

United Nations



Nations Unies

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND  
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, MR. MARK LOWCOCK**

**Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Yemen**

*New York, 16 November 2018*

*As delivered*

Thank you, Mr. President.

On 23 October, I warned the Security Council that a grave economic crisis and escalating conflict had pushed Yemen closer to famine than ever before.

Shortly after that briefing, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, or FEWSNet, released a new alert. FEWSNet, which is supported by the United States, is one of the leading providers of early warning and analysis on acute food insecurity.

According to FEWSNet, “Yemen faces the largest food security emergency in the world, and the worsening humanitarian outlook requires urgent action to reduce the likelihood of significant loss of life.”

FEWSNet characterized the food security situation in Yemen as facing a “catastrophic deterioration” and they warned that many of the millions of severely food-insecure people in Yemen “face food consumption gaps large enough to lead to increases in human mortality.”

So is it a famine?

With respect, Mr. President, I fear this is the wrong question.

From the two famines declared this century – in Somalia in 2011 and in South Sudan in 2017 – a very painful lesson is that most fatalities occur before the famine is declared.

So to be clear, I am not saying that widespread famine has already taken hold in Yemen. But that is what we are trying to prevent.

It is abundantly clear that Yemen is already facing mass hunger and severe food insecurity. We are fortunate to have David Beasley here today. He will describe the food security situation in more detail and tell you about his visit to the country earlier this week.

In my assessment, Yemen has so far avoided famine for just two reasons. First, the UN and humanitarian agencies are implementing the largest aid operation in the world, reaching nearly 8 million Yemenis across the country every month.

Second, Member States and other key stakeholders have taken action when the risk of famine has intensified in the past. For example, by working together to lift the temporary blockade this time last year and also by providing generous, flexible funding early this year.

As I emphasized in my last briefing, we urgently need you to take action again now. That is why I sought your support on five key requests, which – if they are all fully implemented – would spare the lives millions of Yemenis, spare them in an entirely avoidable catastrophe.

So, Mr President,

I'd like to update you on where we stand with these five actions today.

My first request was to implement a cessation of hostilities, in and around all the infrastructure and facilities on which the aid operation and commercial importers rely. Many of you made similar requests during the 23 October meeting and after that, and the Secretary-General reinforced this position in his statement on 2 November.

What in fact happened was that violence escalated on several fronts immediately after my last briefing. Since 30 October, UN sources have observed nearly 800 separate incidents of shelling, armed clashes, or air strikes across Yemen.

Some of the fiercest fighting has been in Hudaydah, which is where most of the crucial infrastructure needing protection actually is.

These incidents too often have devastating consequences for civilians. To cite just one recent incident, a bus carrying civilians fleeing conflict in Hudaydah came under attack on Tuesday this week, killing seven people.

Critical civilian infrastructure has not been spared either. Last Sunday, patients – some of whom were still connected to medical devices – reportedly fled Hudaydah's largest public hospital into the street amidst large explosions. Several days later, this same hospital was damaged by shrapnel and then again by shelling yesterday. A second hospital was damaged after becoming caught up in the crossfire as frontlines shifted around the city. Fighters also took up positions inside this hospital and on its roof, placing the entire facility at grave risk.

The impact of violence in Hudaydah has compounded the chaos and hardships facing people who were already in desperate straits. Needs are enormous – perhaps 30 per cent of people still in the city are barely surviving, including about a quarter of children who are malnourished. As the Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, Lise Grande, recently noted: “The most vulnerable people in the whole country are sitting there in Hudaydah. These are the poorest of the poor.”

The fighting has also had an impact on humanitarian operations. Some programmes have been scaled back in Hudaydah, and the staff overseeing them have left, I hope temporarily. Other important emergency programmes remain in place, and agencies are re-stocking supplies inside Hudaydah in an attempt to ensure critical humanitarian operations can continue if the situation gets worse.

So for all the reasons Martin has cited and I have just given you, it remains urgent for the parties to agree a cessation of hostilities. We both issued statements reiterating this earlier this week. In the last two days, we have seen a welcome de-escalation, and what appears to be at least a pause in the fighting in Hudaydah. But what we need to know is that this lull is going to be sustained.

And let me repeat again, as we have previously said and Martin touched on, the UN is ready to play an enhanced role in ensuring the appropriate use of key facilities around Hudaydah, like the port.

