

What We Carried, What We Left Behind

Five accounts of displacement in Yemen

When fighting forces a family to leave, there may be little time to decide what belongings to take with them, not knowing when – or if – they can return for the rest. Displacement uproots lives, stripping families of a sense of normality, comfort and home. People gather what they can carry and what they believe they will need. Behind them remain homes, possessions and often the means to earn a living.

Since August, more than 281,000 people have been displaced in Yemen*. Renewed hostilities are adding to existing needs that have accumulated over more than a decade of conflict. Families are seeking safety in displacement sites and host communities where shelter, water, sanitation and assistance are already stretched.

This document outlines accounts of five internally displaced persons (IDPs) describing what they brought, what they left behind and how their lives have changed since the increase in hostilities. Their priorities are personal and practical: continuing treatment, returning to school, finding work, having somewhere to cook and keeping their children warm.

Shelter and cash assistance from the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has helped several of these families address immediate needs after arriving in Lahj. Their accounts also show what remains unresolved: bedding, cooking facilities, safe water, sanitation, continued treatment, education and income.

DRC has worked in Yemen since 2008. As of 3 November 2026 , its emergency reporting recorded assistance reaching more than 9,000 people in Lahj, including shelter and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) support and Multipurpose Cash Assistance (MPCA). DRC is also providing protection support and assessing barriers to services and assistance. Working with communities and partners, DRC identifies needs, coordinates services and supports newly displaced households alongside people living in prolonged displacement and vulnerable host communities.

Additional funding is urgently needed to expand this response. Redirecting existing resources can address an immediate gap, but risks reducing or delaying support elsewhere.

Photographer: Abdulelah Al Shamiri

Names of all participants have been changed for protection purposes.
**Source: IOM DTM*



Documents in Hand, Home Behind

Before displacement, Huda and her husband worked to support their family. His work did not provide a fixed salary, but together they found ways to meet their children's needs. Huda remembers being able to leave home, work and return safely.

Then fighting forced them to leave Mokha, alongside neighbours and other families seeking safety.

> *"We were pushed into displacement by what we saw during the war. We wish to go back to our land and our homes."*
> *- Huda, female IDP in Lahj*

As they prepared to go, Huda gathered their documents, something she could not risk leaving behind. 'The first things we took were our IDs and important documents, like medical papers, because we would not be able to move from one place to another without our IDs'.

Most of the family's belongings stayed at home. Prioritising their safety, they were left with no choice but to leave with little more than the clothes they wore.

The journey took two to three days before they reached Al Khadraa displacement site in Lahj.

'The tent gives us a roof over our heads', Huda says, recounting the support DRC provided her with. Inside, however, they were missing much of what they needed for everyday life: clothes, mattresses, blankets and cooking gas. While the family received some support, Huda describes assistance that meets immediate needs for a few days, without allowing them to plan ahead. Food may be available one day and missing the next. Clothing, bedding and other necessities remain beyond their reach.

She worries about keeping her children warm as the weather turns colder. Her father is ill, and she cares for him while trying to meet her children's needs.



Documents Huda prioritised when her family fled. Identifying details have been obscured.

Before leaving home, she and her husband could work towards meeting those needs together. Now she wants the opportunity to do so again. 'I would like to be able to work so I can provide my children with their basic needs. I need a sewing machine so I can support my family for the time being and improve our situation', Huda says. Access to a sewing machine unlocks opportunities to earn, to buy clothes for the children, respond to their needs and contribute to the household again.

Like many other IDPs, Huda also wants decision-makers to pay attention to the families living around her and to the conflict that brought them there. 'We didn't want to be displaced' said Huda.



Huda sits inside a shelter in Lahj.



Medicine Before Everything

Before Khaled's family left Al Khokha, buying his wife's medicine was already a priority. Work was limited, and sometimes there was not enough money for both food and treatment. He tried to put money aside so her supply would not run out.

'I would think about buying the medicine before anything else, before any household expenses and other needs', he says. 'Some things can wait a day, but the medicine was not one of them'.

When insecurity forced them to consider leaving, her health made the decision more difficult. His wife was pregnant and needed regular treatment. Leaving meant not knowing how long the journey would take or whether they would find her medicine wherever they arrived.

Eventually, they were left with no choice but to go. They left behind their home, furniture, appliances and blankets. The family set off at around eight in the evening, not knowing if or when they would return to the life they were leaving behind. Unable to find any mode of transportation, they walked approximately eight kilometres before finding a vehicle, putting more pressure on Khaled's wife and her health.

'I kept the medicine close so that if anything happened to my wife on the road, it would be within reach', Khaled recalls. His attention stayed on her health as they travelled towards an unfamiliar place without knowing where they could stay.

