

War heightens water

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Supply lines are cut off and attacks are destroying infrastructure

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For months, citizens of this war-torn country have been terrorized by bomb explosions and mortar attacks. Now another threat is growing, which could be just as deadly.



SALEH AL-OBEIDI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

More than 20 million Yemeni people — about 80 per cent of the population — struggle to find enough water to drink and bathe.

Yemenis are running out of water.

This poor Arabian Peninsula country has faced a severe scarcity of water for decades. But four months of fighting have dramatically worsened the situation, with attacks destroying water pipes, storage tanks and pumping facilities.

The number of Yemenis who lack access to drinking water has almost doubled since the war began, according to the United Nations

and aid agencies. Now, they say, more than 20 million people — about 80 per cent of Yemen's population — struggle to find enough water to quench their thirst and bathe.

Diseases such as malaria are spreading, killing hundreds of people, because so many residents are forced to use unsanitary sources of water, health experts say. The crisis is compounding a humanitarian emergency that has already prompted UN officials and aid workers to warn of famine.

If the shortages aren't alleviated soon, there could be large-scale epidemics and many more deaths, said Ahmed Shadoul, the World Health Organization's head of mission in Yemen.

"We expect a lot of people to die if the water situation remains unchanged," Shadoul said. "This is a catastrophic threat." Many Yemenis are so desperate for water they bathe with a damp cloth. During storms, people crowd into the streets to catch the rain in buckets. Going bald has become more popular, but not as a fashion statement.

"People are shaving their heads because they don't have enough water to wash their hair," said Mubarak Salmeen, 58, who lives in Aden with his wife and five children.

This country has long experienced water shortages because of rapid population growth, a dry climate and government mismanagement of the water system. Environment experts have predicted for years that Sanaa will be the world's first capital to run out of water.

In recent months, an escalation in fighting has led to unprecedented disruptions in accessing water. Air raids, shelling and ground assaults have destroyed water infrastructure.

The war pits Shiite rebels known as Houthis against supporters of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, whose government was toppled in February. A Saudi-led coalition launched a bombing campaign against the insurgents the following month.

The water problems go beyond the destruction of infrastructure. Power plants and electricity lines have been damaged in the fighting, hampering municipal authorities' ability to pump water to residents. Diesel fuel for backup generators, which could be used to power the pumps, has become scarce. In addition, UN officials and aid workers say an air and naval blockade established by the Saudi-led coalition is severely restricting imports.

Saudi officials deny they have choked off supplies of energy, saying ships and aircraft are allowed to bring food and fuel into Yemen after undergoing inspections for illicit arms.

The worsening shortages have sharply driven up the price of water in a country where the average resident earns a mere \$122 a month.

Many people have no choice but to use unsanitary water for drinking, cooking and bathing. Wildcat drillers are boring wells and extracting untreated groundwater they sell to consumers, health experts say. Residents are storing water for drinking and cooking in uncovered

containers that become breeding grounds for mosquitoes that transmit malaria and dengue fever.

Cholera and other waterborne diseases are also likely to spread as people use contaminated water. More than a million Yemenis have fled their homes for safer ground since March, with many of them cramming into schools and mosques, sharing crowded bathrooms and limited water supplies.

The UN says 120,000 children could die if the lack of access to clean water, sufficient food and adequate health care persists. The fighting has forced many hospitals and clinics to close.

The displacement of so many people is aggravating conflicts over decreasing supplies of water. Many people forced from home have sought refuge in rural areas with few wells and springs. "Now you have wells in these rural communities that are supplying water to 1,700 people instead of just 700," said Mohammed Shamsan, Ministry of Water and Environment adviser. "This is frightening."