



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
DEPUTY EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, URSULA MUELLER****Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Yemen - *As delivered***

New York, 20 August 2019

Thank you, Madam President.

Events in Yemen over the past several weeks have shown – yet again – just how volatile and devastating this war is. Its impact is seen most clearly in the suffering and injustice inflicted on millions of civilians.

For months, we have advocated progress on five key priorities to reduce the suffering in Yemen. The Security Council endorsed these priorities in your resolution 2451.

I would like to review where these five points stand today, specifically: First, respect for international humanitarian law; second, unhindered humanitarian access; third, funding for the United Nations response plan; fourth, the economy; and fifth, the urgent need for peace.

First, respect for international humanitarian law. Unfortunately, the conduct of hostilities in Yemen continues to have devastating consequences for civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Earlier this month, as we heard, fighting in Aden between Government forces and forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council killed or injured at least 300 people, including civilians.

For days, residents were trapped in their homes as clashes – including with heavy weapons – raged in densely populated neighbourhoods. Houses were damaged and destroyed. The pipes of a major water system were also damaged, temporarily restricting the water supply for 200,000 people.

Violence has since then subsided in Aden, although tensions remain. But fierce fighting continues elsewhere, including in Abyan last night.

Last week, strikes on a family home in Hajjah killed twelve civilians, including six children. Another 16 were wounded.

The week before, an attack on a market in Sa'ada killed and injured 40 people as they shopped for food and other necessities. Eighteen children were among the victims.

The images from these and similar incidents are the stuff of nightmares.

We urgently need de-escalation across Yemen – ideally through a nationwide ceasefire that will end all violence.

But ceasefire or not, all parties must uphold international humanitarian law. All feasible steps must be taken to avoid harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure. This includes verifying targets, taking precautions in the choice of weapons and cancelling an attack if it is expected to cause disproportionate civilian harm.

Madam President, the second point relates to humanitarian access.

Let me start with some good news. After months of discussion, the World Food Programme and Ansar Allah-affiliated authorities have now signed an agreement that includes detailed technical procedures to protect food aid from diversion. It will also strengthen methods to identify the people who need food assistance.

Delays in finalizing this agreement meant that WFP – as a last resort – had to suspend food assistance for 850,000 people in Sana'a city two months ago. These distributions are now re-starting.

Ansar Allah authorities have also approved plans for a UN assessment of the SAFER oil tanker, as mentioned by the special envoy. After years without maintenance, the tanker is at risk of rupturing. The SAFER is storing an estimated 1.1 million barrels of oil. A spill would create a major environmental and humanitarian disaster.

The UN assessment team arrived in Djibouti today and is scheduled to travel to the tanker next week. Cooperation and support from all stakeholders are key to this work.

But while we welcome these steps forward, we must also emphasize that many problems remain unresolved.

Humanitarian agencies continue to face severe restrictions. In the north, Ansar Allah-affiliated authorities have imposed more than 50 formal directives and dozens of informal directives in recent months. These directives at times overlap or contradict each other. They are further complicated by a continuous stream of unofficial changes and new policies. Currently, more than 100 humanitarian projects are awaiting agreement by Ansar Allah-affiliated authorities in the north.

In Government-controlled areas, official regulations are less heavy, but delays persist in getting humanitarian projects up and running.

Allow me to cite a specific example. Currently, the multi-donor Yemen Humanitarian Fund has 39 projects awaiting clearance. These projects are ready to assist 2.5 million people across the country with cholera programmes, emergency food, nutrition and protection services.

Thirty-two of the 39 projects are stuck with Ansar Allah-affiliated authorities in the north, while the rest are awaiting approval by the Government of Yemen. On average, they have been stalled for more than 90 days.

It is difficult to understand why such lengthy delays should be necessary in a severe emergency. International humanitarian law requires all parties to take steps to facilitate humanitarian relief for civilians in need.

Beyond bureaucratic impediments, agencies also continue to face movement restrictions, interference and harassment, as well as insecurity.

