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Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Yemen

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Thank you, Mr. President.

In last month's briefing, we reported that Yemen had confirmed only one case of COVID-19. As of this morning, that figure had jumped to 72 confirmed cases, including 13 deaths.

Sixty-two of these cases – more than 85 per cent – were reported in just the last ten days.

Humanitarian agencies have every reason to believe that community transmission is taking place across the country. Official reports are lagging behind actual infections, just as they have in many other places.

And as in the rest of the world, millions of people in Yemen are deeply frightened at the prospect of an unknown disease ravaging their country.

The Secretary-General acknowledged this fear last month, noting that people everywhere “want to know what to do and where to turn for advice.” He also urged that the global approach to COVID-19 be “transparent, responsive and accountable.”

Authorities in Yemen are seeking support. We must all work together to confront this virus. That means reporting cases everywhere, keeping people informed, caring for the sick and following expert advice. This approach has flattened the curve in other countries, and it can do the same in Yemen.

This is the backdrop against which I will update you today on the five overall priorities for the wider humanitarian response: 1) protection of civilians; 2) humanitarian access and delivery; 3) funding; 4) the economy and 5) progress towards peace.

Let's start with protection of civilians.

We welcome the Coalition's decision to extend its unilateral ceasefire through the holy month of Ramadan. Like the Special Envoy, we hope this will soon translate into a mutual agreement to end all fighting on the ground.

Recent clashes in Hudaydah, Marib, as Martin mentioned, Al Jawf, Al Bayda, Abyan, Socotra and elsewhere show we are not there yet. Civilian casualties rose again in April, with 177 civilians killed or injured across the country.

In the first quarter of 2020, six attacks on health facilities were reported – a threefold increase from the previous quarter. At least one such attack was reported in April, despite the pandemic. International humanitarian law requires all parties to take constant care to spare civilians and civilian objects throughout military operations. COVID-19 makes it all the more critical to respect and protect medical facilities in line with international law.

COVID-19 appears to be directly exacerbating protection risks. On 6 April, armed men threw grenades at the guards of an isolation centre at a hospital in Al Dhale'e. Fear of stigma may also be leading fewer people to seek medical care when they need it.

For refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants, stigma is already a grave concern. Reports are growing of refugees and migrants forcibly deported or detained due to COVID-19 fears. Incitement against these people – many of whom already endured horrific trauma on their journey to Yemen – is rising.

I want to echo recent calls by the Secretary-General, the World Health Organization, the International Migration Organization and others in favour of knowledge and social cohesion over rumour and scapegoating. Truly, this is the time for what the Secretary-General has called "science and solidarity."

Over the years, Yemen has distinguished itself by its generous support for refugees and migrants. The United Nations remains eager to support Yemeni authorities and communities in upholding that noble tradition as we work with them counter COVID-19 across the country.

Mr. President, the second issue is humanitarian access, which is also required by international humanitarian law. We are working with all stakeholders to take appropriate precautions against COVID-19 while maintaining life-saving assistance.

But there are several causes for concern. Regular staff rotations are impossible, as aid workers lack predictable access to flights into or out of the country. Nor do we know whether medical evacuations, if required, would be quickly approved. These issues are essential to fulfilling our duty of care to staff.

We have also noted a disturbing increase, mainly in the north, of harassment and incitement against the United Nations. This needlessly makes our work more dangerous and sometimes forces partners to pause activities at the time when they are needed the most.

We are asking the Government of Yemen and Ansar Allah authorities to work with us on these points as a matter of urgency, including renewed commitments to aid workers' safety and security.

I want to acknowledge the constructive role of Member States in helping to facilitate passenger flights. The Government of Ethiopia has allowed the UN Humanitarian Air Service to use Addis Ababa airport for several flights. The Evacuation and Humanitarian Operations Cell in Riyadh has also been helpful.

Unfortunately, we also continue to face obstacles to our work that pre-date the pandemic. In the south, the biggest challenge remains volatility. Rising tensions and renewed clashes are weakening governance and public services, as well as complicating agencies' ability to plan and implement programmes reliably.

Government processes are too cumbersome and at times interfere with independence of aid. Dozens of NGO projects have gone months waiting for approvals in the south, effectively blocking \$100 million in donor funding. Visa delays for international staff also remain a concern.

In the north, access challenges are even more severe. As we noted last month, the authorities have recently made several important improvements, and we appreciate this progress.

