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Dwindling donations leave humanitarian lab's future unclear

BY YOO-MIN KOH AND STELLA DURAN GONZALEZ
CONTRIBUTING REPORTERS



XIMENA SOLORZARNO / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

More than a year after the termination of its federal support, which the lab's director said was partly due to its investigation into a massacre in Sudan, the lab is scaling back operations and weighing staff layoffs as private donations run out.

Yale's Humanitarian Research Lab — which has investigated and documented humanitarian crises in Ukraine and Sudan — is facing an uncertain future as federal funding cuts have forced it to rely on private donations and consider staff layoffs.

The HRL, which is affiliated with the Yale School of Public Health, has operated under persistent financial uncertainty since funding from the State Department's Conflict Observatory program ended in February 2025. With its remaining donor funding dwindling, the HRL is now scaling back operations while holding out hope for a restoration of government support.

"We're trying to figure out how to keep the program funded as our donor money runs out," Nathaniel Raymond, the HRL's executive director, said in an interview. "We don't know whether we'd have our jobs the next month."

According to Raymond, the HRL has continued by surviving off of individual donations from people concerned about the fate of missing Ukrainian children.

The financial uncertainty comes as the HRL prepares a new report estimating the number of Ukrainian children who underwent a "mass transfer" into Russia. Raymond said the report could be among the HRL's last before staff reductions become necessary.

Founded in 2021, the HRL uses international databases, geospatial epidemiology and other forms of temporal analysis to investigate human rights violations in zones where on-the-ground reporters cannot safely operate.

The HRL gained international prominence after the Biden administration enlisted its researchers in 2022 to support the Conflict Observatory, an initiative established to document potential war crimes following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since then, the HRL has expanded its investigations to Lebanon, Myanmar, Palestine, Sudan and Yemen, among other places.

But the HRL's federal support diminished amid disagreements with the government over its investigations in Sudan and the Trump administration's subsequent termination of the Conflict Observatory program, Raymond said.

"We decided to leave the State Department program because they were blocking our warnings of the threat to this city being massacred," Raymond said, referring to El Fasher, a city in North Darfur, Sudan.

Now, various humanitarian experts consider the El Fasher Massacre to be the worst war crime committed during the civil war in Sudan.

According to Raymond, the University does not directly finance the HRL's operations, leaving researchers responsible for raising the money from individual donors to continue the investigations. The HRL is currently awaiting a decision from the government on potential funding for its Ukraine work, but the future remains uncertain, Raymond said.

Human rights researchers outside the HRL warned that cuts to humanitarian research capacity could have consequences extending far beyond the suspension of individual investigations.

Sarah Markey '26, the community human rights fellow at the Law School's Orville H. Schell, Jr. Center for International Human Rights, wrote in an email to the News that documenting human rights violations is essential for holding perpetrators accountable, especially when survivors may spend decades without justice.

Markey warned that cuts to organizations such as the HRL could undermine future accountability efforts around the world.

"By drawing on satellite imagery and open-source intelligence, HRL documents harm in places otherwise inaccessible to investigators, and it would be a profound loss if support recedes just as these methods are proving their worth," she wrote.

Faihaa Dafalla, a postdoctoral researcher at the PEACE Lab at the School of Public Health, previously conducted public health work in Sudan with organizations like UNICEF and the World Bank. Humanitarian research, she said, was important in directing and coordinating resources with local efforts, leading to more effective interventions such as improving water frameworks, living conditions and environmental conditions.

"I think one of the most important things is to build the capacities of the different institutions and support them to lead the research," Dafalla said in a phone interview. "They have the ability to implement and redirect and do the changes that come out of the research."

For now, the HRL's future depends on whether new government support or additional private funding is secured before its remaining funds run out.

"If we don't get that," Raymond said, "it's unclear how we're going to continue."

The U.S. government's spending on humanitarian aid has dropped by 81 percent since 2022.

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Yale's supercomputers 'critically low' on storage, disrupting lab work

BY OM PATEL
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The center that generates Yale's computing infrastructure is transitioning researchers' data onto a new system, which unexpectedly reached near-full storage capacity in August.

