

Red Cross chief visits besieged city on Yemen's front lines

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In this Saturday, July 1, 2017, file photo, a man is treated for suspected cholera infection at a hospital in Sanaa, Yemen. Since April, a cholera epidemic has ravaged the country with around 400,000 suspected cases and over 1,800 deaths. The rainy season underway threatens to worsen the situation and the number of cholera cases is expected to double by the end of the year, according to ICRC. (AP Photo/Hani Mohammed, File)

The chief of the international Red Cross made a rare visit to the front

lines in Yemen Monday, taking a dirt road to reach the besieged western city of Taiz, devastated by more than two years of fighting.

The visit by Peter Maurer, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, is meant to provide the ICRC with a firsthand look at Yemen's raging cholera epidemic and humanitarian crisis amid the civil war. Maurer already visited the southern port city of Aden and will be ending his trip in Sanaa.

The executive directors of UNICEF and WHO are also in Yemen to urge for much-needed humanitarian aid. The \$2.1 billion humanitarian appeal for Yemen is only 33 percent funded, and the response to the cholera epidemic requires an additional \$250 million, of which just \$47 million has been received, according to the United Nations.

Maurer posted a video showing him driving on unpaved roads to Taiz and tweeted: "The city is encircled and main roads are cut off."

"I find this needless suffering absolutely infuriating. The world is sleepwalking into yet more tragedy," Maurer said on Sunday.

The visit is unprecedented since Taiz—once Yemen's cultural hub—has been split by the bitter war into zones controlled by the Shiite Houthi rebels and their allies, and those controlled by factions financed and armed by the Saudi-led coalition and the Yemeni government.

Hundreds of thousands of Taiz residents have been caught in the crossfire and residents use donkeys to carry smuggled goods and basic necessities on [unpaved roads](#) in and out of the city.

The Saudi-led coalition has waged an extensive air campaign since March 2015 to dislodge the Houthis who currently control the capital, Sanaa, and much of the country's north. The conflict has pushed the

already impoverished nation to the verge of famine, displaced 3 million residents, and killed over 10,000 civilians.

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Maurer urged the warring parties to allow in humanitarian aid. Since the beginning of the Saudi-led air campaign in 2015, the coalition has imposed a blockade on Yemen's air and sea routes, shut down Sanaa's airport and limited access to vital sea ports.

"Further deaths can be prevented, but warring parties must ease restrictions and allow the import of medicines, food and essential supplies and they must show restraint in the way they conduct warfare," Maurer said.

The ICRC chief is also expected to discuss the issue of illegal detentions and forced disappearances. He says around 10 Yemeni families attend ICRC's offices every week to report a missing person.

Hundreds of detainees are held in undisclosed locations and informal prisons across Yemen, including southern cities where the United Arab Emirates and forces loyal to it have set up a network of secret prisons where torture is rampant.

Maurer said that he discussed the issue of the detainees with government officials in Aden and would do the same with their Houthi counterparts during his visit to Sanaa. He added that the ICRC "prefers to have a quiet and confidential discussion with all sides in order to de-block a situation... no side is moving because the other is not moving."

"I am here to remind all sides in that conflict the international humanitarian law must be respected, that detainees on all sides have to be treated humanely. This is an important issue which I have discussed with the authorities in Aden and will continue to discuss on my way through Yemen during the week," he said.

Over the past two days in Mukalla, the provincial capital of the Yemen's largest province of Hadramawt, dozens of families of detainees gathered outside the governor's office and the UAE-run air base of Riyan, which has been turned into a detention center.

Women cloaked in black and men in traditional Yemeni attire carried signs that read: "Where is the judiciary? No to the militias."

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