

## International

# Yemen's heritage battered first by bombs, then floods

**'We are between life and death'**

**SANAA:** Muddy waters lap overfoot in Sanaa's Old City, inhabited without interruption for more than 2,500 years but now facing disaster after floods that threaten the collapse of irreplaceable houses. The deluge risks finishing off the destruction of its distinctive buildings with their ochre brick facades and white latticework windows, experts say. The foundations were already weakened by bombings in Yemen's long war. "Since dawn we have been trying to clean the mud off the roofs and drain the water—but it's no use," said Ali al-Ward, a long-time resident.

"We sleep with fear in the pits of our stomachs. We are between life and death," said the frail man with a greying beard as he surveyed the damage in the UNESCO World Heritage-listed site. Flooding is common in Yemen at this time of year, blighting the poorest country on the Arabian peninsula that is in the grips of what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian disaster. The city has since 2014 endured a conflict that pits government forces against Houthi rebels who hold much of the country's north.

But the flooding has been particularly severe this year. At least 172 people have been killed across Yemen since mid-July, according to official sources and local authorities. Torrential rains have also threatened other UNESCO heritage sites in Yemen, including in Shibam further east, renowned for its

high-rise mud-brick "skyscrapers".

In the capital Sanaa, 106 buildings, including five in the Old City, have been destroyed so far and 156 damaged, a source at the Houthi health ministry told AFP. With water still lapping at the fragile structures, many of which have had no maintenance for years, there are fears that others will tumble. "Our homes are made with earth walls. We hope civil society groups will find a solution for us," said Mohammed al-Khamissi, a young resident of the Old City.

The extent of the damage can be blamed on years of "negligence and a lack of maintenance", said Doaa al-Wassie, an official with the authority that manages Yemen's historic towns. "Sanaa is literally melting. The bombings which struck the town have made the foundations fragile. The rain has come to finish off whatever was left," said Wassie, who is also a member of a heritage protection group.

"Undoubtedly budgets are squeezed because of the war but this is about our identity, and just as we defend our country, so we must defend our identity." She called for more coordination between government and civil society groups involved in conservation. The work of those involved in protecting the nation's heritage was being hampered by dysfunction and a lack of political will.

The 2015 intervention of a Saudi-led coalition in support of the government against the Iran-backed



**SANAA:** Yemeni laborers remove the rubble ahead of restoration works on the site of a collapsed UNESCO-listed building following heavy rains, in the old city of the Yemeni capital Sanaa. —AFP

Houthi escalated the conflict on many levels. Coalition warplanes have been accused of targeting civilians as well as historic sites including the Old City. The war has claimed tens of thousands of lives, and displaced some three million people. About 24 million Yemenis—four-fifths of the population—are dependent on some form of humanitarian aid.

Shibam, located in Hadramawt province 500 kilometers from the capital, is also on the UNESCO heritage list and like Sanaa has not been spared by the elements. At least four homes have been completely destroyed and 15 damaged at the 16th-century site dubbed the "Manhattan of the Desert" because of its striking mud-brick towers. —AFP

## Three dead in Scottish passenger train crash

**STONEHAVEN:** Three people died when a passenger train derailed in northeast Scotland on Wednesday, police said, following heavy rains and severe flooding across parts of the region overnight. The crash occurred in the morning close to the town of Stonehaven, around 25 kilometers south of Aberdeen. Smoke could be seen rising from the scene in pictures broadcast on television news channels.

"Very sadly despite the best efforts of paramedics, we can confirm that three people have been pronounced dead at the scene," British Transport Police said in a statement. The driver is believed to be one of the fatalities, according to police, with six other people hospitalised, although none of their injuries are thought to be serious. The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union also told the domestic Press Association agency that the train conductor was another victim.

Union TSSA said the train was the 06:38 (05:38 GMT) service travelling from Aberdeen to Glasgow. Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon initially told the Scottish Parliament that there were "early reports of serious injuries" after noting on Twitter the crash was "an extremely serious inci-



**STONEHAVEN:** Emergency services personnel are seen at the scene of a train crash near Stonehaven in northeast Scotland. — AFP

dent." Sturgeon said it occurred in an area where it was difficult for emergency services to access. Some 30 emergency vehicles were attending the scene of the derailment which happened at 9:40am (08:40 GMT). British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said: "I am saddened to learn of the very serious incident in Aberdeenshire and my thoughts are with all of those affected. My thanks to the emergency services at the scene." Thunderstorms and torrential rain battered parts of central and eastern Scotland overnight, creating hazardous travelling conditions. Photos posted on social media by local authorities showed heavy flooding in the nearby town of Stonehaven early Wednesday. Network Rail Scotland, the company which looks after the rail infrastructure, said it was working alongside emergency services.— AFP

## 'We must fight': Thai youths take on the establishment

**BANGKOK:** Leaderless, social media-savvy and inspired by Hong Kong's young activists, Thailand's budding pro-democracy movement is intent on overhauling the government, rewriting the constitution and even taking on a law that shields the monarchy. The kingdom has seen a decades-long spin-cycle of coups and violent street protests led by well-funded veterans for or against the establishment. But the new generation of demonstrators says its fight is very different, as they stage near-daily protests with crowds of up to several thousand angry young Thais. "I just want my rights," said 20-year-old Rawee, real name Nawiboon Chompoo, who helps fire up rallies with chants for reform and by burning pictures of the country's prime minister.

"The government is unreliable and bad for the people." Premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha is a former army chief and mastermind of the 2014 coup that brought military rule back to Thailand for five years. The 66-year-old became prime minister of a government packed with pro-military figures after an election last year. Demonstrators say the election was deeply flawed, held under an army-scripted constitution that allowed junta-picked senators to have a say in appointing the premier. Protesters are

calling for a rewrite of the constitution and the dissolution of parliament.

### Creativity

"We're partly inspired by the Hong Kong protests," said activist Tattap Ruangprapaikitseree, referring to the months-long unrest over communist China's tightening grip on the semi-autonomous city. "We have no real leaders or organizers—people just come out by themselves." Like in Hong Kong, creativity has been a hallmark of the Thai rallies. Protesters have borrowed pop culture symbols, including songs from Japanese cartoon Hamtaro and the musical Les Miserables, as well as the three-fingered salute from The Hunger Games movies. They have even staged Harry Potter-themed demonstrations.

### 'There is nothing'

The coronavirus pandemic sent Thailand's economy into free fall, focusing already simmering discontent against the government's handling of the crisis. Alleged human rights abuses by authorities are also fuelling anger. In June, the disappearance in Cambodia of Thai pro-democracy activist Wan-chalearn Satsaksit sparked a Twitter campaign that spilled offline when protesters across the country demanded answers.

At least eight activists who fled Thailand since the 2014 coup have disappeared in the past two years, according to Human Rights Watch. Most protesters support the opposition Future Forward Party, whose leaders were banned in February from politics for a decade over electoral breaches—a move they maintain was politically motivated.—AFP