The Yale Center for Research Computing announced in March that it would decommission one of its older supercomputers as well as portions of another and migrate the data off to a new system called Bouchet — a transition that some researchers have said was rocky. An update on the center's status webpage reads that Bouchet's storage system, Roberts, was 92 percent full as of early August.

"Due to overwhelming demand for storage and significantly more interest than anticipated in Bouchet from new and current users, we are critically low on storage," the update reads. "If Roberts runs out of free space, all jobs across the cluster will fail, and we will need to close the queues until more storage is available."

Yale's supercomputers consist of massive clusters of specially cooled central and graphics processing units — or CPUs and GPUs — that allow researchers to process large datasets off-site. These clusters contain more compute power than a standard desktop computer or laptop.

The YCRC previously operated four High Performance Computing, or HPC, clusters: Grace, McCleary, Milgram and Misha. It added the Bouchet HPC cluster in July 2025, expanding its compute power.

In their March statement announcing the decommissioning of Grace and portions of McCleary, the center requested that some users migrate their data onto Bouchet. Just 13 months after the new system opened to all Yale researchers, the storage system was 92 percent full.

The YCRC also capped Bouchet's temporary "scratch" storage and stopped accepting any new paid storage allocations on Bouchet, Grace and McCleary, according to its site.

In the midst of the storage dilemma, labs conducting computationally heavy research and who anticipated transitioning from McCleary and Grace to Bouchet have experienced difficulties.

Mark Gerstein, a biomedical informatics professor at the School of Medicine, said his lab experienced obstacles during the transition.

"The transition from McCleary to Bouchet, it's just been very rocky for us," Gerstein said in an interview with the News. He said the transition "has been really disruptive," adding, "There's nothing we can do about it, but it's been difficult."

According to Matthew Jensen, an associate research scientist in Gerstein's lab, the group's migration from the McCleary cluster to the Bouchet cluster was scheduled for this summer or fall, but the YCRC has not started the process and has asked users to hold off on transferring data.

A few members have seen their research progress slow while waiting for space to open up on Bouchet, Jensen wrote in an email to the News.

Molecular Biophysics and Biochemistry Professor Yong Xiong, who investigates virus interactions with the human immune system, said he faced similar difficulties when training large artificial intelligence models for electron microscopy image processing.

"We are indeed facing a serious storage crunch on Bouchet," Xiong wrote in an email to the News. He wrote that he is developing and training large AI models for his research's image processing, and that "the severe storage constraints have forced us to spend considerable time moving and reorganizing files just to keep the work going. This has hindered our research progress."

However, not all researchers say they have been severely affected. Arthur MacKeith, a doctoral candidate in the O'Hern lab who studies mechanical engineering and materials science, was not dismayed by the notices of "critically low" storage of the Bouchet cluster.

"I assumed they would be on top of it," MacKeith said in an interview.

MacKeith said the O'Hern lab is still transitioning from the Grace cluster to the Bouchet cluster. He stated that the lab was given 40 terabytes of private storage that the YCRC moved to a separate storage system, which he described as primarily a "stopgap."

He also said the O'Hern lab's only difficulties were "losing a few days due to cluster maintenance, which is fairly standard."

The squeeze may not ease soon. Phases 2 and 3, which will move the remaining groups off the Grace and McCleary clusters, including labs that already own dedicated computing nodes, are scheduled for late 2026 and early 2027, according to the YCRC's webpage. That includes large groups like Gerstein's, whose data has not yet moved, according to Jensen.

The center's operations manager, Paul Gluhosky, declined to comment on the matter.

An update on the YCRC's system status page states, "We are purchasing several additional petabytes of HPC storage and hope it will be available this fall."

Bouchet is named for physicist Edward Bouchet, class of 1874, who was the first Black person to earn a doctorate from an American university. He earned a doctoral degree from Yale in 1876.



JOANNA CHANG / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

The Yale Center for Research Computing said in March that it would decommission a powerful computing unit and transition to a new computing cluster, Bouchet — whose system reached 92 percent capacity in August. Some faculty say the shortage has slowed research.

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