Thank you very much, Mr. President.

On 10 April, the Government of Yemen confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in the country.

You have just heard from Martin how the threat of COVID-19 must galvanize the political process, despite the challenges. We need a similar sense of urgency for the humanitarian crisis.

More than five years of war have severely degraded Yemen’s health infrastructure, exhausted people’s immune systems and increased acute vulnerabilities. As a result, epidemiologists warn that COVID-19 in Yemen could spread faster, more widely and with deadlier consequences than in many other countries.

We are, in other words, running out of time.

The Humanitarian Coordinator, Lise Grande, described COVID-19 in Yemen as “one of the biggest threats in the past 100 years.”

It is in this context that I would like to update you on five priorities for the humanitarian response: 1) protection of civilians; 2) humanitarian access and delivery; 3) funding for the relief
effort; 4) the Yemeni economy and 5) progress towards peace. COVID-19 affects all those issues.

First, protection of civilians.

In the first quarter of this year, civilian casualties have risen every month, with more than 500 people killed or injured. One in every three civilian casualties has been a child. In Al Jawf – where hostilities escalated in mid-January – that rate is now one in two.

Despite calls for a ceasefire, hostilities have persisted in many areas, mainly in Marib, Al Jawf, Al Bayda and Taizz, with deadly consequences for civilians. All parties must take constant care to spare civilians and civilian objects throughout military operations.

As Martin said, on 5 April, a strike against a women’s prison in Taizz killed seven women and a child living with his detained mother. Another 26 women were injured.

Since January, at least 60,000 people have fled conflict in Al Jawf and neighbouring areas. Most have of them arrived in Marib, where more than 800,000 displaced people have sought refuge since 2016. If conflict expands deeper into Marib – and everything must be done to avoid that – more than 1 million people could suddenly be on the move.

So I welcome the recent moves towards a nationwide ceasefire, including the Coalition’s declaration last week. I urge all parties to join this effort, which is urgently needed not just to give Yemen a fighting chance against COVID-19, but to relieve the disproportionate burden of the war on civilians.

Mr. President, the second issue is humanitarian access, which is both a requirement of international humanitarian law and essential if we are to continue assisting millions of people.

We are working with all stakeholders to take precautions to reduce the risk of COVID-19 while maintaining life-saving assistance. These precautions are not slowing down aid operations in a major way.

But it is regrettable that other restrictions imposed on staff and cargo movements – mostly in the north – continue to constrain our ability to maintain the high levels of aid that Yemenis need.
There are problems in Government-held areas as well, including bureaucratic impediments and insecurity. Humanitarian organizations are still waiting for Government officials to approve 43 projects that would assist 2.3 million people. Many of these requests have been pending for months.

Several organizations in the south have also experienced serious challenges in implementing approved projects in the last few weeks. We appreciate the Government’s commitment to resolve these issues.

In the north, access challenges remain severe. Ansar Allah authorities have taken several steps to improve the operating environment for aid agencies, but progress is not moving fast enough.

Restrictions in northern Yemen are so onerous that humanitarian agencies are being forced to calibrate programmes and delivery to levels where they can manage the risks associated with such a non-permissive environment.

Although Ansar Allah authorities have approved 13 aid projects since early March, agencies still have 92 requests still pending, including 40 that have been waiting for months to get started.

Local officials still arbitrarily refuse missions, and humanitarian staff continue to experience severe movement restrictions in the field, including in the past few days. Staff are subjected to long delays at checkpoints, even when paperwork is in order. In a particularly serious event, which has not yet been resolved, UN international staff in some locations have been prevented from moving from field hubs to Sana’a. This is unacceptable.

And on a separate note, there has been no progress in accessing the SAFER oil tanker.

Every day, we are working with the authorities to address these challenges. There are positive steps. The waiver of a levy on humanitarian projects remains in place, and a principle governing framework for the work of NGOs has also been agreed. After months of negotiations, there is finally confirmation from the authorities that the World Food Programme’s long-planned biometric registration exercise can start.

And despite all the challenges to maintain principled aid delivery, I want to remind everyone that the humanitarian operation remains a lifeline for millions of Yemenis. Every month, we are still helping more than 13 million people across the country.
Last year, humanitarian agencies supported 3,100 health facilities and conducted 17 million medical consultations. We enabled access to clean water and sanitation for more than 11 million people and treated nearly a million acutely malnourished children. Nearly 12 million people received food assistance every month.

These are the kinds of broad-based programmes that are essential to help Yemenis keep healthy and defend themselves against COVID-19.

