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**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, 11 November 2020

As delivered

Thank you very much indeed, Madam President.

The most urgent task in Yemen today is to prevent widespread famine.

Data released last week have confirmed – again – that the risk is growing. As you will hear from David, malnutrition has never been worse. In some parts of the country, one child in four is now acutely malnourished.

Words like “acutely malnourished”, “food insecurity” and “excess mortality” are dispassionate, neutral, technical terms that obscure the horrors inflicted by famine on the body and on the soul.

So how do the people, the actual human beings, we describe in these technical terms actually experience them?

With no food, the body’s metabolism slows down to preserve energy for our vital organs. Hungry and weak, people often become fatigued, irritable and confused.

The immune system loses strength. So as they starve, people – especially children – are likelier to fall sick or die from diseases that they may have otherwise resisted. There is no shortage of diseases in Yemen that will prey on these weakened immune systems. They include cholera, COVID-19, other respiratory infections and illnesses like malaria, dengue and diphtheria.

For those who manage to escape disease – but still find nothing to eat – their vital organs will start to wither and then fail. Eventually, the body starts to devour its own muscles, including the heart. Many will experience hallucinations and convulsions before, finally, the heart stops.

It is a terrible, agonizing and humiliating death – and it is particularly cruel in a world, like ours, where there is in fact more than enough food for everyone.

This is the fate the world has left hanging over millions of Yemeni men, women and especially children.

The Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen wrote decades ago that the history of famines is “full of blood-boiling tales of callousness and malevolence.” In other words, people who could stop famines simply chose not to.

That too is the case in Yemen today. Yemenis are not “going hungry”. They are being starved.

All of us – parties to the conflict, Security Council members, donors, humanitarian organizations and others – should do everything we can to stop this. Time is running out.

We prevented famine two years ago. To do so again, the world must act now on the five issues I will brief you on again today: 1) protection of civilians, 2) humanitarian access, 3) funding for the aid operation, 4) the economy and 5) progress towards peace.

First, protection of civilians.

Fighting continues along 48 front lines across the country, with the fiercest clashes occurring recently in Marib, Al Jawf, Taizz and Al Dhale'e.

The prospects of further escalation in Marib, where 1 million displaced people are living, or renewed clashes in Hudaydah, whose port is a lifeline for millions in the north, remain deeply concerning.

A nationwide ceasefire, as we have long advocated, would go a long way to protecting civilians. It would also help stop the slide towards famine, as data confirms the worst hunger is in conflict-affected areas. The Secretary-General has reiterated the call he made in March for a global ceasefire specifically for Yemen.

Madam President, the second issue is safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access.

We have recently seen two disturbing attacks against humanitarian staff. On 19 October, a Turkish Red Crescent worker was shot and seriously injured in Aden. On 2 November, a grenade was thrown at an aid agency compound, also in Aden. We strongly condemn these attacks.

We are also concerned by the delays and administrative constraints that humanitarian agencies are increasingly facing in some parts of the south.

In the north, restrictions have been substantially more severe.

There has been important progress on some of the problems, including assessments and project approvals. And on Sunday, a long-planned pilot finally began in Sana'a to introduce biometric registration of emergency food aid recipients. David will talk to you more about this.

And these are important steps. But much more remains to be done. Tomorrow, senior donor and agency officials, convened by Sweden and the European Union, will meet to review developments and plan for the future.

Let me turn to the Safer tanker. Martin has given you the update. We are yet to receive official approval for the assessment and initial repair mission. After several more rounds of extensive discussions, the Ansar Allah authorities continue to indicate they will approve the mission.

Madam President, my third point is funding for the humanitarian response.

With seven weeks left in the year, our response plan has received \$1.5 billion, that is about 45 per cent of requirements. Last year at this time, we had received twice as much - almost \$3 billion.

David will tell you what that means for emergency food aid. Beyond that, 9 million Yemenis could lose access to basic health services, and treatment of more than half a million malnourished children could stop.

More money for the aid operation is the quickest and most efficient way to support famine prevention efforts right now.

So I again implore donors to fulfil outstanding pledges and to increase their support. More than \$200 million in pledges this year – including new funding announced in September – has still not been paid.

Madam President, the fourth issue is Yemen's economic decline, which is exacerbating the risk of famine.

The Yemeni rial continues to lose value. In the south, the exchange rate is hovering around 840 rial to the US dollar – the lowest rate in its history. The Government is unable to defend the currency or subsidize imports because it lacks foreign currency reserves.

Essential fuel imports through Hudaydah also remain far below requirements as a result of the still unresolved political dispute between the Government and the Ansar Allah authorities over revenue management. The parties really must work with Martin's team to resolve the underlying issues there.

So our immediate message on the economy remains the same. Yemen's partners must provide a regular supply of foreign exchange to stave off the worst economic collapse and the famine that would inevitably follow from it.

Madam President, my final point is progress towards peace. Martin has just briefed you on the status of the Joint Declaration and its humanitarian and economic confidence-building measures.

Many of these measures – including a nationwide ceasefire, resuming salary payments and re-opening Sana'a airport – could be game-changers, provided they come along with more money for the relief effort.

In conclusion, Madam President, when I think about what famine would mean, I am really at a loss to understand why more is not being done to prevent it.

Thank you.