ON BEHALF OF THE UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, MR. MARK LOWCOCK, UNITED NATIONS OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS OFFICER-IN-CHARGE, DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS AND ADVOCACY, MR. JOHN GING

Statement to the Security Council

New York, 27 February 2018

Mr. President,

I provide this update to the Security Council today on behalf of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock.

After three years of conflict, conditions in Yemen are catastrophic. A record 22.2 million people need humanitarian assistance or protection – including 8.4 million people who are severely food insecure. About 400,000 children under 5 are so severely malnourished they are ten times likelier to die without treatment than their healthy peers. Some 2 million people remain displaced – 90 per cent of whom fled their homes more than a year ago. Nearly 1.1 million suspected cases of cholera have been reported since April 2017 in what experts have called the world’s worst outbreak. An estimated 3 million women and girls are at risk of gender-based violence.

Mr. President,

These figures represent an urgent call to action that humanitarian workers, the vast majority of them Yemeni citizens, are striving to answer. Working with nearly 200 partners, the UN-coordinated response is making a tremendous difference for millions of people across the country. In 2017, we progressively increased the number of people receiving emergency food assistance every month from 3 million to over 7 million. We delivered enough medicine to health facilities to treat 3.2 million people and conducted 1.5 million medical consultations. By maintaining public water networks, we ensured access to drinking water for 2 million people – in addition to trucking water directly to nearly 1 million more of the most vulnerable in December alone. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network estimates that nine of Yemen’s 22 governorates would be one step closer to famine – or worse – without humanitarian assistance.

And yet, Mr. President,

People’s lives have continued unravelling. Conflict has escalated significantly since November, driving an estimated 100,000 people from their homes, according to UNHCR. More people are
going hungry, and famine remains a real threat. Although cholera cases are in decline, the disease is not yet beaten and is likely to rebound in the upcoming rainy season. In the meantime, a diphtheria outbreak – the first since 1982 – has emerged. These are the consequences of a man-made crisis that only a political solution can bring to an end.

Mr. President,

The most urgent task is for all parties to cease hostilities and engage in meaningful dialogue with the United Nations to achieve a lasting political settlement. In the meantime, as noted by the Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator to this Council in November, there are other areas where we need to see immediate progress. These priorities were conveyed to the governments of Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as well as to the authorities in Sana’a, with assurances from all parties that they would be swiftly implemented. Allow me to update you on where we stand.

The first issue concerns the resources needed for an effective response. In January, the UN and partners released the 2018 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan, which requires $2.96 billion to assist 13.1 million people. Securing full funding for this plan is a top priority, which is why the Emergency Relief Coordinator allocated $50 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund at the beginning of the year. This was the largest ever single allocation in its history. Later in January, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates announced a generous joint pledge of $1 billion for Yemen – including $930 million for the Humanitarian Response Plan. They also committed to raise $500 million from other donors in the region. In discussions this month, the Saudi and Emirati governments confirmed they would transfer $930 million by 31 March and outlined grant management terms very much in keeping with the spirit of the Grand Bargain. Other donors have also stepped forward. But even with the support announced to date, the Humanitarian Response Plan would remain only about one-third funded. On 3 April, the Secretary-General will convene a pledging conference in Geneva hosted by Sweden and Switzerland where all donors will have an opportunity to work together to provide the resources needed for this response.

Mr. President,

The second issue is humanitarian access into and within the country, which all parties are required to allow and facilitate under international humanitarian law. This access must be safe, rapid and unimpeded. Access within Yemen – particularly in areas controlled by the Sana’a authorities – has deteriorated. Authorities in Sana’a continue to delay humanitarian movements and impose bureaucratic impediments that interfere with humanitarian action. These include long delays in customs clearance for essential supplies such as diphtheria treatment and fuel, ad hoc restrictions on movements of humanitarian partners and refusal to authorize humanitarian assessments. In recent weeks, humanitarian staff have also been temporarily detained without justification, and their equipment confiscated at checkpoints. In practice, these restrictions are often eventually resolved through dialogue – but the time lost represents an unacceptable delay for people who need assistance. While these restrictions appear to have intensified in recent
months, we remain hopeful that the Sana’a authorities may still honour the assurances given to the Emergency Relief Coordinator during his visit in October.

Access into Yemen has improved after the blockade imposed by the Coalition came to an end in December. UN flights and vessels have been travelling as scheduled since 26 November, and regular humanitarian staff rotations and cargo shipments have mostly resumed. We have also received assurances that there will be no further disruption to these services. Today, our main challenge in entering Yemen is the Coalition policy to divert containerized cargo to Aden – including relief items shipped in containers aboard commercial vessels, which is often the most cost-efficient option. This policy creates delays and higher operating costs. Sana’a airport remains closed to commercial traffic, preventing thousands of patients from travelling abroad to seek medical care. We are hopeful that solutions to these issues can be found shortly.

Mr. President,

The third issue is related to commercial imports. Even before the current crisis, Yemen imported about 90 per cent of its staple food and nearly all medicine and fuel. Maintaining the flow of commercial imports through all ports is essential to people’s survival. Most imports have historically arrived via Hudaydah, which is the closest port to 70 per cent of people in need. Disruptions to commercial import flows have immediate consequences, including rises in food prices which are rising against the backdrop of the risk of famine. In January 2018, a food basket was on average 55 per cent more expensive than before the escalation of conflict in 2015.

Commercial food and fuel imports have only partially recovered. One factor appears to be the lack of confidence among commercial shippers – the number of vessels seeking clearance to enter Hudaydah and Saleef ports has halved since the blockade. The United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) is an effective system for screening imports bound for these ports, and there have recently been efforts to strengthen it further. Vessels cleared by this mechanism should be able to proceed directly to port without additional delays. Fuel imports are crucial for Yemen, including for the operation of public water networks and medical facilities. In January, United Nations agencies received 175,000 litres of fuel, provided by the Coalition, and distributed it to 16 health facilities and water networks in the north and south. Such imports, increasing the commercial and humanitarian fuel supply, as well as other goods, must continue. For that to happen, Hudaydah and Saleef ports must remain open without time limits or other restrictions that may discourage commercial shipping companies from serving them.

Mr. President,

The last major issue where we had hoped to see immediate progress relates to civil servant salary payments. Since August 2016, 1.25 million public employees and their families – or one quarter of the entire population – have not received regular salaries. Non-payment of salaries – including for some 30,000 health workers and 193,000 teachers – has accelerated the decline in public services as workers seek alternative livelihoods and left families struggling to make ends meet. The resulting collapse of basic services has become a major driver of the humanitarian crisis. The United Nations and partners cannot replace the public sector and while some salaries have
reportedly been paid in the south, regular salary payments must quickly resume across the country.

Mr. President,

Finally, it remains important to emphasize that protection concerns remain at the centre of the response. As mentioned, conflict has recently escalated, putting civilians at even greater risk. All parties to the conflict are obliged to take constant care to spare civilians and civilian infrastructure in military operations. Yet we continue to see civilian harm. Houthi-affiliated forces continue to shell populated areas, often resulting in civilian casualties. On 26 December, a Coalition air strike on a market in Taizz killed at least 60 civilians, including eight children, and wounded 32, including six children.

There are many such examples on all sides of this conflict. I call on all parties to uphold their obligations and responsibilities under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Likewise, I urge Member States to take all possible steps to ensure that the parties to the conflict comply with the law, and to support accountability for violations.

Thank you.