

**United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, David Gressly
Remarks to media in Geneva – 11 October 2021**

Near verbatim transcript

What I would like to speak to you about today is the current situation in Yemen and how we are trying to confront the various problems that we see on the ground. It is a quite serious situation.

Where I would like to start is the fact that this is now getting into seven years. It is a long time for the conflict to take place and each year that goes by just exacerbates the problem for the population on the ground, north and south.

The numbers we are talking about are staggering.

We are talking about 20 million people in need of humanitarian assistance – that is two-thirds of the total population of the country. Five million people in severe or nearly severe hunger – just a step away from famine. About 400,000 children are at imminent risk of death from malnutrition.

We have received reasonable funding for food security and nutrition this year. When we announced the new response plan in March, there was a good enough response to allow us to scale up and to start once again providing not only to the 10 million people we had previously been providing support to, but to 13 million (an additional 3 million) and, more importantly, for those in the most severe need, increasing the rations from half rations, which is what we did when the funding was quite low last year, to full rations for those in the most severe need and three quarters for those in less dire circumstances.

That fast intervention and a parallel one on the nutrition side, particularly for children, has taken us a step back, but it's very fragile. And I think this is the core message I would like to get across: this assistance needs to be sustained if we are not to go back to the abyss of being on the edge of famine.

We're also concerned now with the escalation in fighting around Marib. This has now added to additional displacement in that area, a place where we already have over a million people displaced.

Secondly, we have enclaves where the fighting is continuing that we're not able to provide support to. I'll touch upon that a little bit later. The fact is that we're continuing to see fighting along the major frontlines.

Myself, I've been in this position now for approximately six months, I've taken advantage of this time to basically try to see the situation on the ground. I drive. I go by road. I don't have an airplane. But I've traveled to most of the governorates that are on the frontlines to see up close what is happening – both in the northern governorates, as well as those in the south.

What I'd like to share with you is what I see. I see an economy, number one, that's collapsed. I see the destruction of schools, of factories, of roads and bridges.

I've seen the destruction of power systems. So what made Yemen work seven years ago in many cases, no longer exists. And with that collapse, we've seen a collapse in the economy, a reduction of income by about 50 per cent. and this economic collapse, in many ways, is what drives the humanitarian catastrophe itself. People don't have the income to buy food. The restrictions introduced because of the conflict have actually increased significantly the cost of importing food, the cost of distributing food and other essential commodities once inside Yemen. It is important to remember that the bulk of the food that Yemenis consume is imported commercially. So this has a significant impact. The conflict has led directly to an economic collapse, which has led to the current humanitarian crisis that we see to today.

But I don't just see the infrastructure and the economy that's collapsed. Everywhere I go, it's a chance to speak with people on the ground who really want to tell their story. And I think that story is extremely important to share with you.

It's usually mothers who come to me and they hold onto my arm, literally, because they have a story they want me to hear. And I think, Implicitly, they want me to tell you that story.

I'll give you an example. When I was recently on the southern side of the frontline outside the port city of Al Hodeidah, an area where very limited humanitarian assistance has come in the past. The objective of the trip, in fact, was to open it up to more of that assistance. So these are villages that have had limited contact with the international community, in the last years of the conflict.

I would be told, as they hold on to me, mothers talking about their children, not having access to school, the fact that they face problems with landmines, the fact that fisheries are no longer working so they don't have a livelihood.

They can't access water because the water system is on the other side of the frontline; whereas the wells that they dig because of the proximity to the ocean tend to be salty and therefore not drinkable. Not being able to access hospitals because they're on the other side of the frontline.

This is a tragedy that goes all the way across Yemen – that kind of blockage to access to public services. And then you see the hospitals that are packed with patients. Because there's no clinics functioning outside the government or provincial capitals those seeking treatment have to come in from long distances, traveling two, three days just to get there, and sometimes being denied access to medical services simply because there's not enough staff beds to do so. And being told to go on to another governate. It's very tragic to see this. It's very tragic to see how people suffer as they try to get medical care.

On the other hand, we see the dedication of the Yemeni staff, health in particular, who struggle to try to help people as much as possible. So it's extremely important to understand that this is a system that's very fragile, that humanitarian assistance needs to be sustained if we want to avoid going back to the near famine.

