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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, 18 February 2021*

*As delivered*

Thank you very much, Madam President.

Yemen is speeding towards the worst famine the world has seen in decades.

New data released last week confirm, yet again, that we are running out of time.

Malnutrition rates are at record highs. Something like 400,000 children under the age of 5 are severely malnourished across the country. Those children are in their last weeks and months.

These are the children with distended bellies, emaciated limbs and blank stares – they are starving to death.

Across Yemen, more than 16 million people are going hungry – including 5 million who are just one step away from famine.

That is why, last month, I said every decision the world makes right now must address the risk of famine. That applied particularly to the parties in Yemen.

Last week, the United States reversed its designation of Ansar Allah as a foreign terrorist organization and specially designated global terrorist entity under US domestic law.

The US was concerned about the devastating impact the designation could have on Yemen's food supply at an exceptionally dangerous time.

We have, as you know, as Martin just mentioned, welcome the US decision. US officials have made clear, and we agree, that the concerns around this issue are strictly humanitarian.

The US has also reaffirmed it intends to prioritize diplomacy to end the war in Yemen as well as dealing with the humanitarian crisis. Like Martin, I welcome Tim Lenderking appointment. Many other countries, including Coalition countries, have welcomed the new US initiative.

So, Madam President, there is an important opportunity right now to help Yemen move towards lasting peace in a way Martin just described. That opportunity will disappear, will be wasted if Yemen tips into a massive famine.

To stop that happening, we urgently need action on five points: 1) protection of civilians; 2) humanitarian access; 3) funding for the aid operation; 4) support for the economy; and 5) progress towards peace.

First, **protection of civilians**.

I share Martin's sadness and disappointment on what is happening now in Marib. Ten days ago, Ansar Allah forces launched a major offensive. Fighting, shelling and air strikes have been some of the heaviest of the war. It is hard to believe given what we have seen since 2015, but this is the case.

Front lines are reportedly moving closer to civilian areas. At least four missiles landed in Marib city in the last ten days – seemingly fired indiscriminately. Those attacks killed at least three civilians. Missiles have also landed around camps for displaced people. Thousands are already fleeing.

Until recently, Marib had been relatively safe. Since 2015, something like a 1 million people have fled there to get away from the war in other areas. Many of these people have fled multiple times.

So this escalation is extremely dangerous. It threatens to send hundreds of thousands of people again running for their lives at a time when everyone should be doing everything possible to stop famine.

Madam President, international humanitarian law requires the parties to facilitate rapid, unimpeded **humanitarian access**, which is my second point.

As you know, we have told you many times, delivering aid in Yemen is much harder than it should be.

In the south, challenges mainly include delays in signing project agreements or releasing equipment. Those challenges limit the ability of aid agencies to expand their operations in the south. We continue to have constructive discussions to resolve those problems, but I wish we didn't need those discussions. I wish we didn't have the problems in the first place.

In the north, the problems remain more severe. Ansar Allah authorities regularly delay routine processes. They regularly attempt to interfere with aid delivery and they regularly harass aid agencies and staff. This is unacceptable.

I want though again to emphasise that despite all these problems, the aid operation is still delivering. Last year, aid agencies helped more than 10 million people a month, working in every one of Yemen's 333 districts. What they did, they doffed the famine last year. It is no small feat to achieve what brave aid workers made, most of them Yemenis, continue to do.

On the SAFER tanker issue, Ansar Allah authorities recently announced plans to “review” their approval for the long-planned mission and advised the United Nations to pause some preparations. They have now dropped this review. Unfortunately, we only heard that they dropped the review after a key deadline had passed to deploy the team in March.

It is now difficult to say when exactly the mission might go. Ansar Allah have recently made several new requests that the UN can’t meet. Mission preparations can’t be finalized until these issues are also resolved.

I want to emphasise that the UN remains eager to help solve this problem. We think it poses a clear and present danger to everybody across the country.

Madam President, my next point is **funding for the aid operation**.

In 2020, the aid operation received in funding about \$1.9 billion, that’s half of what we needed and half of what we got the previous year. And as a result, as you know as we have told you many times, we have to close lots of the programmes that millions of people need.

Because there is no money, many hungry families in the north are getting only half as much food aid as they should. We have closed lots of facilities providing water, sanitation and health services. Many more are under threat of closure because agencies can’t afford to continue the support that keeps them running.

More money for the aid operation is of course the fastest, most efficient way to support famine prevention and other relief efforts right now.

Two years ago we stopped the famine largely because of a surge in funding – mostly from the Gulf countries.

With enough money, aid agencies can do the same thing again.

The UN response plan this year will need about \$4 billion. That’s roughly what we asked for in 2019, which was the last time our assessments confirmed famine-like conditions in Yemen. Donors met nearly 90 per cent of funding requirements. As a result, there was no famine.

On 1 March, the Secretary-General will convene a virtual high-level pledging event for the Yemen crisis. It will be co-hosted by Sweden and Switzerland to whom I extend my thanks.

This event is a chance for countries to show their commitment to the Yemeni people. It’s also a chance for everyone to show they are serious about seizing the opportunity for peace. As I said, the world will have wasted the current opportunity for peace if a massive famine is allowed to take hold.

So we call on all donors to pledge generously at – or even better, before – the 1 March event and to disburse funds right away.

Madam President, the fourth issue is the **economy**.

After years of conflict, the size of Yemen's economy has shrunk by more than a half. Salaries, jobs and livelihoods have all become scarce. COVID-19 has depressed remittances flows from abroad that millions of people were relying on, as well of course having a heavy toll on Yemen.

Because Yemen imports nearly everything, the exchange rate is a major factor in what people can buy. Today, the rial is trading about 890 to the US dollar in the south – that means the rial is worth about a quarter as it was before the war began. In the north, the rate is about three times higher than pre-conflict levels. In other ways, the rial is worth a third as it was before the conflict.

What that means is that people who still have an income are finding their money buys much less.

The quickest way again to help people who have income in Yemen to afford food again is to bring down the exchange rate to more sustainable levels. And the way it was done before is through the provision of foreign-exchange injections. And if they managed properly, they could do the same again.

So I call on Yemen's partners to work urgently with the Government to devise a workable programme for foreign-exchange injections, which includes the necessary safeguards or oversight mechanisms. Foreign-exchange injections will also by the way allow the payment of some of the delayed salaries of key workers. Another point that Martin rightly emphasized.

We also need to see steps to ensure essential commodities can reach the country through all ports.

I want to reiterate what Martin said about the situation of fuel imports. They remain near record lows. And that is the result of a months-long dispute between the parties over import revenue. That dispute is contributing to serious fuel shortages, mainly in the north. Right now, 13 commercial fuel ships are just outside Hudaydah port. On average, they have been waiting 75 days for permission from the Government to berth.

And lastly, Madam President, **progress towards peace.**

As Martin said, I want to reiterate. There is an important opportunity right now to help Yemen move towards lasting peace. Preventing famine is essential to making that opportunity has a chance to be realized.

But there is more we can do. First, the violence must stop. Again, I reiterate and call on the parties to stop the dangerous escalation in Marib. I also strongly support Martin's efforts to mediate a nationwide ceasefire – not just in Marib, but across the country – and to resume the political process.

The only way to end the crisis in Yemen is to end the war.

Thank you.