Mr. President,

The second area where I sought your support is to facilitate and protect the supply of food and other essential goods across the country. As you know, Yemen imports nearly all its food, and its fuel and medicine.

Commercial food imports in October through Hudaydah and Saleef ports – where most food enters the country – fell by more than 50 per cent compared to September. Only 17 ships discharged cargo in these ports in October – the second lowest monthly figure ever recorded.

To avoid famine, it is essential to keep all ports functioning and to remove obstacles to imports or domestic distribution of essential goods.

I therefore welcome the Government of Yemen’s decision this week to suspend Cabinet Decree 75 for food imports. Experts had warned that immediate implementation of this decree could lead to worse food shortages and higher prices.

But although the Government has suspended Decree 75 for food, it remains in place for fuel, which is critical to pump drinking water, maintain sanitation systems and run hospital generators. Since enforcement of Decree 75 for fuel began last month, the Coalition has, at the request of the Government of Yemen, denied entry to four commercial vessels carrying nearly 53,000 tons of fuel. That is equivalent to more than 40 per cent of average fuel imports in any given month since the temporary blockade was lifted about a year ago.

To protect the food supply and avoid famine, parties to the conflict must also avoid damaging or cutting off access to supporting infrastructure. The main eastern road from Hudaydah to Sana'a remains closed due to insecurity, forcing traders and humanitarian partners to re-route shipments, which costs more money and more time.

Several humanitarian sites are in areas in Hudaydah that have recently changed hands. They include the Red Sea Mills, which contain enough grain to feed more than 3 million people for a month. I understand that talks are proceeding on options to ensure these critical supplies can now reach the people who need them.

Mr. President,

My third request was for support for the Yemeni economy by injecting foreign exchange and paying salaries and pensions. These measures will protect against famine by boosting people's ability to purchase food and other essential goods and by supporting traders to keep commercial imports flowing.

In October, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia deposited \$200 million in the Central Bank of Yemen to strengthen the Yemeni rial. This welcome move has helped to bring the exchange rate down from a peak of about 800 rial to the US dollar in early October, to about 670 rial to the dollar today. It has also helped to finance imports of food and other essential commodities. Some reports also indicate that this deposit may even be helping to lower food prices slightly.

These are important improvements. At the same time, we must recall that the exchange rate before the conflict escalated four years ago was 215 rial to the dollar. So it still costs more than three times as many rials to buy a dollar than it did before the conflict escalated. In the last year alone, the rial has lost nearly 50 per cent of its value.

It is also important to note that applications to access Central Bank credit against the Saudi deposit have exceeded the available funds – a sign that traders are eager to maintain the flow of essential imports if they have access to adequate capital.

So these developments demonstrate that foreign exchange injections are enormously effective in this environment. We need a continuing, large-scale flow of foreign exchange into the market to finance adequate levels of imports and to support the currency at a level that will make food and other commodity prices affordable.

Regarding salary payments, I welcomed the news in my last briefing that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will provide \$70 million to cover allowances for 135,000 teachers. We see this as a best practice, and discussions with potential donors on replicating it for health and sanitation workers, as well as for pensioners, are at an advanced stage.

Several weeks ago, the Houthi authorities in Sana'a also released some of the back-log in civil servant salaries. We hope that will be a first step towards resumption of regular salary payments across the country.

Mr. President,

The fourth request is to increase funding and support to the aid operation.

This year, we are extremely grateful to all our donors for providing \$2.3 billion so far to the 2018 UN-coordinated Humanitarian Response Plan. That's nearly 80 per cent of the requirements we estimated at the beginning of the year. Given developments over the last few months, we are discussing additional funding for this year with donors now. I hope decisions on that will be taken by the relevant donors very soon.

Given the increase in needs, as a result of the intensified fighting and the further recent collapse of the economy, I can tell you that next year's response plan will be substantially larger. I will announce the precise amount shortly. The Secretary-General plans to convene a high-level conference on Yemen with a focus on the 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan in February.

My fifth request called on all belligerents to work with the Special Envoy to end the conflict and I won't repeat Martin's comprehensive account of where this process now stands. I echo his calls to move quickly towards confidence-building measures and consultations, and from there to resume full negotiations. And you have just heard Martin confirm his support for my five requests.

I want to emphasise that these measures – the five requests – need to be seen as a package. Substantial new action is needed on all of them if massive loss of life in a terrible famine is to be avoided.

So, Mr. President,

I am again seeking your individual and collective support – both practical and political – on those five areas.

Thank you.