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As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen has never been worse. I want to be clear on that point.

Famine is again on the horizon. Conflict is again escalating. The economy is again in tatters. Humanitarian agencies are again nearly broke.

And then the new problems. COVID-19 is spreading out of control.

And we have the sorry saga of the Safer tanker.

I promised when I briefed you the week before last that I would update you on the Safer today.

There has been no progress.

As I told you last time, the thing that worries me most about the Safer is that if it explodes or leaks, the oil spilled could, the technical experts have told us, put the ports of Hudaydah and Saleef out of action for weeks – or even months.

Some of you will remember that in late 2017, and again in late 2018, I warned that the coalition blockade and then their mooted attack on Hudaydah was likely to plunge Yemen into famine. Those warnings were heeded. The worst was avoided.

It would then be the unhappiest of ironies if the failure of Ansar Allah to allow us to deal with the tanker were to be the cause of the loss of the ports. The consequences would be just as I warned in 2017 and 2018. I hope wiser counsels will prevail.

The rhetoric on Yemen is often reassuring, and the actions relentlessly ruinous.

I will brief you today on five issues: protection of civilians, humanitarian access, funding, the economy and progress towards peace.

With respect to the protection of civilians, hostilities are intensifying across the country. There are now 43 active front lines in Yemen – compared to 33 in January.

The number of conflict incidents causing civilian harm increased in the second quarter of the year – for the third quarter in a row.

On 15 June, at least 12 civilians were killed in an attack on a vehicle in Sa’ada. On 12 July, an attack killed nine civilians in Hajjah. Three days later, another attack killed 11 civilians in Al Jawf. Available information indicates these attacks were all air strikes.

I am particularly concerned at escalating hostilities in Marib, including recent shelling incidents. Nearly 1 million displaced people are sheltering in and around Marib city. If there is an assault on the city, we will almost certainly see waves of already vulnerable people flee the area.

I call on the parties to do everything possible to de-escalate the violence now, both in Marib and across the country. Yemenis need a nationwide ceasefire.

Second, Mr. President, humanitarian access.

Overall, efforts to improve the operating environment in the north, where we have had most problems, are progressing. Of course, there is more to be done. In the coming weeks, we will work with everyone to build on the good practices we’ve seen recently on approving project agreements and other issues.

We also want to see the long-planned World Food Programme pilot begin for biometric registration of food aid recipients. After delaying for several weeks, the Coalition has now agreed that the technical equipment can be shipped to Yemen, which is welcome. I urge the Ansar Allah authorities to move quickly to implement the pilot.

Meanwhile, in the south, we continue to have serious concerns, with an uptick in violent incidents targeting humanitarian assets, and local authorities adding new bureaucratic requirements for aid agencies.

Mr. President, my third point is funding for the aid operation, which is, frankly, on the verge of collapse. We have already seen severe cuts to many of our most essential activities.

We used to provide food to 13 million hungry people every month in Yemen. Because of funding cuts, only 5 million of these people are still getting full rations. Eight million have had their rations cut in half. Similar cuts are affecting millions of people who rely on aid for water, healthcare and other needs.

Aid organizations have so far received about 18 per cent of what we need for this year's humanitarian response plan.

What had in recent years been one of the better funded humanitarian operations around the world is now one of the most underfunded.

In August, that will mean a 50 per cent cut to water and sanitation programmes in 15 cities around the country. We will also have to stop hygiene activities for people who recently fled their homes.

In September, nearly 400 health facilities – including 189 hospitals – will lose supplies of clean water and essential medicines. That could cut off health care for 9 million people.

Also in September, we will run out of money to treat more than a quarter of a million children who are suffering from severe malnutrition. Without treatment, those children will die.

It is not difficult to predict the effects of less food, less water and less healthcare in Yemen. Without more funding, we should all expect large increases in hunger, malnutrition, cholera, COVID-19 – and, above all, death.

We should expect many more people to die.

And just as we are cutting programmes, demands for assistance are set to increase sharply. Last week, a new food security survey was released covering 133 districts controlled by the Government of Yemen.

About 40 per cent of people in these areas are now estimated to be highly food insecure – an increase from 25 per cent at the start of the year.

Sixteen districts are now categorized as “Phase 4”, which is one step away from famine conditions. At the beginning of the year, just two districts had been rated as “Phase 4”.

In the coming weeks, we will have results from a similar assessment in Ansar Allah-controlled areas, where funding cuts required significant reductions in food aid this year.

So again, I implore donors to pay their pledges immediately. I am grateful to the United States, Germany, Japan and the European Commission. They are the largest contributors, according to the tracking service my office runs, of the money we have received so far.

I urge those with undisbursed pledges to pay now. There is no time to lose.

I also call on Yemen’s neighbours in the Gulf to increase their support. The sharp drop in pledges and payments from Gulf countries this year is the main reason the resource gap remains so large.

Mr. President, my fourth point is Yemen’s economy, which is in free fall.

When the risk of famine was greatest in late 2018, the exchange rate had fallen to 800 Yemeni rial to the US dollar. On its current trajectory, economists predict the value of the rial will drop to 1,000 to the dollar in the coming months. Already in some areas, the rate has been well above 700 rial for weeks.

The exchange rate is one of the major determinants of the price of food and other commodities – nearly all of which are imported. In other words, as the rial collapses, fewer people will eat.

One solution is for the Government to finance commercial imports. But the Government has run out of foreign exchange. A deposit by Saudi Arabia in the Central Bank is nearly depleted, and oil revenue – a major source of Government income – has collapsed.

Yemen needs regular foreign exchange injections to help stabilize the rial, underwrite essential imports and pay salaries. When Saudi Arabia did this in the past, it was very effective.

Fuel is another key determinant of basic commodity prices. Fuel is needed to distribute goods around the country, pump drinking water and power basic services. In June, only 8,100 metric tons of commercial fuel imports reached Hudaydah – by far the lowest amount ever recorded.

As a result, drinking water prices have increased, in some cases more than doubling within a few weeks. Aid agencies are increasingly affected, with some reporting they can no longer travel to communities to deliver assistance because there is no fuel. As we know, famine is stalking the country again, and the fuel shortages are also behind sharply escalating food prices.

On top of these challenges, many Yemenis are losing any remaining income at an alarming rate. COVID-19 has cut into remittances – long the country's invisible life-line – by as much as 70 per cent. A recent survey found that about half of families have lost at least 50 per cent of their income since April.

Mr. President, my fifth point is progress towards peace. You've just heard from Martin on the political process. With adequate funding, humanitarian agencies can address the most immediate needs in Yemen and prevent a renewed slide towards famine.

This would spare millions of people from needless suffering, which would in turn help to create more space for the political process.

The choice before the world is the same as last month: help Yemen now, or watch the country fall into the abyss.

Thank you.