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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

November 15, 2017

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20.11.2017



War in Yemen In a Devastated Country, One City Is Thriving

The city of Marib in Yemen was long seen as an al-Qaida stronghold. But as the rest of the war-ravaged country descends ever deeper into chaos, it has become an unofficial capital with booming businesses and a popular university, a place poised between horror and hope.



Photos AFP

"Cholera? No, cholera isn't the worst problem here," says the hospital director. The fatal epidemic spreading across [Yemen](#) in the last eight months, which has infected around 800,000 people and claimed over 2,000 lives, "is only the third or fourth most common cause of death here in Marib," says Dr. Mohammed al-Qubati. "Most deaths are caused by landmines."

Marib's desert valley, located 172 kilometers (107 miles) east of the capital Sanaa, served for months as the frontline of some of the civil war's fiercest fighting. Starting in 2015, the attacking Houthi militants began laying tens of thousands of land mines on roads, in fields and in gardens. Today, the front line runs 35 to 100 kilometers outside the town. But the mines are still there, still killing soldiers and civilians alike. "We only have 120 beds," says the doctor. "They're always occupied. Go and see for yourself, second floor!"

"Welcome! Orthopedic Ward," read the colorful letters above the entrance leading into the amputees' corridor. Anyone here with a shattered leg, still held together with screws and splints, can consider themselves lucky. Others have lost one if not two legs. Many of them are soldiers, but the patients also include farmers and even an elderly woman. These patients were admitted in just the last few days and weeks, and the scabs on their wounds are often still fresh. Qubati explains that only a fraction of the people injured by land mines survive the journey to hospital, which can take hours.

Piles of plastic lower legs and feet, foam blocks and metal splints are stored in the prosthesis workshop on the floor below. It's the hospital director's pride and joy. In the room next door, 13-year-old Naif is being measured up. He was playing in the yard when a land mine exploded. He lost both his feet.

"We train specialists," says Qubati, "and these days we make everything ourselves." He's confident that here in Marib, prosthetics have a future.

The small hospital on the edge of the desert is a place of extremes, where the mood fluctuates between horror and hope. It reflects the general situation in this part of the country. The fact the hospital exists at all, that experienced doctors work here, that there is reliable electricity and that the incidence of cholera has remained low due to a reasonably functional clean water supply: All of that is thanks to the spectacular rise of Marib from bastion of terrorism to Yemen's most thriving city; from a backwater to a boomtown that draws companies, refugees, experts and banks from across the country. Marib is in business.

A Humanitarian Disaster Zone

For over two decades, the town, which initially had a population of 40,000, and the entire province of Marib were a notorious refuge for [al-Qaida](#), dangerous territory for Yemenis, let alone for foreigners. It was ruled by tribes who would blow up pipelines and electricity lines to extort money, and known mainly as a place where the U.S. regularly carried out drone strikes on al-Qaida members, proven or suspected.

Then began the fall of Yemen, and with it, the rise of Marib. In 2011, hundreds of thousands of people took the streets of Yemen, as they did across the Arab world, calling for an end to dictatorship. Towards the end of the year, President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to step down after more than 30 years in power.