



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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

**STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON MISSIONS
TO YEMEN, SOUTH SUDAN, SOMALIA AND KENYA AND AN UPDATE ON THE
OSLO CONFERENCE ON NIGERIA AND THE LAKE CHAD REGION**

10 March 2017

Checked against delivery

Mr. President, Council members,

Thank you for inviting me to brief on my visits to countries facing famine or at risk of famine: Yemen, South Sudan and Somalia. I will also briefly mention the outcomes of the Oslo Conference on the Lake Chad Basin.

I need to mention that I also visited Northern Kenya where pastoralists are worst affected by the terrible drought. Over 2.7 million Kenyans are now food insecure, a number likely to reach 4 million by April. In collaboration with the Government, the UN will soon launch an appeal of \$200 million to provide timely life-saving assistance and protection. For what follows however, I will focus on my other visits over the past 16 days.

Mr. President,

I turn first to Yemen. It's already the largest humanitarian crisis in the world and the Yemeni people now face the spectre of famine. Today, two-thirds of the population – 18.8 million people – need assistance and more than 7 million are hungry and do not know where their next meal will come from. That is 3 million people more than in January. As fighting continues and escalates, displacement increases. With health facilities destroyed and damaged, diseases are sweeping through the country.

I spoke with people in Aden, Ibb, Sana'a and from Taizz. They told me horrific stories of displacement, escaping unspeakable violence and destruction from Mokha and Taizz city in Taizz governorate. I saw first-hand the effects of losing home and livelihood: malnourishment, hunger and squalid living conditions in destroyed schools, unfinished apartments and wet, concrete basements. In the past two months alone, more than 48,000 people fled fighting, mines



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and IEDs from Mokha town and the surrounding fields alone. I met countless children, malnourished and sick. My small team met a girl displaced to Ibb, still having shrapnel wounds in her legs while her brother was deeply traumatized. I was introduced to a 13-year-old girl who fled from Taizz city, left in charge of her seven siblings. I spoke with families who have become displaced to Aden as their homes were destroyed by airstrikes living in a destroyed school. All of them told me three things: they are hungry and sick – and they need peace so that they can return home.

I travelled to Aden on the first humanitarian UN flight, where I met the President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the Republic of Yemen. I also met with the senior leadership of the Houthi and General People's Congress authorities in Sana'a. I discussed the humanitarian situation, the need to prevent a famine and to better respect international humanitarian law and protect civilians. I demanded full, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access. All counterparts promised to facilitate sustained access and respect international humanitarian law. Yet all parties to the conflict are arbitrarily denying sustained humanitarian access and politicize aid. Already, the humanitarian suffering that we see in Yemen today is caused by the parties and proxies and if they don't change their behaviour now, they must be held accountable for the inevitable famine, unnecessary deaths and associated amplification in suffering that will follow.

Despite the almost impossible and terrifying conditions, the UN and humanitarian partners are not deterred and are stepping up to meet the humanitarian needs across the country. In February alone, 4.9 million people received food assistance. We continue to negotiate access and make modest gains. For instance, despite assurances from all parties of safe passage to Taizz city, I was denied access and retreated to a short safe distance when I and my team came under gunfire. Yet, we managed to use this experience to clear the path for reaching people inside Taizz city with a first humanitarian truck delivery of eight tons of essential medicine on the Ibb to Taizz city road since August 2016. We will not leave a stone unturned to find alternative routes. We must prevail as so many lives depend on us, the full range of the humanitarian family.

For 2017, the humanitarian community requires US\$ 2.1 billion to reach 12 million people with life-saving assistance and protection in Yemen. Only 6 per cent of that funding has been received thus far. An international ministerial-level pledging event is scheduled for 25 April, but the situation is so dire that I ask donors to give urgently now. All contributions and pledges since 1 January will be counted at the event.

