

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

Statement to the Security Council on Yemen
31 October 2016

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Mr. President,

There can be no humanitarian solution to the conflict in Yemen. There needs to be a political solution, beginning with an immediate cessation of hostilities. I echo the Special Envoy's call. All parties and all with influence over them must work towards peace. Each day that this war continues, it is civilians who suffer. Each day that the conflict drags on, we inexorably are propelled ever closer to an entire generation of Yemenis whose formative years are spent in the chaos of combat.

This humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen is a man-made disaster, where conflict has exacerbated and exponentially increased the suffering of the 50 per cent of the Yemeni population who already were in dire and extreme poverty. Repeatedly over the past 19 months, the people of Yemen have been robbed of their lives, their hope and their right to live in dignity. Thousands have been killed, tens of thousands have been injured, more than three million have been forced to leave their homes, and seven million suffer the daily anxiety of not knowing where their next meal might come from.

I have recently returned from Sana'a and Hudaydah and in my previous visit I reached Aden as well - I saw the desperation, fear, and resignation in the deep-sunken eyes of people I met who have lost all hope – either moved to anger or powerless despair.

In short, since my last briefing to the Council, the humanitarian situation has become worse and 80 per cent of Yemenis, 21.2 million people, are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian actors are being asked to fill the void left by the political power vacuum, but this is not a viable solution.

Mr. President,

All the parties are reminded that international humanitarian law is an obligation, not an option. Perpetrators on all sides must be held responsible for the legions of violations of International Humanitarian Law. This Council and its members also have responsibilities in this regard. I also stress the need for effective, independent investigations into allegations of war crimes and to prosecute suspects.

Since the collapse of the cessation of hostilities in August, Yemenis across the country, in areas controlled by various warring factions or none, have endured near-daily attacks on civilians, civilian institutions and public infrastructure. In August, the Saudi-led coalition bombed an MSF-supported health facility and school in Sa'ada, and the attack on the Grand Hall funeral gathering in Sana'a earlier this month, for which the Saudi-led coalition has taken responsibility, left at least 140 people dead and 550 injured. And, although there is no equivalence between those killing with airpower, available only to one side of the fight, and those on the other side killing with land-based weaponry, the Houthi/Saleh forces have indiscriminately shelled Taizz and other locations, as well as towns and installations inside Saudi Arabia, reportedly using ballistic missiles.

Humanitarian workers are also prevented from doing their work. Armed Houthi and Saleh forces routinely intimidate, delay and harass humanitarians, threatening the Yemenis' last lifeline with arrests and deportation, or demanding the diversion of humanitarian assistance to their fighters. These are all unacceptable breaches of humanitarian law and humanitarian principles.

Mr. President,

The drawn out nature of Yemen's conflict is having a devastating effect on public institutions, which are increasingly unable to provide basic social services. A quarter of the population depends on those employed on the public payroll. Yet paychecks are coming with less regularity and the ability to withdraw cash is disappearing amidst a liquidity crisis. This is a foreshadowing of the impending collapse of Yemen's economy, already desperately poor as well as hollowed out by corruption. The Central Bank has unilaterally been moved to Aden. Humanitarians do not have the capacity or the resources to provide services to a population of 26 million Yemenis. Our joint appeal is less than half funded.

The complete, permanent collapse of public institutions must be prevented. Whilst the primary duty lies with the Government of Yemen, the de facto Houthi authorities and the previous Saleh regime, I call upon anyone with any influence to heed this call, including ensuring that salaries of doctors and nurses and other critical civil servants to be paid.

Where the failure of public services is felt perhaps most acutely is the health sector: less than half of the rudimentary health facilities remain functional. Earlier this month, as I said, I visited Hudaydah held by Houthis/Saleh's forces. Hudaydah Governorate is the poorest in Yemen. I met with children and mothers, a few fathers and the desperately overworked doctors, nurses and carers at the paediatric centre at Al Thawra hospital, where the machines and lights frequently cut out due to shortages of generator fuel, and the medicine cabinets were empty. Easily treatable chronic illnesses are becoming death sentences. Yemenis, old and young, are dying every day because of the deprivation of basic goods and services. Since March 2015, 10,000 children under the age of five have perished from preventable diseases as a result of the sharp decline in the availability of immunizations and remedies for diarrhoea and pneumonia. Also at risk are migrants from the Horn of Africa and the more than 3 million internally displaced, nearly half of whom are children. They are particularly dependent on assistance and supplies getting in by port or air, neither of which is getting in at the moment, and are vulnerable

to the spread of disease.

Yemen is “one step away from famine”. I met an 18-year-old woman with her 3 year old baby, who was bedridden with severe malnutrition, making it difficult to eat; she is barely surviving on milk and tea. I met 8-year old children who looked like 2-year old toddlers due to severe malnutrition, and the resulting health complications. Imagine how many more children and teenagers are suffering and dying of hunger, who never make it to a hospital. As I learnt whilst in Yemen over 14 million are food insecure, 7 million are severely food insecure - they do not know where their next meal is coming from. Over two million people are malnourished nationwide, including 370,000 children who are severely malnourished.