But despite these challenges, the United Nations and partners are staying and delivering.

As tensions rose in Aden in early August, the World Health Organization and UNICEF, working with health authorities, vaccinated nearly 400,000 people against cholera.

When clashes erupted the following week, more than 300 UN staff remained in Aden, and they are staying there. A regular UN flight also arrived in Aden yesterday, bringing in additional humanitarian workers.

Yemen remains the world's largest humanitarian operation, providing food, water, healthcare and other services across the country. Humanitarian agencies working through the United Nations response plan are assisting an average of 12 million people every month.

But much of this is about to stop.

This brings me to the third point: funding for the aid operation.

Since last month's briefing, there has been no major increase in funding for the 2019 response plan. Only 34 per cent of plan requirements have been met.

At this time last year, the Humanitarian Response Plan was 65 per cent funded – thanks to generous contributions from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as many other donors. This funding saved millions of lives.

Since the pledging conference six months ago, nearly all donors have paid most or all of their 2019 pledges. Some have paid even more. But the largest donors – Yemen's neighbours in the Coalition – have so far paid only a modest share of what they have promised.

Essential programmes are now closing down. You heard last month about vaccination campaigns, supplies for health facilities and cholera prevention programmes that had been cancelled. These cuts are now much deeper.

In the next few days, water and sanitation programmes will stop in four governorates, leaving 300,000 displaced people at extreme risk of cholera. By the end of September, WASH programmes for another 1 million people will also close.

In September, we will be forced to close life-saving programmes for 2.5 million malnourished children. Immediately, more than 23,000 babies suffering from severe malnutrition – babies whose lives we could otherwise have saved – will risk death.

This is a tragedy because we know that with adequate resources, we can save millions of lives and reduce people's suffering.

We know we can roll back cholera because we did it last year. A smart, highly effective cholera response saw new cases plummet from 1 million in 2017 to 380,000 in 2018. But this year, new cases have already exceeded half a million. We've also recorded more than 800 deaths. That means over five times as many as we saw in the same period last year.

We also know we can prevent famine because we're doing it right now. A new assessment found that the risk of famine – though still very serious – may be receding in some places. This comes after we doubled food aid in areas with the worst hunger and expanded other programmes. Without funding, we will lose this initial progress and the risk of famine will again intensify.

We also know that the United Nations and our partners are uniquely placed to deliver positive results. Our programmes reach all 333 districts across Yemen. Nationwide presence and relationships mean we are able to assist people in all locations based strictly on their needs.

Independent third-party monitoring confirms that the overwhelming majority of our aid goes where it is supposed to. When concerns emerge, we act. You saw this in June when WFP suspended food aid in Sana'a over diversion concerns, which have now been addressed.

Individual agencies also maintain rigorous internal controls.

This year, UN agencies have commissioned eight internal audits, and three more are planned.

Madam President,

The fourth point is the economy – a key driver of humanitarian needs that is getting worse. Yemen's currency is again losing value, sinking to 600 rial to the dollar – versus 215 rial before the crisis. A recent IMF report predicts further depreciation, with inflation rates up to 45 per cent.

This means prices of food, fuel and other essentials – almost all of which must be imported – will rise even higher for ordinary Yemenis. Many people already cannot afford current prices.

In the past, substantial injections of foreign exchange through the Central Bank have stabilized the exchange rate. We hope Yemen's partners will again provide this support.

At the same time, we understand the Government is considering new regulations on commercial fuel imports. Fuel is essential to run generators, distribute food to markets and many other activities. Its availability is also a key determinant for the prices of food, water and other essentials. Any mechanism to regulate these imports risks worsening the humanitarian situation.

Madam President,

The final point is peace. Only a political solution in Yemen can sustainably address the country's enormous humanitarian crisis. You recognized this important link in Security Council resolution 2451.

We call on all stakeholders to support the Special Envoy's efforts to end the conflict as swiftly as possible. Peace is needed now more than ever.

Thank you.