I continue to reiterate the same message to all: it is only a political solution that will ultimately end human suffering and bring stability to the region. And at this stage, only a combined response with the private sector can stem a famine: commercial imports must be allowed to



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resume through all entry points in Yemen, including and especially Hudaydah port, which must be kept open and expanded. With access and funding, humanitarians will do more, but we are not the long-term solution to this growing crisis.

I am pleased as I said to confirm that a ministerial-level pledging event for the humanitarian response in Yemen for 2017 will take place in Geneva on 25 April. The Secretary-General will chair the event, co-hosted by the Foreign Ministers of Sweden and Switzerland, to advocate for more resources and access. For 2017, as mentioned, the Yemen humanitarian response plan asks for US \$2.1 billion to assist 12 million people in need across all 22 governorates.

Mr. President,

Turning to South Sudan which I visited on 4 and 5 March. The situation is worse than it has ever been. The famine in South Sudan is man-made. Parties to the conflict are parties to the famine – as are those not intervening to make the violence stop.

More than 7.5 million people need assistance, up by 1.4 million from last year. About 3.4 million people are displaced, of which almost 200,000 have fled South Sudan since January alone. A localized famine was declared for Leer and Mayendit [counties] on 20 February, an area where violence and insecurity have compromised humanitarian access for years. More than one million children are estimated to be acutely malnourished across the country; including 270,000 children who face the imminent risk of death should they not be reached in time with assistance. Meanwhile, the cholera outbreak that began in June 2016 has spread to more locations.

I travelled to Ganyiel in Unity state where people have fled from the horrors of famine and conflict. I saw the impact humanitarians can have to alleviate suffering. I met an elderly woman with her malnourished grandson receiving treatment. I listened to women who fled fighting with their children through waist-high swamps to receive food and medicine. Some of these women have experienced the most appalling acts of sexual violence – which continues to be used as a weapon of war. Their harrowing stories are only a few among thousands who have suffered a similar fate across the country.

Humanitarians are delivering. Last year, partners reached more than 5.1 million people with assistance. However, active hostilities, access denials and bureaucratic impediments continue to curtail their efforts to reach people who desperately need help. Aid workers have been killed; humanitarian compounds and supplies have been attacked, looted, and occupied by armed actors. Recently, humanitarians had to leave one of the famine-affected counties because of fighting. Assurances by senior Government officials of unconditional access and no bureaucratic



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impediments now need to be turned into action on the ground.

Mr. President,

In Somalia, more than half the population – 6.2 million people – need humanitarian and protection assistance, including 2.9 million who are at risk of famine and require immediate assistance to save or sustain their lives, close to 1 million children under the age of 5 will be acutely malnourished this year. In the last two months alone, nearly 160,000 people have been displaced due to severe drought conditions, adding to the already 1.1 million people who live in appalling conditions around the country.

What I saw and heard during my visit to Somalia was distressing – women and children walk for weeks in search of food and water. They have lost their livestock, water sources have dried up and they have nothing left to survive on. With everything lost, women, boys, girls and men now move to urban centres.

With the Secretary-General – his first field mission since he took office – we visited Baidoa. We met with displaced people going through ordeals none of us can imagine. We visited the regional hospital where children and adults are desperately fighting to survive diarrhoea, cholera and malnutrition. Again, as if proof was needed, it was clear that between malnutrition and death there is disease.

Large parts of southern and central Somalia remain under the control or influence of Al-Shabaab and the security situation is volatile. Last year, some 165 violent incidents – an 18 per cent increase compared to 2015 – directly impacted humanitarian work and resulted in 14 deaths of aid workers. Al-Shabaab, Government Forces and other militia also continue to block major supply routes to towns in 29 of the 42 districts in southern and central Somalia. This has restricted access to markets, basic commodities and services, and is severely disrupting livelihoods. Blockades and double taxation bar farmers from transporting their grains. It is critical that AMISOM and Somali forces secure vital road access to enable both lifesaving aid and longer term recovery. A lot of hope is placed in the new Government.

