordinance have been the biggest killers of children in Yemen since the truce was announced, due in part to families moving to previously inaccessible areas following the decrease in hostilities.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, as the World Food Program announces further reductions in food rations for millions of Yemenis due to funding gaps, malnutrition and disabilities will increasingly compound their effects in Yemeni lives, with malnutrition causing or contributing to disabilities, and some disabilities leading to malnutrition.<sup>6</sup>

Let's pray for the body of Christ on the frontlines of these realities in Yemen, that God will continue equipping them to support those living with disabilities and their caregivers.

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1 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/959405-disabilities-skyrocketing-in-war-torn-yemen>

2 <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/unshielded-unseen-implementation-UNSC-resolution-2475-protection-persons-disabilities-armed-conflict-yemen-case-study-may-2022>

3 <https://www.hi.org/en/news/-people-with-disabilities-are-afraid-to-go-outside>

4 <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220617-the-landmines-sowing-tragedy-chaos-in-war-torn-yemen>

5 <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/yemen-explosive-remnants-war-biggest-killed-children-truce-began>

6 Watch video on this page: <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/economy/1656327936-wfp-cuts-yemen-food-rations-up-to-over-50-due-to-funding-gaps-global-inflation>