

Aid Missions Gone Astray

*By Walid Al-Saqaf**

“Why has the value of the human being reached such lows?” asked Omar Mujalli, assistant deputy minister of public health and population, during his interview for this report. He was referring to the alleged exploitation that some internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northern Yemen had suffered.

The plight of the IDPs that Mujalli alluded to began in January 2010, when the humanitarian non-governmental organization Yemeni Red Crescent Society (YRCS) and then-governor of Sa’adah, Hassan Manna, decided, for security reasons, to move about 400 Yemeni families to a remote region near the Yemeni-Saudi border.

Mujalli stated that the move was intended to generate profits by raising operational costs and getting custom tax exemptions at the expense of those families, who were to be moved to “an arid region with no health services, no infrastructure and no proper living or security conditions.” He was especially critical of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which initiated the move, and cited this case as an example of “poor implementation” of some of ICRC’s humanitarian efforts in Yemen.

He also presented other cases of abuse and financial irregularities in the delivery of humanitarian aid that ICRC brings and then delegates to its local partner YRCS. Mujalli described YRCS as “incompetent,” yet aims to monopolize aid distribution without being subject to any accountability. He then pointed to cases of suspected corruption in the procurement of equipment for IDP camps with funds provided by the ICRC. “Profits gained by some merchants can reach up to 50 percent,” he said, complaining about the lack of transparency when carrying out such deals.

Despite repeated attempts to have ICRC and YRCS answer specific questions about allegations of corruption in humanitarian aid delivery, neither of them responded to this author at the time this report was produced.

Aid to Feed the War

A governmental report released at the end of October 2010 indicated that the six-year conflict between the Houthi rebels and the government in the northern provinces of Yemen led to the displacement of about 350,000 people. The Sa’adah conflict lasted from June 2004 and ending — as per a public statement by President Saleh — in February 2010, after an agreement was reached with the Houthi rebels under the auspices of the Qatari

government. The conflict was in the form of six successive wars, the last of which started in August 2009.

The last war alone resulted in the destruction of around 10,000 public and private establishments and the budget deficit rose to 9 percent by the end of 2009. However, what the governmental report failed to mention was the frequent complaints of financial irregularities raised by Mujalli and IDPs themselves.

Although corruption in arms trading and war profiteering in the sixth war is a significant topic, an equally important, yet often under-reported, topic is corruption in the delivery of humanitarian aid to IDPs affected by this war.

Corruption in delivering humanitarian aid in Yemen is evident, according to a military officer who was stationed in Sa'adah province for 45 days in the first quarter of 2010. He agreed to give an account of corruption practices provided he remains anonymous for fear of repercussions.

Among other cases, the officer described a particular incident in which he witnessed loads of food packages taken from the YRCR stores by an YRCR driver and then sold directly to a merchant in the capital city Sana'a. "We even opened one of the tuna fish cans and ate it at the merchant's store," he noted. However, these organizations have said in the past that they do not distribute such goods.

The officer also talked about another form of corruption that he claims is quite common. He said that a portion of the goods that were donated by Gulf countries and the United Nations and were supposed to be delivered to IDPs was in fact distributed to soldiers fighting the rebels in the war zones. The mission of the goods went from easing the suffering of the victims of war to feeding the war itself. "We used to get sleeping bags, intended for the victims, so we could sleep in them," he said. The sleeping bags were delivered by Army vehicles and staffers.

In theory, aid from abroad can be delivered via the Yemeni authorities, which use their own channels or civil society organizations to reach the victims. But international aid organizations can also deliver aid — with the approval of the Yemeni government — directly or through their partners. The case described above illustrates the distribution carried out by the Yemeni authorities themselves.

Khalid Al-Anisi, a human rights advocate and lawyer, said that humanitarian aid providers that do not hold their operations to proper transparency and accountability standards end up inflaming conflict instead of alleviating suffering of victims. "When there is no proper oversight over humanitarian aid delivery, what could guarantee that it will not be part of the war itself?" he asked, noting

that instead of going to IDPs, aid often goes to the fighting parties and could even be sold, enabling the purchase of weapons that lead to the killing of innocent civilians.

