Humanitarians are racing against time to help Yemen address COVID-19; the odds are stacked against them

Sana’a, 23 April 2020 – Humanitarian agencies are rushing to help authorities suppress the spread of COVID-19 in Yemen and to prepare and equip facilities in case people become ill.

“It’s a race against time,” said Ms. Lise Grande, Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen. “The threat of COVID-19 is so terrifying we have to do everything we can to stop the spread of the virus and help the people who may become infected.”

“We have to be frank, the odds are stacked against us. Already we are supporting the largest humanitarian operation in the world, reaching more than 13 million people each month,” said Ms. Grande.

“Operating conditions are restrictive, in some places paralyzing so, and we don’t have enough resources. Until donors see that we are allowed by authorities to do our jobs the right way, in accordance with the same principles respected everywhere in the world, funding is going to remain limited.”

Using existing resources, even as they try to mobilize additional funds, humanitarian agencies are taking decisive steps.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is funding the work of 333 Rapid Response Teams. These five-person teams are present in every single district across the country, responsible for detecting, assessing, alerting and responding to suspected COVID-19 cases. People can reach out to these teams through multiple channels including newly established hotline numbers.

“The aim is to increase the number of teams to 999, a tripling of existing detection capacity,” said Mr. Altuf Musani, the WHO Country Director.

As the leading international health agency in the country, WHO is equipping and helping to upgrade specialized isolation units in the 37 hospitals across the country that authorities have designated for COVID. Thirty-two hospitals have already received equipment and 7 specialized isolation units are now fully operational. The remaining 30 will be fully operational within the next two weeks, with WHO funding.

WHO has moved quickly to secure equipment on global markets, where supplies are limited, prices high and buyers for Yemen face stiff competition from other countries. Already, WHO has procured, transported and distributed 520 intensive care unit (ICU) beds and 208 ventilators. WHO has purchased 1,000 more ICU beds and 400 ventilators and will transport and distribute these as soon as conditions permit.

In the past two months, WHO has purchased and distributed more than 6,700 testing kits and has secured an additional 32,400 which will arrive in coming weeks. Despite global shortages, WHO is aggressively trying to secure the personal protective equipment needed to meet expected needs for the next six months.

Knowing how important first-line treatment is, WHO is working with partners to re-purpose the 26 Emergency Operations Centres (EOC) which were established at the height of the cholera epidemic to address COVID-19. Partners have already trained nearly 900 health personnel on rapid response, infection control, case management, psychological first aid and helping children cope with stress.
“Helping people to better understand the virus is key to stopping its spread,” said Ms. Sara Beysolow Nyanti, UNICEF Country Representative. “People are worried and afraid for their families and themselves. Getting the right information into their hands is one of the most important things we can do.”

UNICEF has been training 10,000 community volunteers across the country. The role of these volunteers, who are present in nearly every community, is to explain to people how the virus is transmitted, what someone can do to protect themselves and what steps to take if someone becomes ill.

“Fighting COVID-19 is going to be very difficult in Yemen,” said Ms. Grande. “After five years of continuous conflict, a debilitating blockade and the collapse of public payrolls, less than 50 per cent of health facilities are fully functioning. Expecting that a health system which is already fragile, and in many areas broken, to respond to a crisis the size of COVID-19 is unrealistic.”

“This is why it’s more important than ever to work together in a genuine partnership so that we can beat this virus,” said Ms. Grande. “We need the right conditions to let us do our jobs and we need funding.”

Yemen remains the world’s worst humanitarian disaster. Nearly 80 per cent of the population requires some form of humanitarian assistance and protection. Ten million people are a step away from famine and 7 million people are malnourished. Of the UN’s 41 major humanitarian programmes, 31 will either reduce or shut unless funding is urgently received.

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