

P R E S S R E L E A S E

YEMEN: Children bear the brunt of worst diphtheria outbreak for a generation

Sana'a, Yemen (January 22, 2018) – The death toll from Yemen's diphtheria outbreak is likely to rise if a Saudi-led naval blockade continues to prevent vital supplies from entering the country, Save the Children is warning.

Aid workers are struggling to cope with the country's worst diphtheria outbreak since 1989 following a spike in cases in November. [1]

716 suspected cases and 52 deaths have been reported. Young children are bearing the brunt – 90 per cent of fatalities are under the age of 15. [2]

Respiratory diphtheria is fatal in 5-10% of cases and the risk of transmission, through close physical or airborne contact, is very high. [3]

Save the Children has teams on the ground operating in the hardest hit governorates, Ibb and Hodeidah, where we've set up treatment centres and isolation units to help stop and treat the deadly infection.

However aid efforts are being hampered by a Saudi-led Coalition blockade on Hodeidah port, the country's main entry point for essential supplies of food, fuel and humanitarian aid. Despite a partial easing of a nationwide blockade in December, Yemen's monthly fuel and food imports remain well below levels needed to sustain the population. [5]

The fuel shortage has inflated prices and doubled the cost of public transportation preventing many patients from travelling to the few health facilities still functioning.

Any tightening of the blockade could have a devastating impact on children.

Dr Mariam Aldogani, Save the Children's Field Coordinator for Hodeidah, says:

"Diphtheria is highly contagious, and there's so little help right now that families are carrying their children for hundreds of miles to get to us. But they're arriving too late and infecting people on the way. Yesterday I cried with a mother who lost her child – there was nothing we could do for her daughter by the time she got here."

"Most people haven't been vaccinated, and we don't have the stockpile of vaccines we need for this type of outbreak. The blockade is making it impossible to bring in specialists, medicine or essential items like ventilators to keep sick children alive. Unless there's urgent action now, we will not be able to stop the spread of diphtheria."

Tamer Kirolos, Save the Children's Country Director in Yemen, says:

"This is another grim example of how total and destructive this war is. A cholera epidemic has already infected more than a million people, and now we're facing an outbreak of an even more deadly disease. Both would have been preventable with basic sanitation, healthcare and vaccines. But by bombing hospitals and health clinics and blocking the supplies children need to survive, parties to the conflict are making a catastrophic situation even worse."

Free-to-use stills from Yemen available to download [here](#).

Notes to Editors:

[1] Yemen's last major diphtheria outbreak was in 1989, according to [data](#) from the WHO's Global Health Observatory.

[2] The number of cumulative probable diphtheria cases from August 13, 2017 to January 16, 2018 was 716, with 52 associated deaths, according to the Ministry of Public Health and Population. Children under the age of 15 make up 66% of cases and 90% of deaths (<5 =

18% of cases and 33% of deaths; 5Y-9Y = 26% of cases and 34% of deaths; 10Y-14Y = 22% of cases and 23% of deaths).

[3] See WHO factsheet for more information
<http://www.who.int/csr/don/22-december-2017-diphtheria-yemen/en/>

[4] 19 governorates and 122 districts are now reporting suspected diphtheria cases – the worst affected governorates are Ibb and Hodeidah.

[5] In the past three and a half weeks just 18% of Yemen's monthly fuel needs and just over half its monthly food needs have been imported through its northern ports. See [here](#) for more information.

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Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. Around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. When crisis strikes, and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach.

We do whatever it takes for children – every day and in times of crisis – transforming their lives and the future we share.