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Top News
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Tribal conflicts cause political, social and economic loss

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Local Press
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Tribal conflicts have weathered Yemen's history for thousands of years and a complex tribal justice system has arisen as a result. Although today illiteracy eradication and development projects have played an important role in reducing tribal disputes, much remains to be done to address long-standing truces and other unresolved tribal arguments.

Ongoing tribal conflict has stalled the implementation of decentralization measures in many governorates. Security concerns prevent government institutions from functioning effectively in certain areas and hamper participation in activities of local governing bodies. Furthermore, citizens of the effected areas are increasingly alienated from the state and educational and medical staff is fearful of serving in tribal areas.

Not only do tribal disputes impede proper development on a district level, but they also extend out of the tribal frame to reach the state, its interests and foreigners. As a result, these conflicts lead to substantial economical, social and political losses.

Tribal sheikhs reported a total of 612 deaths as a result of conflicts between 2000 and 2005 alone, according to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Yemen. Up to 410 of these deaths were reported to be associated with conflicts started before the year 2000, and 202 were related to conflicts that started between 2000 and 2005.

Ahmed Mohammed is a tribal conflict victim. Ten years ago, he used to go to school and play with his brothers and friends. When tribal conflict broke out in his village five years ago, Ahmed lost his father, uncle and two other relatives and was compelled to flee from his village because of his fear of being a victim of revenge killings. Four years have passed and Ahmed has still not returned.

The dispute in Ahmed's village left many people dead, including many from rival families. Loss of property, infrastructure, houses and farms are among the targets for each of the fighting parties.

"The tribe aimed to destroy everything," said Ahmed with a frustrated and sad voice. "The dispute was over a piece of land but, instead of winning back a small piece of land, the people lost not only



A mediator (center) carries the belt and jambiya of an alleged criminal in his left hand at a tribal arbitration session.

Tribal conflicts cause political, social ...
their souls but also their properties and relatives.”

Ahmed fled from his village and decided to continue his education with a different name fearing that his family’s opponent may follow him and take revenge from him.

Yemeni society consists of many main and sub tribes that have specific customs and rules which determine and organize the all the different fields of life including the punishments and provisions.

As a consequence of the weak power of the state and in the context of widespread illiteracy, tribesmen in the past thought of setting rules and customs to organize daily life.

Tribal custom dictates that every member of a tribe must participate in any war against it or be renounced by it, whatever the reasons of the war. Thus no member hesitates to take part in tribal conflict, even if he does not believe in the reasons of the conflict.

“The tribal community has very strong customs that organize the rights and duties of its members and anybody who violates those customs will be punished in accordance to the tribal customs,” said Sheikh Mohsen Al-Nini.

“Some tribal conflicts happen because of a dispute over a land while others are caused by revenge killing,” he said, adding that abduction can also be a trigger.

In Yemen, it has been noted that developed districts in which education is widespread are less prone to tribal conflicts than other districts.

According to Sheikh Al-Nini, development and education have a strong role in reducing the rate of tribal conflict because, as people become busy with their jobs, businesses and academic research, their attention is diverted from tribal affairs.

Widespread presence of arms, illiteracy, weak power of the state, lack of religious faith and the abuse of power by tribal leaders are the main reasons of the tribal conflicts.

The head of Dar Al-Salam Organization, Abdul Rahman Al-Marwani, stated that there are no specific statistics as to the exact number of the victims of tribal conflicts: “Even the statistics of the Ministry of Interior aren’t precise because not all the murder cases are notified to the police, organization or hospitals.”

To address the widespread presence of weapons, the government has tried to reduce the rate of crime by banning weapons from cities, but there are many gun markets in the suburbs of many governorates which sell all kinds of the light arms.

“The decision of banning weapons was a wise one,” said Naj Salah, a tribesman from Arhab tribe, “but, in my opinion, this was mainly done to ensure the government’s safety not that of the citizens, otherwise it would ban weapons from the markets in the suburbs. We have a very big market in our tribe that sells all sorts of light arms that are used in tribal wars.”