Meanwhile, a number of Yemeni news websites reported cases of selling humanitarian goods in the market. When confronted with this information and asked where things may have gone wrong, Rabab Al-Rifaï, communication coordinator of ICRC Yemen, said that some IDPs “may choose to sell some of the items provided to them by the ICRC or YRCS so as to buy materials they need more.”

However, Saqr Al-Muraisi, the editor-in-chief of the *alghanob.net* website, doubted this explanation, saying that the large quantities of biscuits he found in August 2010 at retailers in the province of Lahj in the south of Yemen had been bought in wholesale quantities from merchants in the capital city of Sana’a. “I doubt that such amounts could be bought from individual IDPs,” he said.

When this author asked whether they have investigated or followed up such media reports, the ICRC and the YRCS did not answer.

Twice Victims

Also on condition of anonymity, one of thousands of IDPs that had to flee Sa’adah Province as a result of the sixth war and eventually settle in Sana’a related the following incident:

“There were times when I could see some sheikhs filling up trucks with goods that were supposed to be distributed to us, the victims. We couldn’t even get our deserved share of those goods, and we didn’t know of channels through which we could complain,” he said.

He further elaborated that when he left his village at the end of 2009, seeking refuge in one of the many IDP camps, he could see surveyors (employees representing the humanitarian aid distribution mission on the ground) selling cards that allowed their holders to get humanitarian aid for months to come. “With an amount of money, you could have bought a card that would allow you to receive aid for up to nine people,” he said. He also noted that as time passed, the process became more organized.

For this report, ICRC-Yemen and the UNHCR(United Nations Refugee Agency) were asked which mechanisms they have in place to allow IDPs to complain to the donors. Only the UNHCR responded, noting that beneficiaries of aid are normally informed of UNHCR presence in camps and/or offices, and are told about the possibility of having confidential consultations with UNHCR staff in order to share any matters of concern. Based on the

UNHCR policy, beneficiaries in some instances can also contact the government counterpart.

The situation is specifically tough for children, who, according to the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) constitute about 60 percent of the IDPs and suffer the most from the lack of adequate humanitarian services.

Media Interventions

With a score of 2.2, Yemen was ranked among the world's lowest scores on Transparency International's (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index in 2010. Among all forms, corruption in humanitarian aid is the most egregious according to TI, because "it deprives the most vulnerable among the poor — the victims of natural disasters and civil conflicts — of essential life-saving resources."

Trying to allay the situation to help improve the country's economy and stability, international donors have been active over the past few years. However, according to Yemen Post, donor countries urged the regime to implement vital reforms and, in the meantime, withhold further aid.

The humanitarian aid assistance to help IDPs in regions affected by the Houthi-government war has been withheld, according to human rights lawyer and humanitarian advocate Khalid Al-Anisi. He believes that the main problem behind this is the lack of accountability on behalf of the government. Furthermore, donor agencies' dependence on the government and lack of openness to the media are also to blame. "Having transparency and an audit mechanism is vital to assess the delivery of humanitarian aid. And when the media are prevented from reaching IDP camps, this places a thousand question marks," he said.

The government has consistently prevented journalists from easily accessing certain camps and areas affected by the conflict in Northern Yemen, thus fostering more secrecy and ambiguity when it comes to humanitarian aid distribution. In August 2010, groups belonging to the Army briefly detained a media convoy that was heading to Sa'adah. Over 20 journalists, including reporters for international networks such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Hurra, and DPA were denied access to the region and were sent back to Sana'a.

Nevertheless, it is the media that have often reported about IDPs complaints and sufferings. One such report focused on the problems ranging from favoritism in aid distribution to the delivery of rotten wheat to the lack of sufficient aid, which kept IDPs waiting helplessly and eventually forced some of them to beg in order to meet their vital needs.

Despite such reports that clearly show signs of corruption, neither the government nor humanitarian organizations appear to be doing enough to investigate and stop these practices. On the contrary, Yemen's authoritarian government has often suppressed attempts to unearth corruption in its circles. The media remain, however, the best hope of keeping the pressure on government to finally start curbing corruption, not only in humanitarian aid distribution, but in many other vital sectors as well.

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