

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

Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Yemen

New York, 15 September 2020

As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President.

Two years ago, I warned the Security Council that we were losing the fight against famine in Yemen. At the time, we identified five urgent priorities:

First, protecting civilians;

Second, humanitarian access;

Third, funding;

Fourth, the need to support the economy;

And fifth, progress towards peace.

Progress was made.

Donors swiftly allocated more funds, meeting almost 90 per cent of our funding requirements.

With more money in the bank, food aid beneficiaries increased from 8 million to 12 million people a month. Health, education, water and other programmes were also expanded.

In parallel, Yemen's partners took steps to strengthen the economy. Foreign-exchange injections stabilized the then collapsing Yemeni rial. This helped many more people afford food and other essential goods – nearly all of which as you all know have to be imported to Yemen.

And with Martin's support, the parties signed the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018, which calmed the conflict at a critical time and helped keep Hudaydah port open for essential imports.

The results of all this were clear: millions of lives were saved. There was no large-scale famine.

But today, the spectre of famine has returned. The risk has become so serious that we have again notified you, as we are required to do, under the terms of Security Council resolution 2417 – just as we did two years ago.

The same five priority actions that worked then can work today.

Unfortunately, those who are in a position to help, and who have a particular responsibility to do so, are mostly choosing not to.

Let's start with protection of civilians.

Conflict has continued to escalate in recent weeks, particularly in central Yemen. In August, more civilians were killed across the country than any other month this year.

One in four civilian casualties in Yemen are now people who are killed and injured in their own homes.

Like Martin, I remain extremely worried about Marib, where more than 1 million people have sought refuge since 2015. A major confrontation there would be disastrous for civilians.

So I reinforce Martin's message to the parties to work urgently with Martin to agree a nationwide ceasefire – including in Marib. De-escalation played a major role in averting famine two years ago. We need similar steps now.

Mr. President, the second point is humanitarian access.

In the south, we continue to face challenges, including insecurity and bureaucratic impediments.

But these challenges remain less severe than what we encounter in the north.

I am, like Martin, deeply concerned that the Ansar Allah authorities have closed Sana'a airport to UN and humanitarian flights. The authorities attribute this decision to fuel shortages in the north.

These shortages are having severe humanitarian consequences, which I will come to in a moment. But that does not justify closing the airport, and I would emphasize that safe and reliable transport for aid personnel is one of the basic conditions the UN requires to work anywhere in the world.

A rapid solution is essential if aid workers are to remain safely in the north and if we are to maintain the operations on the necessary scale. In the coming weeks, about 100 metric tons of humanitarian cargo is due to fly into Sana'a airport, including essential vaccines and other medical supplies.

We also need faster progress on the wider operating environment for aid agencies. Over the last few months, we saw significant improvements on assessments, project agreements and other issues. But it has now been more than a year since a plan was agreed to pilot biometric registration of food aid beneficiaries. That pilot still hasn't started.

Mr. President, you will be expecting another update on the SAFER oil tanker. The UN team has submitted a revised proposal for the assessment and initial repair mission and we have held several rounds of constructive technical discussions with the Ansar Allah authorities. Frustrating as the endless delays have been, we are not giving up, and we hope the new proposal will be quickly approved so the work can start.

Mr. President, the third point is funding for the aid operation. Increased funding two years ago was the main reason famine was prevented.

This year we have received only 30 per cent of what is needed. Aid agencies with staff in Yemen all agree this is the biggest challenge for their work today.

Several donors – including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, who have a particular responsibility, which they discharged in recent years – have so far given nothing to this year's UN plan. It is particularly reprehensible to promise money, which gives people hope that help may be on the way, and then to dash those hopes by simply failing to fulfil the promise.

More than 9 million people have been affected by deepening cuts to aid programmes, including food, water and healthcare. Continuing to hold back money from the humanitarian response now will be a death sentence for many families.

So yet again, I call on all donors to pay their pledges now and increase their support.

Mr. President, my fourth point is Yemen's economy.

The economy has shrunk by 45 per cent since 2015. The Government also estimates that remittances from abroad were supporting half the population before COVID-19. Those remittances have fallen by up to 70 per cent in the wake of the pandemic.

So Yemenis have much less money in their pockets to feed their families or pay medical bills.

And the money they do have is worth much less. The rial has collapsed again. In the south, it is trading at more than 800 to the US dollar – that is the lowest value ever seen.

This is pushing food prices even higher. Today, food is about 140 per cent more expensive than before the conflict.

Fuel costs in the informal market are now more than double the official rate in many areas. That is mainly due to the acute shortages in the north that I mentioned earlier.

Only about half the normal volume of commercial fuel has entered Hudaydah since June. Right now, because of the blockade, more than three months' worth of fuel is stuck outside the port awaiting Government permission to enter.

The resulting shortages mean water, sanitation and health services are shutting down because they don't have enough fuel to keep going.

This directly affects services provided by humanitarian agencies too. A group of NGOs has estimated that fuel shortages have so far reduced water and sanitation assistance to at least 2.5 million people. It disrupted food aid for at least half a million people, with another 300,000 people at risk.

Resolving the dispute which is behind the fuel blockade is essential to stop Yemen's drift towards famine.

I also want to reiterate my call on Yemen's partners to provide regular foreign-exchange injections. Just as it did two years ago, this will bring down basic commodity prices so more people can afford to eat.

Mr. President, my fifth point is progress towards peace. Martin has just briefed you on his efforts to secure a nationwide ceasefire and resume the political process.

This is more important than ever. Data show very clearly that the worst hunger in Yemen is mainly in conflict-affected areas.

Mr. President, this is the thirty-first time we have briefed you on Yemen since I took up this role.

Every month, I give you the facts and figures. But there is a tendency to forget that the facts and figures are all about real people.

On Sunday, two days ago, I spent a few hours on the phone talking to people from all over Yemen. I wanted to hear their concerns, and ask what message they have for powerful countries and people – like all of you – who hold their fate in their hands.

I spoke to Jamila, a mother of five who fled fighting in Taizz. Her family have had their food aid cut in half. She wants you to know they cannot keep going without your help.

I spoke to Abdulrahman in Sana'a. He told me his six children come crying to him every day in hunger, and that he has even less to give them now because the aid he was receiving has been cut. His message to you is that Yemenis are human beings who deserve respect. He hopes you will again support basic assistance for his family.

Samia in Aden told me life there has never been worse. COVID-19 killed the main earners in her family, and she says they now have no sources of income. She is asking you to look at Yemen with compassion and humanity, and at least offer food and medicine.

And I talked to Mohammed, who fled Sa'ada to seek refuge in Sana'a after air strikes destroyed his house and the bus he used to drive. His family had been receiving aid every month, but it too has been cut back. His children are now too hungry to go to school. Every night, they ask him: "Daddy, where is the food – when is it coming?" He doesn't have an answer for them, and he's hoping you will do something to help. He's worried the world has forgotten about people like him – or worse, has decided to do nothing.

When you talk to people like this – and there are millions just like them all across Yemen – and listen to their articulate, human and emotional stories, the main thing you learn is they are just

like us, except they are victims of people and forces over whom they have no influence or control.

Their stories may be hard to hear, but they are a lot harder to live.

Yemen is in the state it is because those with power and influence have decided there are things more important than the fate of these people.

Isn't it way past time for a different decision?

Thank you.