

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

Statement to the Security Council on Yemen

New York, 30 May 2017

As delivered

Mr. President,

Thank you. I thank the Special Envoy for his statement to which I fully align.

The people of Yemen are being subjected to deprivation, disease and death as the world watches. This is not an unforeseen or coincidental result of forces beyond our control. It is a direct consequence of actions of the parties and supporters of the conflict, and is also, sadly, a result of inaction – whether due to inability or indifference – by the international community.

As I have previously briefed this Council in recent months, urgent action is required to stem the suffering. And yet, based on facts and – as ever – in complete candour, I return here to report the situation on the ground has continued to spiral downwards towards total social, economic and institutional collapse. Yemen has the ignominy of being now the world's largest food security crisis with more than 17 million people who are food insecure, 6.8 million of whom are one step away from famine. Crisis is not coming, it is not looming, it is here today – on our watch and ordinary people are paying the price.

What is worse the threat of famine is driven and exacerbated by conflict. Yemen is not facing a drought. If there was no conflict in Yemen, there would be no descent into famine, misery, disease and death – a famine would certainly be avoidable and averted. We all know there will be no military solution. And for as long as it takes to find, we will continue as humanitarians to do everything in our power to avert the famine in Yemen and more, despite the challenges to our operations by all sides and their supporters.

While the United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism has facilitated over 7.6 million metric tonnes of goods, of which 3.8 million metric tonnes were food, through Yemen's Red Sea ports, people's ability to buy food is diminishing. We are working hard to enhance this mechanism and get it funded.

In particular, governorates in which active fighting and airstrikes continue – such as Taizz, Hajjah, Sa’ada, al Jawf and Marib – remain affected by high and rising prices of commodities. The prices of red beans and wheat flour were 59 per cent and 29 per cent higher respectively in April 2017 than pre-crisis. The economy is collapsing, employment has all but disappeared, food and fuel prices have sky-rocketed, and severe disruptions to fishing and agricultural production continue. The bottom line is that what food there is, is largely unaffordable to the vast majority of the population, especially the most vulnerable such as the two million people who remain internally displaced.

Mr. President,

It is not just the food security situation. The institutional capacity of Yemen to respond to the basic needs of the population is crumbling, exacerbated by the failure of the Central Bank – following its move from Sana’a to Aden - to operate in the interests of the people it is intended to serve. All parties to the conflict in Yemen have proven their continued inability to put the genuine needs of the Yemeni people first. The health system is a shell of what it once was, with half of all health facilities now closed. People are dying because even basic medical treatment, that we would take for granted, is no longer available. By the time I finish my statement to the Council today, another child in Yemen will have died from a preventable disease.

Over one million civil servants have not been paid for months, affecting more than eight million people, pushing more and more families toward poverty and starvation. Families are increasingly marrying off their young daughters to have someone else care for them, and often use the dowry to pay for basic necessities.

While humanitarians have been working to assist the poorest of the poor, it is now also professionals – such as university professors – who are asking for food assistance. The longer this continues, the greater the pressure on already scarce humanitarian resources and the harder it will be for Yemenis to survive, and one day, for Yemen to recover.

Mr. President,

The strain being placed upon the all-too-fragile Yemeni system became all too evident in the last month, with the extensive, desperate resurgence of cholera. The debilitated health system took longer to detect cholera warning signs as health workers, who would have been maintaining disease surveillance systems, were not paid. Water and sanitation systems were not functioning due to lack of fuel and basic maintenance, leaving over eight million people without access to safe drinking water and sanitation. And the rainy season, coupled with uncollected rubbish piling up in the streets of large cities, created the perfect conditions for the rapid spread of communicable and water-borne diseases.

In just the last month, twice as many people are suffering from suspected cholera cases compared to those in the last six months combined and one third of them are children. It is important to bear in mind that malnutrition and cholera are interconnected; weakened and hungry people are more likely to contract cholera and less able to survive it. According to estimates, 150,000 cases are projected for the next six months, in addition to the broadly 60,000 current suspected cases since late April, with 500 associated deaths.

The scale of this latest outbreak is - as well as being depressingly predictable – a direct consequence of the conflict; and had the parties to the conflict cared, the outbreak was avoidable. But let me praise the extraordinary speed and courage of the UN and its humanitarian partners, including international and national NGO aid workers, who are doing all they can, under strong leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator Jamie McGoldrick.

Mr. President,

The UN and partners are working tirelessly to help authorities on all sides – from Aden to Sa'adah and from Hudaydah to Taizz – meet the challenge posed by this cholera outbreak. We urgently scaled up assistance, quadrupling the number of diarrhoea treatment centres in the last month and established 136 oral rehydration corners. Synchronised efforts in water, sanitation and health are in place to ensure a comprehensive and holistic response, including a nationwide awareness campaign.

Some 1.6 million people have already been supported with these interventions and we will not stop our support until the scourge of cholera is contained. I do salute local health and sanitation workers trying to support all and taking no side despite warring parties, but making contemptuous attempts to make them partial. Together with the UN and partners, they are providing round-the-clock assistance. I thank those who have provided financial support, including from the region, to make this happen.

