Thank you very much, Mr. President.

Every month I update the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Yemen. Today marks my fifteenth briefing and the thirty-sixth you will have heard since 2015.

My experience is just like that of the main character in the hit Hollywood movie “Groundhog Day”. A lot of you will have seen it. He finds himself trapped in a time loop, repeating the same day over and over. He tries to escape in many different ways – to no avail. Every morning he wakes up back where he started.

Just as in “Groundhog Day”, the details in my briefings to you change from month to month. The larger picture though does not.

Today I want to step back and consider the time loop we seem to be experiencing in Yemen. How has this war evolved in the last four or five years? What has it wrought? What can we
expect if it continues? What are we doing about it? And what is needed to help Yemen break this cycle for good?

Let me begin with the nature of the war.

From the start, it has been brutal. One independent monitoring group, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (or ACLED), estimates that more than 70,000 people have been killed since 2016.

Violence has also been remarkably consistent. Fighting may decrease in one area – as we’ve seen recently in Hudaydah with the Stockholm Agreement – only to mushroom elsewhere, as we’re seeing right now in Al Dhale’e, Hajjah and Taizz.

Today there are more than 30 active front lines in Yemen – more than enough to absorb fighters redeploying from quieter areas. In fact, ACLED data indicates that conflict incidents across the country have been mostly increasing since 2016.

Yemen is getting more violent, not less. The conflict is getting worse, not better. Fighting this year has displaced more than 250,000 people. The number of incidents killing or injuring children more than tripled between the last quarter of 2018 and the first quarter of this year. In recent days, we have also seen a dangerous and reprehensible increase in attacks on Saudi Arabia, as well as air strikes in Sana’a and other areas.

All the fighting has, though, led to relatively few major shifts in control. Today, the large majority of Yemenis live in areas controlled by Ansar Allah and their allies. After tens of thousands of air strikes, shells, mortars and ground clashes, this has changed only marginally since 2016.

So the war is not only brutal, it is unwinnable. Everyone agrees on this last point, at least in their public statements. And yet the war continues.

So the next question is, if all the fighting has not materially changed the military facts on the ground, what has it achieved?
We give you the figures every month. Eighty per cent of the population – more than 24 million people – need assistance and protection, including 10 million who rely on food aid to survive. Some 600 incidents per month damage or destroy civilian infrastructure. More than 100 hospitals, health facilities and schools were hit just last year. A quarter of children are out of school. More than 3.3 million people remain displaced. The economy has been devastated, shrinking by 40 per cent or more.

Some people may suggest the war is not solely to blame for this tragedy. Four years ago, Yemen was already the region’s poorest country and millions of people were receiving aid. That is true. But there was also a functioning economy. Public institutions were providing essential services, and basic infrastructure reached across the country. Yemen was even seeing improvements in food security and nutrition.

All that has now been undone. Today, the number of people who need assistance is 50 per cent higher than before the war. For the first time this year, assessments confirm pockets of famine-like conditions in dozens of places across Yemen.

So when people ask what has been the effect of all the fighting, the answer is clear: untold death, damage and destruction; the immiseration of a nation; and the fracturing and fragmentation of its society. All amounting, in sum, to the world’s worst humanitarian tragedy.

Let me turn now to the question of what will happen if the war continues.

There are two immediate answers.

First, many more people will die, and conditions will get much worse for those who survive.

An independent study by the University of Denver, commissioned by the UN Development Programme, recently used a global model to forecast the impact of continuing conflict in Yemen.

If fighting lasts until 2022, we can expect close to half a million total deaths – including more than 300,000 people who will die from hunger, lack of healthcare and related causes. That’s twice as many people dying as the model predicts if the war were to stop this year.
We would also see a profound decline in the status of survivors throughout the country. A quarter of children would be malnourished, and nearly 40 per cent of children would be out of school.

You can imagine better than me what the implications of this might be for security and stability in the wider region.

This brings me to the second answer – we will need an even larger and an even more expensive relief operation. At $4.2 billion, this year’s response plan is already the world’s biggest. It’s also three times more than we needed in 2015. If the fighting doesn’t stop, today’s requirements will be a fraction of what we’ll need to keep people alive a few years from now.

Some Yemeni activists have rightly asked why the international community is spending so much money in Yemen, but things keep getting worse.

Unfortunately, humanitarian organizations can’t do much more than keep people alive – and we have been reasonably successful at doing that. In early 2017, we were providing aid to about 3 million people every month. Two years later, we’re reaching more than 10 million a month.

Working with local institutions, we’ve rolled back the risk of famine in some areas, stemmed the world’s largest cholera outbreak and we’ve greatly increased the number of malnourished children who are being treated and cured.

But as conflict continues, underlying conditions keep deteriorating.

So how do we get out of this deadly loop? What needs to change to break this cycle altogether?

Last October, I set out five priority actions to avert catastrophe in Yemen. At the time, I emphasized that all five steps needed to be taken together to bring about real change. It’s worth reviewing where we stand with these priorities today.

First, I said we needed an immediate ceasefire across the country. We needed to silence the guns and ground the war planes. Yes, there has been a reduction in violence in Hudaydah since December, but this has been essentially offset by escalating conflict elsewhere. Enough is
enough. The parties must also respect international humanitarian law, sparing civilians and civilian infrastructure at all times – ceasefire or not.