On top of this already unthinkable suffering, cholera is rearing its ugly head. There are now 61 confirmed cases of cholera, with more than 1,700 more suspected cases in ten governorates. To date, the Ministry of Health has confirmed four cholera-related deaths and 42 deaths associated with acute watery diarrhoea. But the caseload is almost certainly much higher due to a lack of testing kits. The UN and partners are establishing 21 cholera treatment centers – but this is insufficient to stop the escalating spread.

Mr. President,

As before the conflict, the vast majority of the needs of the Yemeni people are met through commercial deliveries. The United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) is a unique first in such arrangements pulled together by OCHA and now run by UNOPS, I take the opportunity to call for the renewal of its mandate. Let us back something that is working. –UNVIM has cleared over 190 commercial vessels to successfully offload over three million metric tons of food, fuel and supplies at ports in Hudaydah, Ras Isa and Saleef since May. However, there are currently some 40 vessels waiting to offload some 1.4 million metric tons of cargo, including some 600,000 metric tons of food. Offloading cargo can take up to 30 days on average, because of inefficient port management, financial disputes between shippers, and above all slow offloading due to limited capacity at Hudaydah port, which was severely damaged by air strikes (albeit denied) in August 2015. These cranes need to be removed fast to make way for emergency mobile cranes. Profiteering from commercial imports in a country where 90 per cent of food must be imported is unacceptable in the face of a humanitarian disaster. Since February 2016, fuel imports have averaged a fifth of the pre-airstrikes levels.

The Coalition and the local port authorities need to ensure rapid and safe access for cleared vessels to reach the ports, especially Hudaydah port. I also call on donors to support the rehabilitation of the damaged port infrastructure in Hudaydah – the lifeline of the country. The United Nations is trying to accelerate the procurement of mobile cranes to dramatically increase the port’s capacity, but this is a short-term solution at best.

In the same vein, I echo the calls for the Coalition and the Government of Yemen to immediately resume commercial flights to and from Sana’a. Saudi Arabia controls the airspace over Yemen generally and Sana’a in particular. It is within their power, their choice to permit this. Since Yemenis stopped flying into Sana’a, thousands of Yemenis are stranded, including students who need to pursue their studies abroad and patients who need medical care not

available in Yemen today. Many lives could be saved if only they could travel freely to obtain that medical treatment. For instance, the United Nations worked tirelessly to organize life-saving evacuations via the air of wounded civilians from the 8 October attack on the Great Hall. The Iranians and quickly thereafter KSA also offered to assist with evacuations. Yet politics, bureaucratic impediments and other obstacles prevented us doing so. Clearly the people of Yemen cannot be asked to depend upon such improvisations in order to receive essential medical care. We commend Oman, which was able to evacuate more than 100 people for medical treatment, but a second evacuation couldn't be arranged in time before the ceasefire ended.

Mr. President,

Since I last briefed the Council, humanitarian partners were reaching 3.5 million every month between January and July, now they are reaching 4.6 million per month – despite all challenges. There has been a steady increase in deliveries to people in need across the country, and an additional million people are now being reached with food aid every month, with more than 4 million Yemenis receiving food aid each day. Partners have provided essential health services through fixed and mobile teams, including both trauma and secondary healthcare; and provided medicines/supplies to health facilities which serve millions.

The United Nations, under the strong leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator, together with our humanitarian partners, stand ready to do more, if only the humanitarian access constraints could be eased and we had more financial support. But this requires coordination with the Coalition, the myriad of local actors at the central level in Sana'a, and other parties to the conflict. Bureaucratic impediments in Yemen were already a problem before the current conflict began, and have since then grown more complex. The UN continues to negotiate access with all relevant actors, including the authorities in Sana'a.

Mr. President,

This man-made brutal humanitarian disaster is now the catastrophe which I said was “looming” in my first briefing to this Council 18 months ago. The conflict has gone on for too long. It is high time the parties put the Yemeni people first and reached a peaceful agreement in order to salvage what is left of the infrastructure, economy, and social services of the country, and most importantly to address the aspirations of the Yemeni people to live in a peaceful society. If disregarded, the collapse of the country will have menacing consequences not only for the Yemeni people but to the entire region.

The parties, their proxies and those with influence over them, namely the Yemeni government, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the regional Gulf nations in the Gulf Cooperation Council, the USA, UK and other western partners of KSA all have key roles and influence – as do the Houthi authorities, the former President Saleh and his supporters and Iran; they can arrest this war and this suffering. They can get behind the framework agreement put forward by the Special Envoy and secure peace in 30 days. It is a political decision which takes courage and leadership. We cannot wait.

Thank you.