But more is still needed. The most urgent priority is to approve 93 pending NGO projects, many of which have been waiting for months and together represent \$180 million in donor investments. We also need more effective procedures for future projects and an end to arbitrary movement delays, detentions, harassment and interference in aid operations.

Over the last several days, we have had the opportunity to remind senior Ansar Allah officials of all the steps required to put in place the same minimum humanitarian conditions expected everywhere else in the world. We will continue to work with them to achieve the quick results we need to create a more enabling environment for humanitarian action.

On a separate note, we also continue to call for access to the decaying SAFER oil tanker. Last week, a senior representative of the authorities in Sana'a wrote to the United Nations to highlight the "urgent necessity" of an assessment. We welcome this enthusiasm and are following up to confirm Ansar Allah authorities will indeed facilitate this work without again imposing unnecessary conditions.

Mr. President, despite the enormous challenges our teams are facing, we are doing everything we can to stay and deliver and reach as many people as possible. There are many factors impacting our capacity to deliver aid, including restrictions, lack of funding and measures we are forced to take to mitigate the risks we face. This said, we're still reaching more than 10 million people every month. These large-scale programmes provide food, water, healthcare and other services. They offer some of the best chances for people to protect themselves against COVID-19.

COVID-specific activities are also expanding. Thirty-eight hospitals are being equipped to serve as COVID-19 facilities. Rapid response teams are working in every district. Health workers are being trained and essential supplies delivered – including ventilators, tests, reagents and personal

protective items for health workers. Massive amounts of COVID-19 supplies are needed across the country, which is why we are asking everyone to give Yemen the highest priority in COVID-19 global supply chains.

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

The World Health Organization recently wrote to the Government of Yemen and Ansar Allah authorities in Sana'a to inform them that WHO must progressively reduce their activities due to lack of funding. The COVID-19 Rapid Response Teams that I just mentioned will shut down next month. Therapeutic feeding centres, which treat the most severely malnourished children, will close by August.

Amidst a pandemic, this is shocking. Preventing disease and feeding sick children are the kinds of programmes that everyone agrees should be protected at all costs. Other essential activities are also at risk. Of 41 major UN programmes, 31 will start closing down in the next few weeks if we can't secure additional funds. That means many more people are likely to die.

We are urgently appealing to donors to release funds now to sustain principled aid operations. Aid agencies estimate they will need up to \$2 billion to cover essential activities from June through December.

These requirements reflect a tightly prioritized response strategy that will be published later this month. The strategy is based on painstaking work that agencies have done over the last few months to ensure manageable levels of risk in a country where millions of people are acutely vulnerable and need help.

On 2 June, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Nations will host a virtual pledging conference. This event offers an important opportunity to show civilians that the international community will not abandon them while they still urgently need help.

Donors have started to signal support, including a large pledge by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and an announcement of lifeline funding from the United States. But pledges remain far below what is required, and most still have not been paid. By themselves, pledges cannot save lives.

We are calling on all donors to pledge generously and pay quickly – ideally before the 2 June event. We realize aid budgets are shrinking everywhere and greatly appreciate donors' support.

Mr. President, the fourth issue is the economy.

Yemen imports almost everything. For the last several months, commercial food imports through Hudaydah and Saleef have been falling. In April, they totalled just 195,000 metric tons – one of the lowest figures to date. Fuel imports rose considerably in the same period, likely due to lower oil prices.

Imports must be paid for in hard currency. A weak Yemeni rial – about 600 rial to the US dollar in the north and 690 in the south – means fewer people can afford the basic goods they need to

survive. The current exchange rate is three times higher than before the crisis and is severely limiting the Government's ability to finance imports or pay for public services.

COVID-19 is poised to make these dynamics even worse. Remittances from abroad – the largest source of foreign exchange in Yemen – are falling, though it is difficult to quantify by how much. Yemenis who still have jobs at home often depend on day labour. These workers need daily wages to feed their families, and many will be ill equipped to restrict movements or comply with similar COVID regulations.

We need bold action to stabilize the economy and soften the blow of measures that may be necessary to protect public health. This support should include regular foreign exchange injections and steps to quickly increase quantities of affordable food and other goods in markets across the country. As much as possible, Yemeni migrants should be allowed to continue working abroad.

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

Peace is the best chance Yemen has to contain COVID-19, and we hope the parties will work with the Special Envoy to make it a reality.

This is essential not just for public health, but for the sake of millions of Yemenis who, even before this pandemic, were exhausted after five years of a war they never wanted.

Thank you.