



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 2020**As delivered*

Thank you, Mr. President.

Every month, I brief you on five priority issues in Yemen:

First, protection of civilians and respect for international humanitarian law;

Second, humanitarian access and delivery;

Third, funding for the UN aid operation;

Fourth, the Yemeni economy;

and fifth, progress towards peace.

As Martin has just outlined, we are now going through an extremely worrying period in Yemen. This is equally true for the humanitarian operation.

So let's start with protection of civilians. Hostilities have escalated significantly along several fronts, most notably in the governorates of Marib, Al Jawf and Sana'a. As Martin said, these are places that had been mostly quiet for the last two years.

Fighting in these areas has displaced more than 35,000 people since January.

This escalation, in addition to clashes in other places, has reversed the trend towards decreasing civilian casualties that we had seen in previous months. As January assessment suggests, more than 160 civilians were killed or wounded across Yemen.

On Saturday, air strikes reportedly killed dozens of civilians in Al Jawf. Lise Grande, the Humanitarian Coordinator, issued a statement about that the same day, and I associate myself with what she said.

Ten days ago, hostilities badly damaged two hospitals in Marib and injured a health worker. These hospitals had already closed because of fighting in the area, depriving 15,000 people of medical care.

And in Taizz, Hudaydah, Sa'ada and other places, we continue to hear daily reports of civilians killed, homes destroyed, farms damaged, children shot by snipers and other horrors.

For months, I have called for a nationwide ceasefire. This call is even more urgent today when the violence, as Martin has said, is at very real risk of spiralling out of control.

Mr. President,

The second issue is humanitarian access. Let me remind everyone that international humanitarian law requires the parties to facilitate access to people in need. Access is essential if we are to continue saving millions of lives across Yemen.

Yet the space we need to do this work has been narrowing from all directions.

In the south, humanitarian agencies have to wait too long to get projects approved. Last year, we estimate that about 30 per cent of NGO projects were not taken forward because the Government failed to agree them. Efforts to carry out a multi-sectoral needs assessment have recently stalled.

We also remain concerned over proposed Government regulations that would hinder humanitarian agencies ability to move around the country as necessary in order to meet urgent needs. This past week the Government returned eight trucks, with medical supplies, held by Government forces in Marib since 30 January. However, after initial inspection, it appears that up to 70% of the supplies were missing. We appreciate the ongoing dialogue with the Government on these issues.

But it is important to be clear that we have much more serious problems in the areas controlled by the Ansar Allah authorities.

Last year, they issued more than 200 regulations on humanitarian action. By the end of the year, the number of reported incidents disrupting assistance had risen by a factor of six. About half these incidents constrained movements of relief supplies or staff, and about a quarter involved attempts to influence decisions on who receives help or otherwise interfere with programmes.

Ansar Allah authorities asked NGOs to sign agreements that would not be consistent with humanitarian principles. About 40 per cent of NGO projects last year went unapproved – that is 10 per cent more than in the south. It has also been suggested that NGOs pay a 2 per cent tax to fund the authorities' aid coordination body.

The situation is unacceptable. Stopping the world's largest aid operation would be fatal for millions of people.

The Secretary-General issued a statement last week about this. He reiterated the importance of sustaining the humanitarian operation, and he supports continued dialogue with all the interested parties to ensure that help reaches all those who need it in accordance with humanitarian principles.

There was also a valuable meeting in Brussels last week involving UN colleagues, leading international NGOs and some of the large donors to discuss how we can maintain life-saving assistance in a principled way, including the measures that may need to be taken as a result of the interference and blockages we are seeing.

The UN, Mr. President, is looking to intensify dialogue with the Ansar Allah authorities at all levels and through all the channels available to us.

Last week, Ansar Allah authorities returned food that had been taken from a WFP warehouse in Hajjah.

They also announced they were dropping the proposed 2 per cent levy.

They also wrote to WFP saying that they would implement a long-pending agreement on biometric registration and other issues.

We welcome all these announcements. And we are looking forward to seeing them implemented.

There are several other issues, including:

First, project approvals, especially agreements with NGOs;

Second, moving forward with urgently required assessments, including updating food security assessments;

And third, approving more monitoring missions, all of which still require progress.

These are activities which the humanitarian principles require humanitarian agencies to conduct.

Important discussions are ongoing with the relevant parties to cover all these and other points.

I also want to reiterate what Martin has said about the SAFER oil tanker. I have raised this in my briefings to you on ten occasions over the last 12 months. It needs to be resolved. Nothing can happen without the UN assessment mission. So, again, like Martin, I urge rapid action on that.

Mr. President,

Amidst all these challenges, the humanitarian operation has continued to deliver. The World Food Programme report they are still providing food assistance to more than 13 million people every month. The World Health Organization carries out more than 1.5 million medical consultations a month. And UNICEF and others report that support to water networks benefitted an average of nearly 4 million people a month between September and December last year.

I want to commend again the humanitarian workers – and especially the Yemeni staff – who are delivering this response. They are unquestionably saving millions of lives.

No one has suggested the emergency in Yemen has improved over the last year. But key assessments remain blocked, complicating efforts to adjust programmes based on the latest evidence. This makes it difficult to know with certainty whether there are large pockets of unmet needs across the country.

So far, we have not heard reports of famine-like conditions returning in high-risk areas. In late 2018, we heard such reports from many sources even before the formal assessments had been completed. I believe that high levels of aid delivery have helped. But of course, without the assessments, we cannot be confident of the position.

Let me, finally, on this point, thank everyone who has contributed to the medical evacuation of the 28 patients Martin mentioned. Like him, I would like to see a more sustainable solution put in place soon.

Mr. President,

Humanitarian agencies have been able to continue saving millions of lives because our donors have provided the money to do so. This brings me to my third point: funding for the UN aid operation. I again want to thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, Germany, the European Union and its member states and all our donors for their support.

All humanitarian agencies take very seriously the accountability for these funds. We know that the choice over whether or not to provide assistance is a voluntary one. The donors have shown much generosity in financing the Yemen humanitarian operation. From my experience, that generosity is based on just two things: first a belief that there are real needs. And second, a belief that if they provide resources, they will get to the people who need help.

So Mr President, anybody currently or potentially hindering humanitarian agencies' work on these two points needs to understand what a big risk they are taking with donors' continuing generosity.

Mr. President,

I turn now to the Yemeni economy.

Because Yemenis depend almost entirely on commercial imports for food, fuel, medicine and other basic goods, it is essential to keep all ports open.

Most food and fuel imports still come in through Hudaydah or Saleef. Commercial food supplies through these ports have remained stable in recent months. Thanks to a mechanism for commercial fuel imports managed by the Special Envoy, fuel volumes have been higher than the previous average every month since October.

It is equally important to ensure that imports are affordable. The Yemeni rial is losing value, meaning fewer people can afford the goods, above all food, that they need to survive. A dispute between the parties over bank notes is still driving a disparity between the exchange rate in the south, which is around 650 rial to the US dollar, and the north, where it's about 595 rial to the dollar.

In late 2018, the rapid depreciation of the Yemeni rial was a key factor in bringing the country to the brink of widespread famine.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has played a crucial role in stabilising the rial. I thank them again for this, including the release of another \$227 million for these purposes. I expect that such support will continue to be necessary.

Mr. President, the last point is progress towards peace. Peace is the only way to end the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Martin has just briefed you on the serious risks we now see.

We are now entering the sixth year of this war. Enough is enough.

Thank you, Mr. President.