

SCHOOL STARTS IN THE SHADOW OF WAR



This month, for the first time since 2014, Yemeni children who are able to attend school will begin an academic year under the semblance of peace. The good news for Yemeni students comes thanks to the recent extension of a ceasefire that was first declared on April 2nd and is now due to continue until October 2nd under the renewal. Unfortunately, violations of the truce, the ongoing siege of Taiz city, and the remnants of more than seven years of war nationwide have continued to put children's lives at risk. In the week preceding the truce renewal agreement, child casualties reached the highest weekly total recorded in two years, according to Save the Children. From July 21st to July 27th, 11 child fatalities and 27 injuries were reported due to incidents including airstrikes, shelling, small arms fire, landmines, unexploded ordnance, sniper fire, improvised explosive devices, light weapons, drones, naval shelling, and hand grenades.¹

Within days of the initial truce announcement in April, President Hadi of Yemen's Internationally Recognized Government handed over his powers to a newly established Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) of eight members. However, more than 100 days after its formation, the PLC has failed to produce any of the significant changes that are necessary to fix Yemen's broken status quo, such as instituting political and economic reforms, finally paying civil servants' unpaid salaries, and fixing the city of Aden's chronic electricity shortage. As of today, the PLC has yet to gain credibility with its constituents because it has yet to address their most urgent needs and millions of Yemeni lives around the country remain at risk under a lethal set of economic and humanitarian challenges.² Within the fragile truce in this fractured nation, ensuring access to education has grown more important than ever in the pursuit of a sustainable peace—but not to the parties in conflict.

According to Al Jazeera, roughly 170,000 teachers in Houthi-controlled provinces have not received regular pay since 2016, forcing many of them to quit their posts to earn a living in other fields. "As this school year begins, we ask the Houthi authorities and the Yemeni government to provide us with our unpaid salaries. It is their fighting which has thrown us into misery," Amal, a teacher in a public school in Sanaa, told Al Jazeera. "We [teachers] feed students' minds with information. But we need income to feed our children with food. If we keep doing this job without reward, it perhaps means that our effort is not important to society. That is disheartening."

UN reports estimate that 2.4 million students aged 6 to 17 are out of school, while approximately 8 million children in Yemen require education support to continue basic education. Meanwhile, students who have dropped out to contribute to their household's income no longer see much value in education. "I work and

earn money for my parents, and this is better than spending time in school," 15-year-old Mohammed - who works as a street vendor - told Al Jazeera. "Even if I did not leave school this year, I would have left it next year or two years later. I know relatives who graduated from high school or university but didn't get a job that fit their educational level."

Additionally, despite the truce, armed groups have continued recruiting and training school-age children in preparation for any escalation in hostilities. In the north, the Houthis held summer camps for children during the ceasefire in May and June. "Many of the students who attended the Houthi-organized summer camps received ideological courses, and now they are ready to join the fighting if ordered to do so. Their minds have been turned into mines," Ali, a teacher in Sana'a told Al Jazeera. "If a child can carry a gun, load it with bullets, and fire, he is a man. He can be a fighter. This is the Houthi group's way of thinking."

UN experts estimate that some 2,000 children enlisted by the Houthis were killed between January 2020 and May 2021.³

Among the hundreds of thousands of teachers and millions of students and parents affected by these realities in Yemen are Yemeni disciples of Christ. This includes Abdu, who is a teacher. When the government stopped paying teachers, his household lost their main source of income; now, they depend on humanitarian aid. However, continued funding shortages have forced the World Food Program (WFP) and other humanitarian actors to steadily reduce food rations in the face of soaring needs. As of June 2022, the WFP was targeting five million of the most food-insecure Yemenis with less than half of their daily food requirements and eight million people with just one-third of their daily food requirements.⁴ Abdu's family recently ran out of food completely in between aid distributions.

"Abdu's family is in desperate need of assistance to put bread on the table every day," said another Yemeni Christ-follower who visited the household recently to encourage them. "We prayed with them and shared the story of the prodigal son with them and sent them some e-books to read for spiritual growth."

Perhaps students in your own community are starting a new school year this month. Let the teachers, students, and schools that cross your path closer to home remind you to also pray for Yemenis like Abdu and his family who need both physical and spiritual sustenance. Ask God to provide Yemeni students with access to the Gospel, their daily bread, and educational opportunities that will prepare Yemen's next generation to build the bridges of reconciliation required to heal a nation destroyed by war and strife.

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1 <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-last-week-truce-sees-highest-weekly-number-child-casualties-2-years-0>

2 <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/yemens-prospects-for-unity-are-uncertain-after-many-years-of-war/>

3 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/28/war-looms-large-as-yemeni-children-head-back-to-school>

4 <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/wfp-yemen-food-security-update-july-2022>