



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, MARK LOWCOCK**

Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Yemen

New York, 14 January 2021

As delivered

Thank you very much, Mr. President. Shukran.

The most urgent priority in Yemen right now Mr. President is to prevent a massive famine.

The data show that 16 million people will go hungry this year. Already, about 50,000 people are essentially starving to death in what is essentially a small famine. Another 5 million are just one step behind them.

Every decision the world makes right now must take this into account.

On Sunday, the United States announced it will designate Ansar Allah as a specially designated terrorist entity and foreign terrorist organization (or FTO) under US domestic law.

For months, aid agencies have unanimously opposed this designation. They believe it will accelerate Yemen's slide into a large-scale famine.

The reasons agencies believe that are not well enough understood in some quarters, so I am going to use most of my time today explaining them.

Many of you will recall that I told the Security Council last month that Yemen imports 90 per cent of its food. Nearly all that food is brought in through commercial channels. Aid agencies give people vouchers or cash to buy commercially imported food in the market. Aid agencies cannot – they simply cannot - replace the commercial import system.

What this means is that what the commercial importers do is the single biggest determinant of life and death in Yemen.

I also told the Council last month that we had been talking to the commercial traders and asking them what impact the mooted US designation, as it was then, would have on them. They told us

– and I told you – that they were not sure they would be able to continue importing food into Yemen in those circumstances.

They thought the suppliers, bankers, shippers and insurers they do business with could decline to do business with them if the designation proceeded.

You and I may think that the suppliers, bankers, insurers and shippers should behave differently. That does not matter. What matters is what they decide to do.

So we went back to the commercial traders over the last few days to ask what they now think, given that the designation has now happened.

Already, Yemenis are crowding into markets and shops to stockpile whatever they can afford. Families are terrified that no more food or other supplies will make it into the country.

The Yemeni companies who bring in most of the food are using words like “disaster”, “havoc”, and “unimaginable” when they describe to us what they fear is coming.

For years, these companies have been moving mountains to sustain their very risk-averse global supply chains – including the suppliers, banks, insurers and shipping lines.

Some suppliers, banks, insurers and shippers are ringing up their Yemeni partners and saying they now plan to walk away from Yemen altogether. They say the risks are too high. They fear being accidentally or otherwise caught up in US regulatory action which would put them out of business or into jail.

Some of the Yemeni traders’ suppliers, bankers, shippers and insurers are saying they are hoping they can keep going. If they can, they say, their best-case estimate is that costs could go up by 400 per cent. That will make it too expensive for many importers to keep doing business. And in any case, hardly anyone in Yemen could afford to buy food brought in at those prices.

The United States has said it will introduce licences so that some humanitarian aid and imports can continue.

Would that help? Well, first, those licences do not yet exist. Aid agencies have no confirmed details on how they will work or what activities will be eligible. The details apparently won’t be ready until the day that the designation takes force, on 19 January.

But second, licences and exemptions for humanitarian agencies will not solve the problem. As I have said, it is not humanitarian agencies who are importing most of the food.

Mr. President, this is not the only problem we face. You’ve heard me explain many times what is needed to prevent famine in Yemen: protection of civilians, access for aid workers, funding for the aid operation, support for the economy and peace.

Let’s start with protection of civilians. I condemn in the strongest possible terms the attack on Aden airport that Martin just described. More than twenty people died – including three humanitarian workers. Dozens more people were injured.

Humanitarian access problems in Government-held areas have become worse in the last few months. Recent incidents include warehouse break-ins, detention of aid workers, seizure of relief items and attacks on humanitarian premises. The trend is worrying.

But the most severe challenges to rapid and unimpeded access remain in the north. I have no good news on that to report this month.

And I don't on funding for the aid operation either.

Humanitarian crises need continuous funding until the emergency is over. Past contributions to the aid operation in Yemen saved millions of lives. But those past contributions will not save a single life tomorrow or the next day. That money has already been spent.

In 2020, we received \$1.7 billion for the UN response plan. About half of what we needed. And less than half of what we got the year before. As you know, most of the reduction was because Gulf donors gave much less last year.

The aid operation used to help 13.5 million people every month. Now we're helping just over 9 million. Less money means stopping key programmes, including food aid. David will tell you what is going to happen next.

The 2021 response plan will be released next month. It will be similar to the 2020 plan – probably around \$3.4 billion. We call on donors to pledge generously and to disburse funds quickly.

On the economy, beyond what I have said already let me just repeat that Yemen needs regular foreign-exchange injections to stabilize the currency, finance critical import flows and lower prices in local markets. This worked well in the past, and it could work again.

On progress towards peace, I have nothing to add to what Martin has said.

Mr. President

Let me, for the avoidance of doubt, summarize my main message today.

I am not questioning the intent of the US invocation of the FTO designation. I am answering three questions.

First, what is the likely humanitarian impact? The answer is a large-scale famine on a scale that we have not seen for nearly forty years.

Second, would licences and exemptions for aid agencies prevent that? The answer is no.

Third, well, what would prevent it? A reversal of the decision.

And, of course, action on all the other issues we brief you on every month. Thank you Mr. President.