The current indicators mirror the tragic picture of 2011, when Somalia last suffered a famine. It is important to add that when the famine was called at that time 260,000 had already died, this will be important in what I am about to tell you. However, humanitarian partners now have a larger footprint, mature cash programming, better data through assessments, better controls on resources and vetting of partners, as well as stronger partnership with government authorities. The Government recently declared the drought a national disaster and is taking steps to work



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with humanitarian partners to ensure a coordinated response. To be clear, we can avert a famine, we have a committed clear new President, a humanitarian and resilience track record, a detailed plan, we're ready despite incredible risk and danger, we have local and international leadership, we have a lot of access, now we need the international community, at the scale of you the donor agencies and nations, to invest in Somalia, its life-saving – but we need those huge funds now.

For all three crises and North-Eastern Nigeria, an immediate injection of funds plus safe and unimpeded access are required to enable partners to avert a catastrophe; otherwise, many people will predictably die from hunger, livelihoods will be lost, and political gains that have been hard-won over the last few years will be reversed. To be precise we need \$4.4 billion by July, and that's a detailed cost, not a negotiating number.

Mr. President,

Before I visited all these countries, I was in Oslo, where the governments of Norway, Germany and Nigeria, in partnership with the United Nations, organized a humanitarian conference on Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. 10.7 million people need humanitarian assistance and protection, including 7.1 million people who are severely food insecure. Humanitarian partners scaled up their response to reach the most vulnerable groups threatened by violence, food insecurity and famine, particularly in North-Eastern Nigeria.

Fourteen donors pledged a total of US\$672 million, of which \$458 million is for humanitarian action in 2017. This is very good news, and I commend those who made such generous pledges. More is needed however to receive the \$1.5 billion required to provide the assistance needed across the Lake Chad region.

Mr. President,

We stand at a critical point in history. Already at the beginning of the year we are facing the largest humanitarian crisis since the creation of the United Nations. Now, more than 20 million people across four countries face starvation and famine. Without collective and coordinated global efforts, people will simply starve to death. Many more will suffer and die from disease. Children stunted and out of school. Livelihoods, futures and hope will be lost. Communities' resilience rapidly wilting away. Development gains reversed. Many will be displaced and will continue to move in search for survival, creating ever more instability across entire regions. The warning call and appeal for action by the Secretary-General can thus not be understated. It was right to take the risk and sound the alarm early, not wait for the pictures of emaciated dying children or the world's TV screens to mobilise a reaction and the funds.



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The UN and humanitarian partners are responding. We have strategic, coordinated and prioritised plans in every country. We have the right leadership and heroic, dedicated teams on the ground. We are working hand-in-hand with development partners to marry the immediate life-saving with longer term sustainable development. We are ready to scale up. This is frankly not the time to ask for more detail or use that postponing phrase, what would you prioritize? Every life on the edge of famine and death is equally worth saving.

Now we need the international community and this Council to act:

First and foremost, act quickly to tackle the precipitating factors of famine. Preserving and restoring normal access to food and ensuring all parties' compliance with international humanitarian law are key.

Second, with sufficient and timely financial support, humanitarians can still help to prevent the worst-case scenario. To do this, humanitarians require safe, full and unimpeded access to people in need. Parties to the conflict must respect this fundamental tenet of IHL and those with influence over the parties must exert that influence now.

Third, stop the fighting. To continue on the path of war and military conquest is – I think we all know – to guarantee failure, humiliation and moral turpitude, and will bear the responsibility for the millions who face hunger and deprivation on an incalculable scale because of it.

Mr. President,

Allow me to very briefly sum up. The situation for people in each country is dire and without a major international response, the situation will get worse. All four countries have one thing in common: conflict. This means we – you – have the possibility to prevent – and end – further misery and suffering. The UN and its partners are ready to scale up. But we need the access and the funds to do more. It is all preventable. It is possible to avert this crisis, to avert these famines, to avert these looming human catastrophes.

Thank you. Thank you Mr. President.