Mr. President,

The humanitarian response to the cholera outbreak is one part of a much larger response. In all, humanitarians have reached 5.8 million people this year with food assistance, including at least three million people each month. With mounting needs, we will need more resources. However, our ability to respond is dependent on sustained and predictable funding.

As you know, on 25 April, the Secretary-General alongside the Foreign Ministers of Sweden and Switzerland co-hosted a High-Level Pledging Conference for Yemen to respond to the growing acute needs in the country. The Conference generated US\$1.1 billion in very generous pledges. We express gratitude to all those donors who have paid their pledges in full; and encourage others to do the same. As of last night, 56 per cent

(US\$612 million) of the pledges have been paid both within and outside the humanitarian response plan. This means the overall humanitarian strategy and plan is only 24 per cent funded (\$489 million) of the \$2.1 billion required. I strongly urge that funding is provided in support of the humanitarian strategy and plan as it is the most effective, neutral and impartial way to reach those most in need. With escalating needs, we will need more resources.

Mr. President,

Let me now turn to the issue of access. Hudaydah Port is a lifeline for Yemen, being the primary point of entry for commercial and humanitarian imports into the country, which historically is 80 to 90 per cent dependent on imported food staples. It is also the only port in Yemen that can handle fuel, and bulk and containerized cargo at scale. Yet there is intermittent access of vessels to Hudaydah port due to diversion or clearance delays by the Coalition, which – coupled with the threat of an attack on Hudaydah port – has sapped traders' confidence. While on average it took a week to sail into the ports, it now takes five times as long on many an occasion. Given rising costs, major shipping companies are now simply avoiding the Red Sea ports, thereby depriving the Yemeni people of desperately needed food and fuel.

I appeal to Member States to ensure that all efforts are made to keep Hudaydah port open and operating. An attack on Hudaydah is not in the interest of any party, as it will directly and irrevocably drive the Yemeni population further into starvation and famine. In this regard, we continue to support the efforts of the Special Envoy to develop a sustainable solution for the protection of the port as critical civilian infrastructure. In addition, bringing in the UN mobile cranes, stuck for the last four months in Dubai, would be an investment in the civilian character of Hudaydah port, and would assist in getting food and fuel to those most in need.

Mr. President,

Aside from Hudaydah, the parties must commit to ensuring that all other ports, as well as land routes, are open for both humanitarian and commercial imports as humanitarian action alone cannot meet the needs of a population of 27 million people. Access across the country, including Taizz Governorate, must be safe, consistent and unimpeded, and commercial goods must be allowed to reach Yemen's ports without artificial delays and corrupt exactions. Further, it is imperative that commercial flights to Sana'a resume – to allow civilians to seek medical treatment and for families to reunite.

Mr. President,

Time is running out. The Yemeni people face a 'triple threat' of armed conflict, famine, and deadly disease that has already killed, injured, displaced or otherwise affected

millions and it will spare no one if it continues unchecked. The cruel irony, as I said at the beginning, is that these threats are man-made and could easily have been prevented. The international community, in concert with those parties to the conflict, have an urgent duty now to address these threats and bring Yemen and her people on all sides of the fighting lines back from the brink of complete disaster.

As humanitarians, we are doing and will continue to do our job, but the Yemeni people also need the international community to do its job. A sustainable political agreement is the only long-term solution, and as this is sought, a reduction in violence, an end to violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and unimpeded access to those in need must be allowed. The parties to the conflict and the international community, especially the Security Council, cannot allow the deadly combination of violence, inaction and indifference to condemn the Yemeni people to a bleak obituary.

I call on the international community to undertake the following immediate actions to avoid irreversible consequences which will have generational impact on Yemen and the wider region.

1. Ensure the protection of the Yemeni people. For as long as military actions continue, all parties *must* comply with international humanitarian and human rights law, and all States must exert their influence to ensure the parties do so.
2. Ensure that all ports and land routes remain open for both humanitarian and commercial imports. This includes exerting efforts to avert an attack on Hudaydah and to re-open Sana'a airport. We need the mobile cranes at the port.
3. Preserve essential Yemeni institutions, and ensure that civil servants are paid. This is no longer just a question of politics or economics; it's about basic humanity, human dignity, and indeed, survival.

Mr. President,

Cholera is spreading at an unprecedented rate and famine is knocking on the doors of millions tonight. The parties to this conflict and their allies, as well countries in the region and across the globe, must set aside politics and self-interest and respond at the most humane level – facilitate access and mobilize resources to treat the cholera outbreak and allow food to get to those in need.

In that spirit, I urge the parties, with the support of the international community, to redouble their efforts toward a sustainable political settlement where the people's protection, dignity and well-being are at the heart of any agreement. Working together, we can end one of the world's great humanitarian tragedies and put Yemen back on the path to survival and a future. The time is now.

I thank you, Mr. President.

