

# Half a million Yemen children face severe malnutrition, says UN

GENEVA, Oct 17, (RTRS): More than half a million children in Yemen face life-threatening malnutrition as a risk of famine grows, a senior official of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said on Friday.

The figure, a three-fold jump since fighting erupted in March, reflects depleted food stocks compounded by a failing health system unable to care for hungry children or vaccinate them against disease, said Afshan Khan, director of UNICEF emergency programmes worldwide.

"We are facing the potential of a huge humanitarian catastrophe... The levels of malnutrition that are being reported for children are extremely critical", Khan told Reuters, saying more data and hard evidence was needed to declare a famine. "A nutritional survey will be done at

the end of October. How close are we to a famine declaration? We see some zones that are worse than others," she said.

In addition to 537,000 children aged under five at risk of severe acute malnutrition, marked by visible wasting of their bodies, 1.3 million are moderately malnour-

ished, according to the latest UN figures.

Fewer than one in five therapeutic feeding centres across Yemen are functional, Khan said. UNICEF operates 43 mobile teams that screen children for malnutrition but areas such as the al-Qaeda-held eastern province of

Hadramawt are inaccessible. Saudi Arabia has led an Arab military intervention against Houthi fighters since March 26 to restore the exiled Yemeni government and fend off what it sees as the creeping influence of the Shi'ite Muslim group's main ally, Iran.

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