But Mr. President, we need money to pay for these programmes. That brings me to my third point: funding for the aid operation.

Of the UN’s 41 major programmes, 31 will start closing down in the next few weeks if we can’t secure additional funds. This means we will have to start eliminating many of the activities that may offer Yemenis’ best chance to avoid COVID-19.

UNICEF will have to stop immediate assistance for families displaced by conflict or natural disasters. That means up to 1 million displaced people would not receive critical supplies – including hygiene items that help protect against diseases like cholera and COVID-19.

Nutrition programmes will also be cut, affecting 260,000 severely malnourished children and 2 million more children with moderate malnutrition. These children’s immune systems will be weakened, making them much more vulnerable to COVID-19, cholera and other diseases.

People who do fall sick are likely to find fewer clinics to help them. WHO estimates that 80 per cent of health services provided through the response could stop at the end of April.

This could mean disbanding local health teams that have been essential in detecting and containing past disease outbreaks. We need these teams more than ever – not just to keep on top of COVID-19, but to contain a growing risk that cholera will rebound as the rainy season starts.

The humanitarian community – UN agencies, international NGOs and others – are unanimous in our position that the world’s largest aid operation cannot afford extended cuts during this unprecedented emergency. UN agencies estimate they need more than $900 million to carry them through July.
So I want to thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for their pledge last week of $500 million for the UN-led response and $25 million for COVID-19 activities. The pledge alone of course does not solve the problem. But we hope these funds can be quickly disbursed on similar terms as past years, which reflect global best practices in humanitarian donorship, so that the programmes I have described can continue.

I also want to acknowledge the concerns donors have expressed over restrictions on humanitarian aid, particularly in the north. As I have said we share these concerns and we continue to work tirelessly to address them. There has been some progress – but more is needed.

We understand that all humanitarian funding is provided on a voluntary basis, and many countries are facing economic downturns at home. I want again to thank all our donors for their support.

At the same time, we must all acknowledge the extraordinary threat Yemen is facing. So far, we have received about $800 million in pledges and contributions for the response this year. At this time last year, the equivalent figure was more than three times higher – about $2.6 billion.

So I am urging all donors to pledge generously now and immediately release at least enough money to cover response operations through July. For operations beyond July, we understand some donors may choose to disburse the remainder of their pledges only after observing future developments.

Despite conditions on the ground, and the real threat to our staff’s safety and health, we are staying and delivering. Some international staff were rotated outside Yemen when the airports closed several weeks ago. The rest remain in country and are working with their Yemeni colleagues to deliver critical aid programmes during this difficult time. We have enough staff in the country to deliver critical programmes. What we don’t have is the money.

Mr. President, the fourth issue is the economy.

Yemen imports nearly everything. Commercial cargo is still entering the country despite increased scrutiny to reduce the risk of COVID-19. In March, commercial food and fuel imports into Hudaydah and Saleef fell by 9 per cent. That is a matter of concern, but they are within normal fluctuations.
Longer-term economic prospects are more alarming.

Imports must be purchased in hard currency, which means the Government needs foreign exchange to finance them. And to afford those imports, people need the Yemeni rial to maintain a reasonable exchange rate.

The impact of COVID-19 on the global economy will make this more difficult. Oil prices have fallen. Because the Government depends on oil as a main source of revenue, officials may soon find it much harder to finance imports, to pay civil servant salaries or support the exchange rate.

Rapid, uncontrolled currency depreciation was a key factor in bringing Yemen to the brink of widespread famine 18 months ago. The World Bank warns that a similar risk of currency collapse persists today.

In the past, remittances have served as a last defence for millions of vulnerable families. Economists estimate that Yemenis abroad send home more than $3 billion a year, making remittances the largest source of hard currency in local markets.

But COVID-19 is affecting the economies where expatriate Yemenis work. A group of Yemeni economists and private-sector leaders recently projected that remittances could drop by as much as 70 per cent in the coming months. This places us in uncharted territory.

We need bold action to stabilize the economy before it’s too late. This should include regular foreign exchange injections that have proved effective in the past, as well as doing whatever we can to increase quantities of affordable food and other consumer goods in markets across Yemen right now.

Mr. President, my final point is progress towards peace.

Martin briefed you on that. Millions of Yemenis have suffered through years of war and deprivation. COVID-19 is presenting a unique opportunity to reinvigorate the political process and move towards peace.

It is though also promising severe repercussions if that does not happen.

Thank you Mr. President.