> *"I told my wife to get the medicine and the hospital papers ready. We could take only a few clothes, but the medicine had to come with us. We did not know whether we would find it in the pharmacies where we were going."*
>
> *- Khaled, male IDP in Lahj*



Inside a shelter in Lahj, where Khaled's family sought safety.

Upon reaching Lahj, Khaled describes arranging for the women to stay with other people while he and the other men slept in the street. Once the women had somewhere to stay, he went looking for a pharmacy.

Before displacement, Khaled had worked to keep his wife's treatment available. After leaving home, that responsibility continued amid the search for shelter and the loss of familiar surroundings and livelihoods.

The medicine had been important enough to carry through the journey. Finding the next supply is a challenge Khaled continues to face.



A closer look at Khaled's bag and its contents.



Medicine supplies pictured in Lahj.



A Home Left Behind. A Blanket Brought Along

For a time, Nasser and his family hoped they would be able to stay in Mokha.

‘We kept saying the situation would calm down’, he recalls. ‘But it didn’t settle. It got worse. Then we decided to flee with our children and family’.

Leaving at night, Nasser and his family had little time to gather their belongings and no mode of transport to take what they needed. ‘We fled in the clothes we were wearing, with just one blanket for the children’.

> *“If I had work, I could provide for my family and children and get what we need.”*
> *- Nasser, male IDP in Lahj*

Not only were they forced to leave behind their home, furniture, money and livestock, they also left behind his parents; leaving them with additional fear for their safety and well-being. At that moment, Nasser says, they were thinking only about reaching safety. They left at night and arrived in Lahj the following morning.

Finding somewhere for the children to sleep became his first concern. ‘The first days were difficult. I had no shelter and didn’t know anyone’. Away from home, he has struggled to find income and cover their expenses.

DRC provided the family with a tent and cash assistance, helping Nasser meet some of those immediate needs. ‘The money came at the right time’. He describes buying clothes, food and vegetables, as well as biscuits and juice for the children. The assistance gave him a way to make purchases for his family after leaving so much behind.

> *“Our whole lives changed. We didn’t know how to manage.”*
> *- Nasser, male IDP in Lahj*



A view through Nasser's shelter doorway in Lahj.

But the blanket they brought could not replace everything they needed for sleeping and keeping warm. The family still needs mattresses and more blankets. Without cooking gas of their own, preparing meals also depends on help from others.

Nasser wants to return home, but says the continuing insecurity prevents it. He remembers being able to support himself and his family there. In Lahj, finding work is one of his priorities.

The tent and cash assistance helped the family through their first days of displacement. Nasser is now looking for a way to meet the needs that return each day: food, clothing, bedding and fuel to cook.

He left Mokha with one blanket for his children. What he wants now is the means to provide the rest.



A glimpse inside Nasser's shelter in Lahj.



Books Before Belongings

When the fighting intensified near their home in Al Khokha, Salma's family left in a hurry. Her father, Hassan, remembers trying to gather clothes and a few belongings while preparing the children to leave.

'We told her to take the essential things', he says. Salma went for her schoolbag and began putting her books and notebooks inside.

'I made sure to take my bag because I love studying', she explains, 'I thought that when we reached the place where we would settle, I would enrol in school and study'. Her clothes and some of her toys stayed behind.

Unable to find transportation, the family walked for three days before reaching safety. Salma remembers the exhaustion, crying and the journey that seemed not to end.

'The road was difficult and very long. We didn't sleep. I kept asking my mother when we would arrive'. This is a question many children of displaced families asked their parents. A question parents dread to answer while grappling with the fear of insecurity and lack of safety.

In Salma's case, her parents tried to keep the family moving by telling them 'soon', wondering when they would reach their destination themselves. 'Even on the road', Hassan says, 'Salma was thinking about school'.

> *"What I wish for now is to study again, get new books and notebooks, and make new friends."*
> *- Salma, female IDP in Lahj*



Salma holds her toy, a piece of her home, in Lahj.

Reaching Lahj brought relief from the journey, but it also meant finding somewhere to stay without some of the family's basic necessities. Hassan recalls arriving without shelter, mattresses or blankets. For Salma, it meant being surrounded by people she did not know.

When asked what she misses most about Al Khokha, she names her school and her friends. Her schoolbag is still with her, a reminder of life before displacement, a coping mechanism, and a source of hope for the future.

'Sometimes I open it, take out a notebook and sit and write. Other times I just read through the pages'. But having her books with her has not meant being able to return to school. Hassan says she asks about it every day. 'She is used to studying', he explains. 'When we left, everything changed for her'.