Second, we need all parties to facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access – as required, again, by international humanitarian law. More than 5 million people who need help, including 3.8 million people in acute need, live in 75 districts that are hard to reach because of bureaucratic impediments, insecurity or logistical constraints.

In April and May, access constraints prevented or delayed humanitarian assistance for more than 1.5 million people – that’s half a million more people than in the previous two months. Bureaucratic impediments remain a major problem, costing lives and increasing suffering.

So far this year, Ansar Allah-affiliated authorities have prevented or delayed 55 UN field missions – an average of three per week. Monitoring restrictions, issues with beneficiary targeting and other interference all require constant engagement.

Despite these challenges, we have seen some progress recently. It is, for example, encouraging that Ansar Allah-affiliated authorities have issued more entry permits for aid workers recently.

Last week, we also received initial written approval from Ansar Allah-affiliated authorities to proceed with a technical mission to assess the decaying Safer oil tanker, which is storing an estimated 1.1 million barrels of oil off the coast of Hudaydah.

I have alerted you repeatedly to the risks here. If the tanker ruptures or explodes, we could see the coastline polluted all along the Red Sea. Depending on the time of year and water currents, the spill could reach from Bab el Mandeb to the Suez Canal – and potentially as far as the Strait of Hormuz.

I leave it to you to imagine the effect of such a disaster on the environment, shipping lanes and the global economy.

If a major spill occurs, the world will surely demand answers from anyone who could have prevented the catastrophe but chose not to.
Provided Ansar Allah-affiliated authorities continue to facilitate this work, the assessment team should be able to deploy to the Safer tanker within the next two weeks.

The other major concern about interference and access relates to the diversion of food aid. I am going to leave it to David [Beasley] to update you on that.

The third priority is full funding for the humanitarian operation. This year we require $4.2 billion and have so far received $1.15 billion, or 27 per cent. In February, we heard very generous pledges in Geneva amounting to $2.6 billion.

We thank all our donors for their generosity and understand that this money comes from voluntary contributions. But when pledges are made, they must be fulfilled. It has now been four months since the Geneva conference.

Already, the World Health Organization has had to suspend incentive payments for health workers and procurement of medicine and other supplies. Vaccination programmes will also soon start winding down. This means people are almost certainly already dying as a result of these funding gaps.

Other critical programmes, including malnutrition treatment, cholera prevention and support for displaced people, could start closing in the next few weeks.

Fourth, sustainable measures are needed to strengthen the Yemeni economy.

We have seen some important progress on economic issues over the last six months. The Government has recently published its first budget since 2015, and I strongly support their efforts to get it fully financed. I hope donors will do the same.

The Government has paid salaries across the country for health workers and some other civil servants for several months running, and the Ansar Allah authorities have also made salary payments in some areas.

In May, commercial food imports through Hudaydah and Saleef were the highest in three years, and fuel imports largely recovered from the fuel crisis the previous month.
With salary payments and rising imports, many Yemenis should have more money in their pockets and find more goods to purchase in the market.

But – and here is the point to focus on – like the war itself, progress on one issue can obscure the bigger picture. Commercial imports through Hudaydah and Saleef rose in May, but they also fluctuate wildly from month to month. As I’ve told you before, we frequently see that in months in which food imports increase, fuel imports drop. And vice versa. And the trend line – which is the thing that really matters – points sharply downwards. Since the conflict began, food imports have declined by more than 40 per cent, fuel imports by 70 per cent and medicines by 50 per cent.

Almost no containerized commercial cargo has entered Hudaydah since late 2017, meaning everything that isn’t food or fuel – such as medicine, clothing or shelter materials – must go elsewhere.

Food, fuel and other goods are able enter Aden and other ports, but moving them north – where most people live – is increasingly difficult and pushes prices even further out of reach for many.

And while it is true that civil servant salaries are being paid more often, the currency is also losing value again. A US dollar now costs about 560 Yemeni rial – compared to 400 rial at the end of last year and 215 rial before the crisis. So any extra money in Yemeni pockets is now worth much less – especially because nearly all goods have to be imported.

A growing number of families are also getting less help from friends and family overseas. According to the World Bank, Yemenis working abroad – almost entirely in Gulf countries – send home more than $3.3 billion every year. Remittances are a lifeline for their families. Some experts estimate these payments make up nearly a quarter of Yemen’s GDP and pay for more than half of commercial imports. But stricter labour policies are sending thousands of Yemeni workers home every month, effectively cutting off family incomes.

So there remains an essential – indeed growing – requirement for a predictable and regular flow of foreign exchange into Yemen at a scale which allows the Government to keep paying salaries and keep the exchange rate stable.
The fifth priority is the most important: meaningful progress towards peace. The Stockholm Agreement is a crucial step in the right direction. But as you’ve heard from Martin [Griffiths], we are in danger of losing that momentum. I hope everyone will do everything they can to work with Martin and his team to keep moving towards peace. I have already, again today, explained the consequences of failing to do so.

Mr. President,

After almost endless repetition, there is a happy ending to “Groundhog Day”. Eventually, the main character breaks out of his time loop – but only by totally changing his behaviour. The film ends as he embarks on a peaceful, satisfying future.

There is a lesson here for our own time loop too. Nothing will change in Yemen until everyone is ready to do things very differently.

The steps I outlined above are the way to start.


More briefings like this one.

Thank you.