

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs
and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien**
Remarks at the launch of the 2017 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan

Geneva, 8 February 2017

As delivered

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for being with us at the launch of the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen; and the Yemeni people. I am pleased to be joined by His Excellency Mohammad Ali Saeed Majawar, the Permanent Representative for Yemen to the United Nations in Geneva; Mr. Jamie McGoldrick, the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen; and Mr. Erik Abild, Director of Policy and Partnerships of the Norwegian Refugee Council.

I am also very pleased to be joined by Thana Faroq, a photographer from Yemen who is generously showing her photographs documenting the resilience of Yemeni women as they endure this terrible conflict.

Before handing the floor to Ambassador Majawar, let me take a moment to give you a sense of the terrible toll the conflict in Yemen is having on the lives of ordinary people. Jamie will outline in more detail the Response Plan – the instrument by which we attract your support and investment.

I have seen myself the utter devastation this 23 months bloody conflict has on the lives of ordinary Yemeni. In Aden and Sana'a back in 2015 just after I started my own mandate, I have seen the devastating impact on people's lives in Yemen, including the dangers faced by children who, while playing, become accidentally exposed to mines and the explosive remnants of the war.

In late 2016, I travelled from the capital Sana'a to the coastal port city of Al Hudaydah. I saw countless homes destroyed, people hungry and scurried along in small, rural and remote mountain communities affected by a conflict that is not theirs. Bridges, key roads, neighbourhoods and a port demolished by airstrikes. A provincial capital that almost entirely lacked safe water, electricity or food. Hospitals with no power, a handful of medical staff and only the most basic of medical supplies. Stunted, severely malnourished children and youth, reduced to skin on their bones, barely holding on to their lives.

This was five months ago. Since then, the situation in Yemen has become worse and further deteriorated. Over 18.8 million people – two-thirds of the population – are now affected. Immense human suffering is unfolding in front of our eyes, caused by an ongoing conflict compounded by a collapsing economy and key public and social

institutions in disarray. All of this was preventable two years ago; and it would be preventable today.

As we meet here, a military offensive is underway along the coastal areas of the Red Sea. I am particularly concerned about the ports. Attacking them would have serious effects on supplies for the civilian population and could contribute to pushing the population to starvation or forcing them to move away. Already, since the intensification of hostilities in Taizz governorate in late January, at least an additional 34,000 people have been displaced. As people flee the fighting we must not lose sight of the continued and vital need to protect the civilian population. This is the responsibility of all parties – to protect civilians from harm in times of conflict – and to also protect civilian infrastructure. The destruction of a school, or a market place, or a port facility, a hospital, a water treatment plant, a grain facility, a humanitarian warehouse – none of these are abstract concept – it is an act causing more hardship, suffering and death.

Yemen is one of the most food insecure countries in the world – this means that more than 17.1 million are food insecure and a staggering 7.3 million people do not know where their next meal will come from. The latest report even paint a possibly grimmer picture. If there is no immediate action – and despite the ongoing herculean humanitarian efforts - famine is now a possibility in 2017. Malnutrition is rife and is rising at an alarming rate.

Over 14 million people need access to safe, clean drinking water and sanitation. As a result, since October there is a cholera outbreak, a disease that has spread rapidly. At the end of January, we were hopeful of having stemmed the outbreak, but the likelihood of cholera spreading in Hudaydah rose significantly just the other day on 1 February when a sewage treatment plant servicing 6,000 people was bombed.

As always, children are suffering the most under man's inhumanity to man. Every 10 minutes a young child dies of preventable causes. Parents face impossible choices. Imagine choosing between buying food for one of your children or medicine for her sick sibling. Imagine watching your child die slowly of hunger. You have no money left to arrange transport to a barely functioning or destroyed health facility. Imagine being in Sa'ada, Taizz or along the Red Sea coast tonight. The sound of airstrikes and indiscriminate shelling – chilling as you go to bed. Your children don't sleep and if they finally nod off – exhausted and terrified – they have nightmares and wet their beds. They are listless and tired. Their schools bombed, no longer a safe place for learning. Children across Yemen now consider shelters with other displaced people their "home". Imagine being able to trust no one, as all fighting parties violate international humanitarian law and erect other impediments for people to survive and live in dignity.

So to the parties in this conflict, I remind you that granting rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access is a key obligation under International Humanitarian Law. Only neutral and impartial humanitarian action will be able to provide life-saving assistance and protection to *all* people in Yemen.

Though humanitarian access is severely limited due to ongoing fighting, bureaucratic impediments and lack of funding, humanitarian organizations deliver assistance, save lives and protect people in every governorate of the country. 120 humanitarian entities, including the UN as well as national and international NGO partners, are currently operating in the country. For our part, and within the restrictions we currently face, we are reaching more and more people. In 2015, we – the brave and brilliant humanitarian workers on the ground from the entire humanitarian community spanning the UN, INGOs, NGOs, Red Cross and others – provided assistance to 3.5 million Yemenis; in 2016, we were able to reach over 5.6 million people. This year we must reach even more. We are delivering, we are ready to do more and we are well led. Yet, we need to do more and need your generosity and support to do more. And we need it urgently to meet the escalating suffering.

To support humanitarian operations, as Emergency Relief Coordinator, I established the Yemen Humanitarian Fund which is the largest and one of the fastest-growing country-based pooled funds in the world. Donor generosity has supported the fund with US\$107 million in contributions, two-thirds of which enabled international and national NGOs to save countless lives. Over the last two years, CERF has allocated \$59 million to Yemen. In 2016, \$14.9 million were allocated, the majority of which through the CERF window for underfunded emergencies.

Thank you to all donors and their citizens who have supported the humanitarian response in 2016, especially those who contributed to pooled funds and OCHA.

But the needs are dire, increasing and the timing is critical. For 2017, we need your help to save and protect lives and stave off famine. We have given you the warning signals. Huge, glaring, flashing red lights. What more can we give you. Please heed our call today. It's simple: provide the funds needed to enable us to deliver the best of humanity to our fellow men, women and children. Don't delay.

Lastly, let me remind you that only a political solution and peace will end the human suffering. Let me be clear, there will be no military solution. Humanitarians are not a solution [either]. They fill in for collapsing public institutions, which at this scale is both beyond our capacity and our remit. In Yemen, the needs are so great that we must ask for easing of economic restrictions. We are advocating firmly for the re-opening of Sana'a airport for commercial flights. This would immediately allow more than 20,000 Yemenis to seek treatment abroad and for life-saving medicines to be flown in. We must ask for the facilitation of lines of credits for importers and for salaries of public employees to be distributed equitably and without political bias. Similarly, we must mobilize to sustain and facilitate the increase of commercial imports of essential supplies; to open ports facilities, especially in Hudaydah where mobile cranes are desperately needed for the off-loading of humanitarian as well as commercial goods;

So, this is our appeal, on behalf of our community and above all for the Yemeni people.

Thank you.