

UNICEF YEMEN UPDATE 20 January 2015

Context

After yesterday's heavy fighting between the Presidential guards and the Houthis armed group, a fragile ceasefire was brokered between the warring parties, but latest media reports suggest that the ceasefire has collapsed and the armed group has taken over the Presidential palace. These media reports need to be verified.

Clashes initially erupted near the Presidential Palace, which saw the heaviest fighting and show of force throughout yesterday. It resulted in the Houthis taking control over a strategic hill overlooking the Presidential palace. Clashes rapidly spread to several parts of the city with varying levels of intensity and scale. It was also reported that the Houthis took over the state television and news agency as well as control over the Political Security Office and the National Security Bureau. There was no major disruption to basic services, including electricity and the communications network.

Yesterday's clashes have been the heaviest since the Houthis took control over the capital, Sana'a in September 2014. Since that period, tensions have been gradually building in the city, where the Houthis have expressed dissatisfaction with the outcome of the national dialogue, made demands around the drafting of the constitution and showed dissatisfaction with the Government including President Hadi. It is too early to assess the political impact of yesterday's events, and tensions remain high in the capital.

Impact on children

The fighting erupted at a time when school exams were taking place and resulted in a number of students being trapped in schools for a few hours before they could safely return home. It is estimated that 5,400 children had their examinations interrupted. Schools are now closed for the mid-year break. Parents and students fear that the conflict may resume and impact the education of their children.

The psychosocial effect on children is noticeable as observed by the UNICEF team, which was deployed to do an assessment of damage in the affected areas today. No major destructions were observed to water and sanitation facilities and there has not been any major displacement reported.

Whilst figures are not yet verified, 15 deaths and 91 injured were reported, including four children (one killed, three injured). The use of under 18s in an active combat role by the Houthis has been observed. Al-Quds military hospital was partially damaged and one school in the vicinity of the Presidential palace was hit by stray bullets. The potential of unexploded Ordnance (UXOs) in some neighbourhoods poses risks to children.

Response

A multi-sectoral team from UNICEF was deployed today to the city to undertake an assessment of the situation and document the impact of yesterday's events. As of now, immediate interventions are needed around child protection. The team reported back that there has not been any major impact on physical infrastructure in the locations visited, including schools and hospitals.

UNICEF and its partners have begun reaching communities with a mine risk awareness campaign through public services announcements on TV and Radio and by distributing leaflets describing measures to be taken in case a suspicious object is found.

Plans are also underway to establish psychosocial support to children in affected areas and verification of reported grave child rights violations is ongoing by the UN Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting.

In the coming days, UNICEF will be undertaking another round of high level advocacy with various parties to the conflict on child rights issues, including the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, which continues to be of a grave concern.