The weak power of the state in the remote rural areas is a supporting reason for the perseverance of tribal conflicts in the country, with many individuals committing crimes without any fear of the state.

Period	Number of new conflicts
2001-2005	35
1996-2000	22
1991-1995	14
1986-1990	26
1985 and earlier	67
Total	164

National Democratic Institute, 2005

In these areas, sheikhs hold much more power than the state and they can put an end to a conflict that the government cannot control.

Sheikhs, whether from the tribes in conflict or from other tribes, are much more likely to be involved in mediation efforts to resolve conflicts than other individuals or institutions. They are the key actors in discussing and resolving conflicts.

“In remote rural areas, the power of the state is weak, so the end of any tribal conflict is in the sheikhs’ hands.

Sometimes, the sheikhs prevent the security apparatuses from dealing with tribal conflicts under the pretext that they conflicts will only be solved by tribal customs, not by state law,” noted Ahmed Al-Etheri, a tribal village elder.

What is more, tribal customs are sometimes used by tribesmen to extract demands from the government, leading to national political repercussions and economic losses. Usually tribesmen resort to kidnapping foreigners or blowing up pipelines to exert pressure on the government, gravely affecting tourism and foreign investment in Yemen.

Many tribesmen attribute these methods to government weakness and procrastination: "Sometimes the government takes a long time to implement projects in a particular district," noted Ahmed Al-Tam, a sheikh of the Bani Dhabyan tribe. "As a result, people resort to kidnapping foreigners or blowing up pipelines."

Attacks on pipelines, foreigner kidnappings and the deaths they entail cause considerable loss to government and other stakeholders. Yemeni-German relations are constantly tried when German tourists are kidnapped by tribesman with a grudge against the state.

Yemen's economy is affected not only by a drop in tourism, but also by a decrease in foreign investment. Businessman Tawfeq Al-Khameri said that his company has lost USD 13 million over the past four years because of kidnappings and tribal conflicts that create an unsafe environment for investment.

"Over 50,000 workers have been affected directly and another 90,000 workers are affected indirectly by the decrease of tourists in the country because of the kidnappings," said Nabeel Al-Faqeh, the Minister of Tourism.

Addressing tribal conflict

Escaping the state's modern justice system, persisting tribal conflict is detrimental to tribes involved, destroying resources, livelihoods and opportunities for development. But some tribal leaders have recognized the problem and are seeking outside help.

In 2004, Yemeni Organization for Development and Social Peace (YODSP), an organization formed by a group of tribal leaders from Mareb, Al-Jawf and Shabwa, approached the Yemen office of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) for help in addressing revenge killing and tribal conflicts in their areas.

Following almost three years of research, a program was launched, involving governmental body the Higher National Committee for Combating Revenge (HNCCR) and three local NGOs.

"We [the NDI] help the HNCCR create a database on conflicts in the said governorates through training," explained Nadwa al-Dawsari, NDI's senior program manager. "We also train them on managing and analyzing armed conflicts."

In March 2008, NDI held training courses for trainers on conflict management and analysis for 16 people from its partner NGOs and, in April 2009, NDI will launch a tribal conflict awareness campaign in the three governorates. According to al-Dawsari, the campaign will target students, mosque preachers, women and tribal leaders.

In December 2007, Islamic Relief started a two-year program aimed at reducing violent conflict in the country through what it calls "the mainstreaming of conflict transformation and the promotion of responsible citizenship" through workshops for 665 individuals in Sa'ada, Lahj, Aden and Sana'a.

Furthering efforts to reduce and understand tribal violence, the NDI has also assisted Mareb College and local NGOs to establish a regional center for tribal conflict research, where students will study the causes and nature of conflict in addition to receiving training in conflict resolution. The center is expected to open in early 2009.

Research increasingly indicates growing realization from the tribes themselves that in order to move the areas they live in out of poverty and underdevelopment, they will have to rely on governmental institutions to prevent and resolve tribal disputes.

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3/30/2009

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