

**Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Yemen by the
Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief
Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock**

New York, 21 September 2018

As delivered

Thank you very much indeed Madam President,

The Security Council have asked me to update you today on the humanitarian situation in Yemen. In a word, it is bleak. We are losing the fight against famine. The position has deteriorated in an alarming way in recent weeks. We may now be approaching a tipping point, beyond which it will be impossible to prevent massive loss of life as a result of widespread famine across the country.

Madam President,

As you know, Yemen has for some time now been the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Years of very intense and protracted fighting all over the country have destroyed infrastructure, wrecked public services, displaced millions of people from their homes and livelihoods, and seen what's believed to be the worst cholera outbreak the world has ever seen ravage the country.

All that, together with a dramatic economic collapse in a country already among the world's poorest, meant that, at the beginning of this year, fully three quarters of Yemenis – 75 per cent, 22 million people – were in need of some kind of humanitarian assistance or protection.

Many millions no longer have any regular source of income – including the families of teachers, health workers, water and sanitation workers and other public servants who haven't been paid a regular salary in two years.

Some 18 million people, including a high proportion of Yemen's children, are food insecure, and more than 8 million of them severely-food insecure, and what that means is that those people do not know where their next meal will come from, and they need emergency food assistance to survive.

Notwithstanding all this Madam President, the humanitarian situation has been kept stable, and the worst loss of life avoided so far this year. That is because the world's worst crisis has attracted the world's largest and one of the world's most effective humanitarian relief efforts.

In the first half of the year, humanitarian organisations supported under the United Nations response plan, provided assistance to more than 8 million of the most vulnerable Yemenis. The operation has been substantially scaled up and broadened since last year. While food distributions were reaching 3 million people a month last year, they have dramatically expanded – and we aim this month to reach 8 million people.

A third wave of the cholera outbreak has been kept at bay with intensified prevention campaigns, repairing and chlorinating water networks and vaccinating people in high-risk districts in Aden, Hudaydah and Ibb. Health facilities that would otherwise have closed, have remained open through an incentive programme paid to healthcare workers to keep services going.

Madam President,

Running such a large-scale relief effort requires an enormous operation on the ground. I want to pay tribute to all the aid workers, thousands of them from UN agencies including UNICEF, the World Food Programme, the World Health Organisation and

others, from the Red Cross and Red Crescent organisations, to countless international and, especially national civil society organisations. Most of the aid workers are Yemenis helping other Yemenis, often at considerable personal risk.

The relief effort would also be impossible without the generous funding voluntarily provided by our donors. I want again to thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the State of Kuwait, the United States and many European countries, who together have committed some US\$ 2.6 billion, including \$2 billion through the 2018 Yemen UN Humanitarian Response Plan, to finance the operation.

And also, I want to note that the aid operation would not be possible, given the intensity of the conflict, without the deconfliction system run by the Coalition authorities. We notify the Evacuations and Humanitarian Operations Cell (EHOC) in Riyadh, of the operations of the aid agencies, and that protects aid workers, to a large degree, from being caught up in the fighting, and it helps the Coalition to meet their obligations under International Humanitarian Law.

But Madam President,

The issue I want to flag to you today, is that two recent developments threaten to overwhelm the aid operation.

The first is a marked economic deterioration, symptomized by the depreciation of the Yemeni Rial by some 30 per cent in the last month or so. Because almost all the food consumed in Yemen is imported, that depreciation translates directly into a sharp increase in the price of food for some 10 million Yemenis, who are food insecure but who are not reached by the aid operation. We are already seeing pockets of famine-like-conditions – including cases where people are eating leaves because they have no other form of sustenance.

We estimate that an additional 3.5 million people may soon be added to the 8 million already severely food insecure.

Compounding that, the depreciation of the Rial and access problems are producing unprecedented increases in the price of fuel. My team on the ground reported yesterday that people are waiting in kilometre-long queues at petrol stations. As petrol prices have doubled just this week, transportation costs have gone up, and reaching a health facility or fleeing fighting when it reaches your neighbourhood is becoming unaffordable for many families without outside help.

Commercial imports of food and fuel have yet to recover from last November's blockade. Fuel imports in September are only one-third of what they were in August. Commercial food imports fell from a registered 410,000 metric tons in May to 280,000 metric tons in August. That's a fall of 30 per cent.

With the confidence of shipping companies already very battered, as reflected in a 35 per cent drop in clearance requests since the blockade, any further shocks could add to the core humanitarian caseload in a way which would simply overwhelm the capacity of humanitarian organizations.

Secondly, the intensification of fighting in recent weeks around Hudaydah is choking the lifeline, which the aid operation and the commercial markets rely on.

The combination of the ports of Hudaydah and Saleef, where most of Yemen's food imports arrive, the access roads from the ports to the large population centres in the north and the west of the country, and the facilities in the city in which grain is milled before onward transportation, that combination is the essential, irreplaceable, infrastructure on which aid operations and commercial imports rely.

Now, the main Hudaydah-Sana'a road – which is the principal artery used by commercial importers and humanitarian organizations to move commodities from the ports to people across the country - has in recent days been cut off by fighting.

Other routes are heavily damaged and increase transport times and therefore the cost for humanitarian organizations and private companies.

The Red Sea Mills in Hudaydah, which currently contain 45,000 tons of grain imported by the World Food Programme, that's enough to feed three and a half million people for a month, has recently been inaccessible because of fighting in the local area.

Armed groups have occupied humanitarian facilities. Attacks against civilians and humanitarian sites have resulted in dozens of deaths, especially of children, and serious damage to public health and water facilities and other humanitarian assets.

Aid agencies including United Nations still have 600 staff in Hudaydah, and while we have since June provided direct assistance to more than half a million people fleeing the fighting in the Governorate, aid activities, including life-saving immunization campaigns, have been delayed or have been prevented.

Madam President,

It is far from clear that the recent intensification of fighting is producing any winners. It is, though, abundantly clear, all too abundantly clear, who the losers are: millions of Yemenis civilians, most of them women and children, whose lives are right on the line.

I know that some people will want to talk about who is to blame for the position we now face. That is, with respect, the wrong question for today. The issue is who can do something to head off the impending catastrophe.

While we will continue to push to scale up the humanitarian response, humanitarian organizations simply cannot look after the needs of all 29 million Yemenis. That is untenable. We ask the Security Council for support in three key areas to prevent a complete collapse and safeguard the lives of millions of the most vulnerable people.

First, immediate measures are needed to stabilize the economy and support the exchange rate. That includes useable liquidity for the central bank, and the implementation of long standing commitments to pay key public-sector salaries across the whole country, so that more people have the wherewithal to buy e food and keep the commercial markets, which as I have said, aid agencies cannot replace, to keep those markets alive. It is, at the same time, essential to avoid any policy measures, which would damage the already paper-thin confidence of commercial importers any further.

Second, everyone with a stake in this must uphold their obligations to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure and facilitate access to vulnerable people. We have to keep all the ports open, we have to keep all the main roads open, we have to keep them functional, we have to keep them safe. No humanitarian site should be used for military purposes. As I have said to you, the lifeline through which the aid operation runs now hangs by a thread.

Third, we ask all parties to find practical solutions to key issues, including the opening of an air bridge for civilians to seek medical treatment outside Yemen for diseases no longer treatable inside the country. That would lay the pathway for the opening of the airport in Sanaa.

And, of course, and finally, the parties need to get around the negotiating table and engage seriously with the efforts of the Secretary-General's Special Envoy on a positive path towards peace.

Thank you very much Madam President.