7 December 2017, Sana'a – A young mother sits in the waiting room of the Al-Sabeen Hospital in Sana'a, desperately holding onto her 10-month old baby girl, Menamah. The journey from their home in Al-Jawf governorate to the hospital has taken a physical toll on both mother and child. Menamah is suffering from severe acute malnutrition, and her frail, little body is further weakened by complications from pneumonia, gastroenteritis and a skin infection.
"I cannot bear to see my child this way. No mother can. There are no words to describe how helpless I feel seeing my baby like this," said Menameh's mother.

Hunger is painful and prior to this hospital visit, Menameh suffered in silence for nearly 2 months, unable to receive the life-saving medical care needed due to ill-equipped health centres located in Al Jawf governorate.

"When we took her to a health centre in Al-Jawf, the doctor told us that Menameh was severely malnourished and that they did not have the equipment to treat her, it was then that he advised us to take her to Sana'a."

With tears in her eyes, she went on to say that the family could barely afford their travel to the hospital.

"We can barely afford to live. But we found a way. We are not rich people, my husband is a labourer and finding a job these days is next to impossible."

Nearly half a million children in Yemen are starving

The sad fact is that Menameh's story is one of many. Currently, there are around 400 000 children in Yemen suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

Shamekh Abdullah is only 5 months old, and he too suffers from severe acute malnutrition. The normal weight of a baby his age is approximately 6-7 kilos. Shamekh weighs a meager 4.2 kilos. His mother explained that Shamekh battled sickness from the moment he was born. HIs family was, and still is, unable to afford the trip to the hospital.

Shamekh's parents finally borrowed enough money to make the trip, with the faint hope that this hospital visit would save his life.

"When Shamekh was born, he was very sick. We could not afford to put him in an incubator. My husband works as a civil servant and because of this war, he has not received a salary for over a year."

Shamekh's mother, looks down at her son, "He is not our only child. We also have a 7 year-old girl, who is suffering from heart disease. We do not have the money to treat her too."

The hurtful cost of a painful war

Since the beginning of the conflict in March 2015, many people in Yemen have lost their jobs. As the prices of commodities and goods doubled, those who are unemployed consider themselves fortunate if they can feed their children at least once a day. Before the war, 80% of Yemen's food supply was imported; fast forward 2 years and an estimated 7 million people are at-risk of starvation, including 1.8 million children who are malnourished.

"These overwhelming figures indicate that Yemen is on the brink of famine, and WHO is actively supporting the country by intensifying our response efforts, establishing, equipping and rehabilitating 20 therapeutic feeding centres (TFCs), in addition to the existing 12 WHO-supported TFCs which are also being rehabilitated," said Dr Nevio Zagaria, the WHO Representative for the Republic of Yemen.

Some in the international community have heard the cry of the people of Yemen and are doing something. Response efforts in 19 of the 22 governorates have scaled-up, in large part due to the support provided by the World Bank, the Humanitarian Pooled Fund and the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA).

WHO rebuilds and responds

WHO is actively involved in rebuilding existing TFCs and, in addition, has distributed 120 nutritional kits to all TFCs in Yemen. These life-saving kits can treat up to 6000 cases of severe acute malnutrition. WHO is also training health workers whose role is to work in and manage the TFCs. To date, WHO has trained 164 health workers at these centres located in 10 of the worst-affected governorates.

This is about response and rebuilding, which has prompted WHO to actively monitor the quality of care provided in the TFCs. The focus is on training health workers in "real time" to ensure these centers are able to effectively treat people who suffer from malnutrition. The treatment is free-of-charge and patients receive milk and medicines, as well as health education for those who come to the TFCs.