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Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Yemen

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As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President.

As you've just heard from the Special Envoy, escalating hostilities in Yemen have pushed peace further away than it had seemed just six weeks ago. This is dangerous territory, and we join Martin in his call for all parties to freeze military activities and work towards de-escalation.

The renewed fighting underlines the urgency of the five priority issues which we have been briefing you on for over a year now:

One, protection of civilians and respect for international humanitarian law;

Two, humanitarian access and delivery;

Three, funding for the UN aid operation;

Four, the Yemeni economy;

and five, progress towards peace.

The first issue is protection of civilians, which is a requirement of international humanitarian law.

Civilian casualties last year decreased by one third from the 2018 figures.

That is good news, but it is only part of the story. There are also several alarming trends.

Children now account for one in four civilian casualties – up from one in five in 2018. More than half of all civilian casualties now occur in family homes – up from 40 per cent in 2018.

In other words, violence – though killing and injuring fewer people – is now more likely to strike families in the places they should feel safest. It is no surprise that 90 per cent of these incidents result in psychosocial trauma that can last long after physical injuries heal.

And when we look at data from this year, we see that civilian casualties are again rising. In February, 187 civilians were killed or wounded across Yemen – that’s more than six people every day and an increase of 20 per cent since January.

Much of this increase is due to the fighting Martin has just described in Al Jawf and Marib, which has displaced tens of thousands of people in the last several weeks. Nearly all civilians have fled Al Jawf’s capital, Al Hazm, leaving behind only the most vulnerable. Some families have moved into remote desert areas that are difficult to reach. The rest are mostly heading towards Marib – an area already hosting more than 750,000 people forced from their homes by earlier rounds of hostilities.

So, again, we join the Special Envoy’s call for the fighting to stop now. We need a nationwide ceasefire. I also call on the parties – at all times – to protect civilians in line with their obligations under international law. This includes taking constant care to spare civilians and meeting the essential needs of those who are displaced because of the fighting.

Mr. President,

My second point is equally a matter of international humanitarian law: safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access. For months, we have been transparent about the severe obstacles facing principled humanitarian action in Yemen.

In the north, these restrictions have become untenable. Everyone agrees that a new approach is needed, and we appreciate the close cooperation with our donors and partners in setting out that approach over the last few weeks.

Our common objective, as the Secretary-General confirmed last month, is to maintain principled aid delivery to the millions of people who depend on it to survive. To that end, we are intensifying dialogue with the de facto authorities to ensure the right conditions are in place to facilitate this work. We are also preparing to adjust programmes in case those conditions are not in place, or improve only temporarily.

As you heard last month, the de facto authorities agreed to drop their proposed 2 per cent levy on NGO projects. Since then, they have agreed to an acceptable format for NGO country agreements. Necessary food security assessments, which are essential for knowing how many people need assistance, have also started in many areas in the north, albeit with some access challenges that we are trying to resolve with the authorities.

The World Food Programme has reached agreement with the authorities to start the retargeting and biometric registration exercise immediately. Although senior leadership engagement is there to ensure the agreement is followed, new conditions have emerged. It is frustrating to see last-minute issues raised at the technical level. This again puts us in discussions with the authorities after more than eight months of sustained negotiations.

We have communicated to the de facto authorities from all directions the need for actions over words. We appreciate the recent steps forward. We also remain clear-eyed about what remains to be done and the need to avoid backsliding on what has recently been achieved.

Specifically, we are asking de facto authorities to process the 71 aid projects still pending approval. We need more monitoring missions to be approved. And we need urgent humanitarian assessments to proceed on the basis of global standards. These points are essential if we are to maintain principled aid programmes at the scale that people need.

On a related note, I would also recall the danger posed by the SAFER oil tanker, where we have seen no progress. Independent technical experts recently modelled what a spill from the SAFER might look like. In every scenario, nearly all the oil would wash up on the shores of Hudaydah and Hajjah.

This would devastate coastal communities in the north, as well as the fisheries and marine environment they depend on. Neighbouring countries would also be affected. The first step to preventing such a catastrophe is the UN-led technical assessment, which we remain eager to undertake.

Mr. President,

Humanitarian agencies are also facing challenges in Government-controlled areas, although not as severe as in the north. The Government of Yemen, for example, has left 44 humanitarian projects pending approval; on average these projects have been waiting more than five months to start.

A key multi-sector needs assessment has also stalled again in the south due to shifting Government demands on how it should proceed. Fortunately, food security surveys have been able to move ahead, and results are being analysed now.

Insecurity also remains a challenge in parts of the south, including several recent incidents that have affected humanitarian action. We remain grateful to the Government and local authorities for the support they are providing on these issues.

Mr. President,

My third point is funding for the UN aid operation.

Large-scale humanitarian assistance has mostly managed to keep the situation stable in Yemen, and everyone agrees that the underlying needs remain severe.

The aid operation is saving millions of lives. More than 13 million people every month are receiving food aid and other kinds of assistance. Preliminary data collected over the last several weeks seems to confirm this is having a pronounced effect on countering severe food insecurity.

But with delays in key assessments in the north and the south, it is not possible to yet quantify any changes over the last year or to confirm whether there are pockets of large, unmet needs.

As assessments proceed, we intend to roll over the 2019 response plan to maintain the programmes that have helped prevent famine, roll back cholera and otherwise save millions of

lives. This technical roll-over will require considerable funding, although likely somewhat less than last year's plan.

We started this year on a very strong financial footing. But income projections now show that more than 30 major programmes will reduce or start to close down by the end of April without additional funding. This would disrupt core, life-saving services for millions of people, including emergency food aid, treatment for malnourished children, vaccines for children and shelter for families fleeing conflict, among others.

I want to be clear that these cuts would be purely due to lack of funding. This means that even if we see sustained progress in removing obstacles to principled aid delivery, we could still find ourselves up against another crippling constraint: no money.

We want to acknowledge that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for co-hosting, with the United Nations, a high-level pledging event in Riyadh planned for 2 April. This event is an opportunity to show the world's commitment to the Yemeni people. It is also an opportunity to re-affirm humanitarian principles, which in Yemen may include donors choosing to disburse pledges in instalments as conditions for aid agencies improve.

Mr. President,

The fourth point is the Yemeni economy, which is a major driver of humanitarian needs.

Commercial food and fuel imports continue to enter the country through all ports and in line with established averages. This is essential in a country where nearly everything must be imported.

But fewer people are able to afford what they need to survive, as the Yemeni rial remains far below its pre-crisis value. In the south, the rial is trading around 650 to the US dollar; in the north, the rate is closer to 600. A dispute between the parties over banknotes is driving a disparity in the two rates.

Rapid depreciation of the rial was a key factor in pushing Yemen towards famine in 2018. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network noted last month that it "anticipates a steady depreciation of the [rial]...in the coming months" and warned that "the risk of famine is expected to increase" due to pressure on market systems, including the exchange rate.

One of the most effective solutions to the exchange rate problem has been foreign exchange injections to strengthen the currency. We need a regular programme for these injections.

Mr. President, my last point is progress towards peace. Now is the time to take the bold steps—like opening Sana'a airport—that will give the people of Yemen hope that political dialogue, not war, will prevail in their country. Humanitarians have been remarkably successful in mitigating some of the worst consequences of this crisis for civilians. But only a political solution can end the crisis altogether.

Thank you.