But we also have to recognize that the support to other systems in the country is almost non-existent. We're at about 20 per cent funding for health, water, education, livelihoods, including agriculture, support to internally displaced persons. We have 4 million IDPs. The demands just continue. What I worry about as much as anything right now is the lack of fuel for hospitals, for water systems – to keep those systems going. I worry about the fact that public servants don't get paid. How long will they continue to work? They're not been paid since last year.

All of these things are slowly degrading the life of the average Yemeni, both in the north and the south. And we need to continue to work on doing this.

So what are we looking for? One is sustaining humanitarian assistance, as I've mentioned – better funding this year, but just enough to stave off famine. Secondly, we need to make sure that these additional areas are covered in health, water, agriculture, for the IDPs, education, et cetera.

Number two, we need to look at why the economy has totally collapsed and what we can do to unlock that economy, because the skills are still there for business to operate, for livelihoods to operate, if these restrictions, that I referred to before are, are removed.

So we need to have – and we've developed – an economic strategy to say these are the things that are holding back this economy, that are driving down incomes, raising food prices. The stability of the currency is also an important part of this. Its rapid depreciation has reduced the purchasing power of the rial and therefore increased the rial cost of food that comes into the country.

All of these things are working in the wrong direction and we need to find, and we've identified ways, to try to reverse that – to compliment the humanitarian assistance that's going into the country. I think we can do so, but we need the political will by the parties in conflict, by those who have influence on the parties in conflict to isolate the people of Yemen from the conflict, from an economic point of view, so that they can resume economic activities and take care of themselves.

As we go forward, I think there are two or three issues that are extremely important.

We need a stronger evidence base on the situation in Yemen. We're working very hard on this right now to increase the quality of the food assessments, nutrition assessments, and the assessments in the other areas that I've described. [This is] critically important to make sure that we can provide to donors the reality on the ground.

I think we'll see that in the south, the situation has further deteriorated because of the kind of security instability that we have seen increasing over the recent months. And you will have seen the recent attack in Aden as an example. That also is working against the humanitarian situation in the southern governates as well.

We're also working to improve the biometrics of the distribution of food to reduce the potential for diversion to make sure that the food and other support is going to the right people and, likewise, substantially increasing our monitoring on the ground and looking for ways to break through various impediments to our support to families on the ground – whether it's from security restrictions by authorities or from delays in approval of projects, this remains a major matter of priority for us.

I want to summarize, and I think we can take some questions. We need a sustained humanitarian response and funding that makes that happen. We need to unlock the economy. And most importantly, the fighting has to stop.

We cannot reverse what's happening in Yemen without a political settlement, without a ceasefire. As long as the conflict continues, we're going to continue to see massive humanitarian needs in Yemen. That's just the reality. We would like to see otherwise. I would hope that we can find a way forward on that as soon as possible to allow Yemenis to rebuild their economy and their lives – and to avoid the situation I have seen in so many countries that I've worked in, where a conflict goes on for 20, 25 years. When that happens, you have a totally transformed country.

It's nearly impossible to go back to where you were before the animosity, the difficulties of having lived in a war, in a violent conflict affect relations for years to come, makes the possibility of reconstruction much more difficult because usually public services decline and degrade to the point

where you have to rebuild the human capital, as well as the infrastructure. But most importantly, the impact on children who grow up in conflict. If that's all they know, that changes their view on how to live and how to survive. And if they don't have access to education, you don't go back just 5, 6, 7 years. You go back a generation or two in terms of trying to rebuild. Malnutrition leads to stunting that has an impact over decades for the future.

This is the path that Yemen could take. We need to find it on a different path if we want to succeed.

I'll conclude just by making note of the situation around Marib, where recent advances by forces from the de facto authorities in Sana'a have led to additional displacement where there's populations that we were not able yet to access, where we're trying to find different ways to do so.

It's a reminder of why we need this fighting to end, a reminder why we have to find a different path forward as I described before. So I will stop there and just see if there are some questions that people would like to follow up on.

Thank you very much for your time.