

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
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Briefing to the Security Council on the SAFER tanker in Yemen

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Thank you very much, Mr. President.

I have briefed you fifteen times over the last fifteen months on the SAFER tanker.

Most of those fifteen briefings have repeated the same information. With little concrete progress there was little new to say until quite recently.

But in May, a leak of the SAFER brought us closer than ever to an environmental catastrophe Inger has just described. Last week, Ansar Allah authorities confirmed in writing they would accept a long-planned UN mission to the tanker, which we hope will take place within the next few weeks.

We understand that Member States are working to finalize funding to pay for the UN mission, which in the first phase will include a technical assessment and any initial repairs that prove possible. Member States have also been helpful in using their good offices to advocate in favour of this work.

So this is a good moment to recap where we are with the SAFER and where, we hope, we are going. There are four issues I'd like to update you on today:

first, the recent leak onboard;

second, what a major spill would mean for local communities;

third, what we have been doing about it;

and fourth, what will happen next.

Let's start with the incident beginning on 27 May, when seawater began leaking into the SAFER engine room. It is difficult to know precisely what caused this leak, as no maintenance has been carried out on the SAFER, and there have been no international visits to it, since the conflict in Yemen escalated nearly six years ago.

Water coming uncontrollably into the engine room could destabilize the SAFER and potentially sink the entire structure. That would almost certainly lead to a severe oil spill. As Inger just said, the SAFER is carrying 1.1 million barrels of oil. That's about four times as much oil as was discharged in the Exxon Valdez disaster – a spill the world still talks about thirty years later.

Fortunately, the engine room leak was relatively small, and divers from the SAFER corporation were able to contain it. This dangerous work took five days, with divers spending a cumulative 28 hours under water. The world, Mr. President, owes them a debt of gratitude, and I want to commend them for their work.

But the fix they applied is only temporary, and it is impossible to say how long it might hold. The world might have a bit more time to solve the larger problem – but not much.

This brings me to my second point: the impact of a spill. Inger just described the appalling environmental consequences for Yemen and its neighbours.

A spill would also be bad news for the Yemeni people – millions of whom already depend on humanitarian aid after nearly six years of war and now, an unprecedented pandemic.

Inger described the modelling experts have done on what a major spill might look like depending on seasonal conditions and other factors. In every scenario, coastal communities would be severely affected in Taizz, in Hudaydah and in Hajjah – mostly in areas controlled by Ansar Allah authorities.

If a spill were to occur in the next two months, experts project that 1.6 million Yemenis would be directly affected. Essentially every fishing community along Yemen's west coast would see their livelihoods collapse and would suffer substantial economic losses. About 90 per cent of people in these communities already need humanitarian assistance.

Sea currents and seasonal conditions also mean much of the oil would likely remain near Yemen's coast rather than dispersing widely. As a result, again as Inger mentioned, the port in Hudaydah could be forced to close for a period of weeks or even months.

As you know, Yemen imports nearly everything, and most imports come through Hudaydah or the port at nearby Saleef. Losing either of these ports for an extended period would destabilize critical commercial and aid imports of food and other essential commodities. That has the potential to inflict terrible additional suffering on millions of Yemenis – including people who are already going hungry in Sana'a, Sa'ada, Ibb and other places located away from coastal areas.

This would also deliver another severe blow to Yemen's already embattled economy. The resulting disruption would substantially accelerate recent trends that are already – once again – pushing the country towards famine.

International maritime routes and neighbouring states would also be affected.

So I want to be clear that the risk from the SAFER is by no means strictly environmental, dreadful though the environmental impact would be. It is also a direct and severe threat to the well-being – and potentially the survival – of millions of Yemenis. We are deeply concerned about these people, and we want to do everything we can to avoid this new blow falling upon them

Mr. President, that brings me to my next point – the role of the United Nations. The Government of Yemen and the Ansar Allah authorities formally requested UN assistance with the SAFER in March 2018 – more than two years ago. The first step was to be a technical assessment, in order to provide impartial evidence to guide next steps – which might potentially include the safe extraction of the oil and removal of the SAFER structure, were the parties to agree to that.

For much of 2018, a Coalition-backed military offensive in Hudaydah made it too dangerous to visit the site. But with the Stockholm Agreement in December of that year and the subsequent ceasefire in Hudaydah, safe access again became possible. Since then, the United Nations has been working closely with the parties to secure the necessary clearances so the UN technical team can deploy.

The Government of Yemen has agreed to the assessment and has actively sought to facilitate access to the SAFER. The Ansar Allah authorities have also consistently agreed – in principle. In fact, authorities in Sana'a have sent several letters to the United Nations and to the Security Council confirming their agreement. They have also made public statements to this effect.

But in the past, the Ansar Allah authorities have been unwilling to accept a mission in practice. Instead, they imposed preconditions and linked the SAFER with other issues.

I have provided you, in my previous fifteen briefings, with a running commentary on this protracted bureaucratic minuet, of permissions to visit being sought, apparently being granted and then turning out in fact not to have been granted.

The most frequent demand from the Ansar Allah authorities has been to deploy the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism to Hudaydah prior to any assessment of the SAFER. This is a completely unrelated issue to that of the tanker.

I want to emphasize here that from a humanitarian perspective, we do not take a position on where UNVIM is deployed. That is a political issue, and is subject to agreement by the parties. My only objective – with the SAFER, UNVIM and indeed all of our work – is to alleviate suffering and prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.

Ansar Allah authorities have also sought assurances that repair works will occur simultaneously with the assessment. We would like to do that and so have adjusted the mission plan to include both a technical assessment and whatever initial repairs might be feasible. Obviously, though, you have to find out what the problem is before you can fix it, and you can't do either without visiting.

Initial repairs, in so far as they may be possible, may buy us a little more time to find a sustainable solution, but they won't be enough to eliminate the risk of a disaster. The assessment results could provide an impartial analysis of what needs to happen next and what kind of equipment and other resources will be required.

Without prejudging the outcome of the assessment, industry experts have told us we should expect additional repairs to be necessary. But for the reason I have just given about initial repairs, they do not know exactly what those required additional repairs will be. Experts have also said, and Inger has mentioned too, that extracting the oil is probably the only way to remove the threat of a spill from the 44-year-old tanker for good.

This brings me to my last point, Mr. President: where do we go from here?

Last week, we received encouraging news. Ansar Allah officials confirmed to the United Nations in writing that they are ready to authorize the UN mission to the SAFER. They have also communicated their intention to issue entry permits for mission personnel. I welcome this announcement.

We have, of course, been here before. In August 2019, we received similar assurances and, on that basis, deployed the UN team and equipment to Djibouti at significant expense. The Ansar Allah authorities cancelled that mission the night before departure.

But it is not too late, and we remain ready to assist. The UN team can deploy within three weeks of receiving all the necessary permits. We are in touch with the Government of Yemen for their approvals. Yesterday, we also submitted an official request to the Ansar Allah authorities, which includes details on the mission plan, the personnel and the technical equipment. We hope these requests and other logistical arrangements will be quickly approved, without preconditions.

The Ansar Allah authorities have an important opportunity here to take steps that will spare millions of their fellow citizens from yet another tragedy.

We are keen to work with them to do that

Thank you.