Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock
Remarks at the High-Level meeting to enhance humanitarian response in Yemen
Hosted by the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 29 October 2017

As delivered

Excellencies, Dear Dr Al Rabbeah,

Distinguished delegates,

It is a pleasure to be here at this important event to discuss the challenges and opportunities for humanitarian operations in Yemen.

Our presence here today is a clear sign of our collective concern for the well-being of the Yemeni people. We all share a common objective – to reduce the suffering. Thank you for bringing us together. The more we coordinate our work, share our perspectives and assessments and build mutual understanding, the better job we will do in achieving that common objective.

As you know, I have spent this last week in Yemen. I wanted to tell you what I saw and offer a few impressions.

The first thing to say is that this is still a hot conflict. There is fighting every day, in several parts of the country. The day I travelled from Aden to Sanaa’, the UN reported six air strikes in the vicinity of the OCHA office in Sana’a. My staff took shelter in their basements. (I am sure that these events were not related to my arrival).

You are all familiar with the raw facts of the crisis: 21 million people in need of emergency aid or protection, most of them children and 17 million unable to meet their daily food needs. Some seven million of those are living with the threat of famine. More than 800,000 suspected to have cholera. And as the Secretary-General reminded the Security Council earlier this month, the economic blockade has led to a rise in fuel costs of over 50 per cent and food costs by 30 per cent since before the crisis.
We have all heard the statistics, but behind each of them is an individual man or woman, girl or boy.

In Aden, where I started my visit, and in Sana’a, and during my visits to Lahj, Hudaydah, Hajjah, and Amran governorates, I met hundreds of Yemenis, and listened to their stories.

Everywhere I went, I saw roads, bridges, factories, hotels, houses and much else which had been destroyed by the bombing and fighting. I went to hospitals with barely any electricity or water, also a result of the fighting.

I met some of the two million people who have been forced to move to avoid the conflict, and saw the dreadful conditions in which many of them are now forced to live.

I met health workers who have not been paid for months.

I heard from children who have not been to school for almost a year because their teachers’ salaries have not been paid.

And I know the destruction and suffering is even greater in some places I did not get to this time but would like to visit in future, including Sa’ada, Taizz and Haradh.

Across the country, and on both sides of the frontline, Yemenis are being kept alive by brave aid workers, working under extremely difficult conditions.

I met lots of them, both Yemenis and international staff.

I was very pleased to meet colleagues from the King Salman Relief Centre and the Emirati Red Crescent in Aden and learn about their work.

I saw many of my colleagues from UN agencies, who are based all over the country. The UN now has 200 international staff members in Yemen as well as many Yemeni staff. I met many NGO colleagues too, including from organizations represented here today.

Thank you, all of you, for the work you and your teams are doing. I will do my best to advocate for you and to support your work.

As we all know, a sustainable end to the horrendous suffering will only follow a political resolution to the crisis. We should all do whatever we can to support that.

My particular responsibilities, though, and our focus today, is for emergency relief and humanitarian action and protection. So that is what I want to focus on.

We are able to be effective because we remain impartial, neutral and independent. But we need to do more – and we need more support.
In both Aden and Sana’a, I held frank discussions with those in positions of authority on the need for all parties and stakeholders to do more to ensure humanitarian assistance reaches everyone who needs it.

In Aden, I asked the Prime Minister and other members of the Government, among other things, to ensure progress on paying salaries to health workers, teachers and other civil servants, to get Sanaa’s airport reopened for commercial and humanitarian flights and to improve the operation of the ports, especially Hudaydah.

The Prime Minister told me he would instruct his officials to pay health workers’ salaries. He also said he would be happy to see the cranes financed by the US government for WFP delivered to and installed in Hudaydah.

In Sana’a, I raised serious concerns about the operating environment facing the UN and other humanitarian agencies.

I am concerned to hear that UN staff have been harassed by the authorities in Sana’a, that essential equipment and supplies are deliberately delayed at the ports, and that our efforts to carry out essential assessments of needs so that we can target our assistance most effectively, are all being blocked.

I received assurances in Sana’a that these issues would be addressed and equipment belonging to the UN would be released.

There are three points I would like to emphasize to all of you.

**First:** humanitarians need unimpeded access to the most vulnerable people throughout Yemen.

All parties to the conflict must provide safe, rapid, unhindered and sustained humanitarian access to people in need, through all ports and airports, through Hudaydah port and Sana’a airport, as well as by road.

We are grateful for the collaboration we have had on humanitarian movements by land, air and sea as part of OCHA’s deconfliction mechanism. But commercial vessels with humanitarian goods have been delayed from reaching their destination—primarily into Hudaydah port.

Humanitarian flights must also remain open to all humanitarian workers, UN and NGOs alike.

People in positions of authority in Sana’a regularly deny access to humanitarian agencies, and have arbitrarily delayed or denied dozens of requests for humanitarian personnel to enter the country. Aid workers are spending a significant amount of time negotiating access with local authorities when they could and should be delivering assistance to
people in need. I ask for your help in getting all these issues addressed, in line with the assurances that were given to me in Yemen.

**Second,** the humanitarian response to the world’s worst hunger crisis and its worst cholera outbreak must be fully resourced.

With only two months left in the year, the UN Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) is only 56 per cent funded. I thank all of those generous donors who have already committed their support.

This funding has helped 130 humanitarian partners to respond to needs in every governorate in Yemen, enabling us to help well over seven million people with assistance under the HRP.

It has allowed the World Food Programme to reach seven million people in August, a doubling since the beginning of the year.

And it has assisted the World Health Organisation, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the International Committee for the Red Cross and many NGOs to largely contain the devastating cholera epidemic.

But I know that we can do more.

I respectfully ask you all to directly fund the Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan to ensure the most effective and coordinated response across the country, and to contain conditionality to the minimum and keep reporting requirements to a level commensurate with the situation we face on the ground.

I also ask, in particular, that any outstanding pledges be paid immediately.

Priority sectors include food and nutrition, urgent investment in health and water and sanitation systems to prevent a further surge in cholera, protection and education.

We also need to work together to plan the response and coordinate our efforts for the continuing humanitarian operation that will inevitably be required in 2018. We would like to work more closely with all of you in preparing and acting on the Humanitarian Needs Overview for 2018, which we are working on right now.

This brings me to my **final point,** which is as much an opportunity as it is a challenge.

In addition to supporting humanitarian efforts, we must collectively support the crippled health, education and water and sanitation sectors.

As a first step, support is needed to provide incentives to civil servants providing life-saving services, many of whom have not been paid over the last year.
The salary crisis has left health clinics, water boards and schools with no staff to operate them. This comes on top of extensive damage to infrastructure, and equipment and medicine shortages.

The principal responsibility for this lies, as it must, with the Government and others in positions of power in Yemen. But I believe that we too need to play a role in shoring up the priority sectors, working with Yemen’s own institutions and public sector workers. That will have an immediate impact in saving lives and restoring hope to the Yemeni people.

Ultimately, this crisis can only be solved by stopping the war, and that requires a political solution. In the meantime, I reiterate the plea I made at the UN General Assembly in September. All parties in Yemen must do much more to ensure they respect international humanitarian law and protect civilians – and those outside with an influence on the parties should exert greater pressure to this end.

In the absence of substantial progress on all these points, the already dire situation will continue to deteriorate. The human suffering, which is already extreme, will grow and grow.