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Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Yemen

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As delivered

Thank you very much, Mr. President. Let me, like Martin, start by wishing everyone an Eid Mubarak.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen – complementing what Martin has just said on the political situation – is trapped also in a relentless downward spiral.

Famine is still stalking the country, with 5 million people just a step away from starving.

COVID-19 is still surging, pushing the health-care system to collapse.

And the war continues unabated, as Martin has described practically just now, making everything else much worse.

Famine, disease and other miseries are not simply “happening” in Yemen. The war is imposing them. As long as the war continues, they will keep getting worse.

That’s why it is so important to stop the fighting.

In the meantime, aid agencies continue to do their best to mitigate the worst suffering.

I will give you my update on the usual five points.

Firstly, the protection of civilians, which is a requirement under international humanitarian law, as we tell you all the time.

In February, just as the world was renewing diplomatic efforts to end the war, Ansar Allah – as Martin has just described – launched an offensive again in Marib. The subsequent hostilities – including shelling, air strikes by the Government of Yemen and its supporters, and missiles – have had an impact on civilians already. And Martin talked about that too. I just wanted to say here that the risks ahead are much, much bigger.

Twenty-five thousand people have fled the fighting so far. But if the fighting doesn't stop, aid agencies fear up to 385,000 people could be displaced in the coming months.

And the fighting in Marib has also fuelled escalations in other places, including Hajjah, Hudaydah and Taizz, and those, too, are harming civilians.

With millions of people on the brink of starvation and COVID sweeping the country, more violence is the last thing Yemen needs. What we need right now is a nationwide ceasefire.

Secondly, on humanitarian access, I expressed my concern to you last month over new regulations issued by local authorities on the Red Sea coast. Those regulations had stalled aid delivery for about half a million people.

They have now been suspended until the end of the year. That is a promising step, and we look forward to them being cancelled altogether.

In the north, we are working with Ansar Allah to sustain the progress we have seen over the last year on issues like biometric registration, assessments and project approvals.

But we also continue to see challenges on other issues, including delays in cargo movements and attempts to interfere with agencies' programme management. These kinds of actions make it harder for aid agencies to help people in Ansar Allah-controlled areas.

We will keep working to address these issues. Providing a needs-based, principled response across Yemen remains a priority for agencies and donors alike.

I don't have significant progress to report this week on the Safer oil tanker. We have recently heard some positive assurances, but we don't yet still have the official confirmations we need to move ahead. And that makes planning very difficult, obviously. Let me just remind everybody that donor funds, which are necessary for the UN assessment project, are also going to start soon to run out.

Next point, Mr. President, is on funding for the aid operation.

I want to emphasize, firstly, that aid agencies are racing to address the most severe needs across the country.

We are racing to stop famine. Last month, agencies provided emergency food assistance to nearly 9 million people.

We are also racing to stop COVID. A vaccination drive has started in Government areas. So far, 19,000 doses have been delivered. That's obviously a very small beginning, but the rates are expected to accelerate after the Eid holiday. But I do have to say that a lot more vaccine is needed for Yemen, as for so many other countries.

We are also racing to help people in Marib and other areas affected by the conflict. We do now have weekly UN humanitarian flights to Marib, and aid agencies are expanding their programmes there now. And we have helped thousands of families.

But we are also, Mr. President, racing towards a fiscal cliff.

The UN response plan is currently 34 per cent funded.

That's a bit more than last month, mostly due to payments coming through that have to be spent in the next few months. But after that, the world's largest aid operation will start to run out of money.

By September, food aid could be cut back, again, for 6 million people. There will also be cuts to water and sanitation, as well as cuts to activities to combat COVID.

On 1 June, senior officials from a number of Member States – donor States primarily – are going to meet to take stock of the situation in Yemen, including the humanitarian operating environment and what can be done to reduce people's suffering.

And a major part of the discussion is going to be on ensuring the aid operation doesn't run out of money later in the year. Because several key donors have drastically cut their support, underfunding is, by far, the biggest threat. So again, I call on all donors to increase their support back to where it was in 2019.

The fourth issue, Mr. President, is the economic situation, which exacerbates the danger of famine. There are two immediate things that can help with this.

Firstly, strengthening the currency. The Yemeni rial is still trading near record lows.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia recently announced that they will provide oil derivatives worth some US\$422 million to the Government of Yemen over the coming year. And that is welcome, because it should help relieve pressure on Yemen's foreign reserves. The first shipments under that initiative, I understand, arrived in Aden on Saturday.

The second immediate step that would help the economy is to ensure that Yemen has a stable and adequate flow of commercial imports through all the ports. You in the Security Council have for a long time emphasized the importance of that.

Unfortunately, commercial fuel imports through Hudaydah have plummeted this year. Between January and April, only about 200,000 metric tons of fuel entered Hudaydah. That's about a third of normal volumes, so two thirds down.

Fuel also enters Yemen through other ports and over land, but getting it to major population centres in the north through those other routes is way more complicated and more expensive, so fewer people can afford it. And that means that Hudaydah really is of fundamental importance.

Right now, six vessels – all of which have been cleared by the UN’s inspection mechanism – are waiting outside Hudaydah for permission from the Government to dock. Those vessels are carrying about 150,000 metric tons of fuel. And on average, they’ve been sitting outside the port waiting to dock for more than 100 days.

The Government has been reluctant to allow commercial fuel vessels to enter Hudaydah because of a long-running dispute with Ansar Allah over the import revenue they generate.

The parties really do have to find a solution to this dispute. Until they do, Yemen will continue to see cycles of fuel shortages that push up prices of food and water and everything else, while cutting into basic services.

Mr. President, lastly, let me emphasize again the thrust of Martin’s message on the need for peace.

For months – actually, for years – we – and I in particular – have been calling for a nationwide ceasefire. It’s the war that is ultimately behind the risk of famine, behind the spread of disease, and behind the economic collapse.

I strongly support everything Martin has just said, including his concern over the lack of concrete political progress despite all the recent engagements and support from the international community.

Martin is also totally right that the measures on the table – including a ceasefire, opening the ports and opening Sana’a airport – would go a long way towards alleviating people’s suffering.

They could also set Yemen, finally, on a path towards a more sustainable peace. And peace, as we have told you more times than we or you can remember, is the only way to resolve this crisis.

Thank you very much.