The family has received shelter and cash assistance from DRC, but they still need mattresses, blankets, hygiene supplies and basic household items. Hassan wants a steady income so he can provide for his family. When he speaks about his children's needs, he shares his hope for a safe place to live, clothing and education.

His message to those supporting displaced families is simple: 'We left our homes, but we don't want our children to lose their education'.

Salma has kept the books and notebooks she packed before leaving. Now she wants somewhere to use them, and people to share her school days with.

> *"The place was strange to me. I didn't know anyone. There were faces I had never seen before, and I had no friends here."*
>
> *- Salma, female IDP in Lahj*



Inside the shelter where Salma and her family are staying.

> *“My greatest wish for Salma and her sisters is for them to return to their studies, so their future is not lost because of displacement.”*
>
> *- Hassan, Salma’s father*



Salma playing outside the shelter in Lahj.



No Time to Pack

During the decade-long conflict, Sami's family had already lost relatives. Following the recent escalation in hostilities, the family decided to leave Al Khokha, aiming to prevent another loss.

It was the middle of the night. Sami woke his children, left with his wife and set off on his motorcycle. 'We didn't have anything but the clothes we were wearing'. Their home and belongings stayed behind, along with the work that had supported their family.

They reached Lahj without knowing anyone or having somewhere to stay. After leaving home to protect his children, Sami now had to find a place for them to sleep.

'On the first day, we didn't have a place to stay. But someone helped us and let us sleep in his bus'. This offer gave the family somewhere to spend their first day and night. Later, shelter and cash assistance from DRC helped them cope with some of the initial difficulties of displacement.

But the family still lacks things they need every day: lighting, clean water, kitchen utensils and a toilet of their own. With too few toilets available, they sometimes have to ask to use facilities in nearby homes.

Finding shelter had addressed one urgent need. Preparing food, collecting safe water and finding somewhere to use a toilet remained daily concerns.

Sami is grateful for the assistance his family has received. But he also wants people to understand what they are still going without.

'We thank all the organisations helping us. But we still need more support, especially food baskets and blankets'.

> *"Because there aren't enough toilets, we sometimes go to homes in the host community to use the bathroom."*
> *- Sami, male IDP in Lahj*



Sami holding his youngest son in an IDP camp in Lahj.

His youngest son was less than a month old at the time of the interview. When Sami speaks about blankets, he explains what worries him most. 'My greatest fear is that my son will suffer from the cold'.

What happens next should not depend on another stranger opening a door and Sami's family's needs should not be dependent on another community member's support. Like many IDPs impacted by the recent hostilities, Sami and his family simply want to live their lives with dignity and ease, especially for their children.

> *"We weren't ready to lose more, so we left to save our lives."*
>
> *- Sami, male IDP in Lahj*



Sami holding the keys to his house, hoping to return one day.

Beyond these five stories

The five people featured here are among more than 281,000 people recorded as displaced in Yemen since August 2026. They also sit alongside the needs of households displaced before the latest escalation, including families who have been forced to move repeatedly, and host communities sharing already limited resources.

The schoolbag, documents, medicine and blanket reveal different priorities. Together, these accounts show how much remains to be rebuilt after reaching safety, including access to treatment and education, a place to sleep, privacy, an income and the ability to make decisions about everyday life. Beyond the needs described in these stories, DRC's assessments point to urgent gaps in safe shelter, water and sanitation, and protection support, including help replacing civil documents for people who fled without them.

Assistance – including DRC's support – has helped several of these families meet their immediate needs. Sustaining and expanding that support requires additional resources. Repeatedly redirecting existing budgets risks leaving other households without assistance while the overall scale of need continues to grow.

DRC calls for:

- **Provision of urgent, additional and flexible funding**, specifically to fund protection, shelter, WASH, essential household items and cash assistance. Enabling organisations to support new arrivals while maintaining assistance for previously displaced households and vulnerable host communities must remain a key priority. Immediate funding must be complemented with multi-year commitments to sustain essential services and support recovery.
- **Investment in safe living conditions** by supporting site management and improvements to water, sanitation and shelter in receiving locations. Outreach and assistance must also be extended to families staying with relatives, renting accommodation or living outside recognised sites.
- **Protection of civilians and safeguarding principled humanitarian action**. Donors and decision-makers must use diplomatic engagement to press for de-escalation, protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access. Assistance must be allocated according to need, without discrimination or political conditionality.

The families in this booklet have explained what they need and what they hope to do next. Donors and decision-makers can help make those next steps possible with funding that arrives in time, services people can access, and sustained action to protect their rights.

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