

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief
Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock, Remarks to the Security Council on the
Humanitarian Situation in Yemen**

New York, 23 October 2018

As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President.

On 21 September, I warned you we were losing the fight against famine in Yemen.

Since then, the situation has got worse.

That is why, as required in Security Council resolution 2417, which you adopted in May this year, we issued the White Note circulated late last week. In line with our obligations under your resolution, my briefing today focuses on the risk of famine.

Mr President,

Famines are mercifully rare in the modern world. They used to be ubiquitous. A relatively common occurrence all over the world for more than 99% of human history. It is a spectacular feature of progress in our era that only two famines have been declared in the last 20 years. The one that took the lives of quarter of a million Somalis in 2011. And the localised famine last year affecting a few tens of thousands of people in South Sudan. It is that recent progress that makes what we now face in Yemen so shocking.

A famine is declared when three thresholds of food insecurity, acute malnutrition and mortality are together all breached. The three criteria are:

- At least one in five households faces an extreme lack of food;

- More than 30 percent of children under 5 are suffering from acute malnutrition (wasting);
- At least two people out of every 10,000 are dying every day.

Assessments conducted a year ago identified 107 districts out of Yemen's 333 districts to be at risk of famine, where two of these thresholds were either already exceeded or dangerously close. A further assessment exercise is now under way across the country, and initial results are expected in mid-November.

It has been more difficult to confirm the position on the third criterion, the number of deaths due to starvation or starvation related disease.

But while mortality-related data is difficult to collect and triangulate, health workers are pointing to the rising number of deaths linked to food-related factors.

We also know that many deaths are hidden. Only half of health facilities are functioning – and many Yemenis are too poor to access the ones that are open. Unable to reach care, people often die at home. Very few families report these deaths; the stories of those people go unrecorded.

At the end of last year, one aid agency estimated that 130 children under 5 were dying every day from extreme hunger and disease. Nearly 50,000 little children during the course of a year.

While we wait for the results of the assessments under way, we already know that a further year of war and economic crisis have pushed millions more Yemenis towards famine.

So, just to be clear, my assessment – my advice to you – is that there is now a clear and present danger of an imminent and great big famine engulfing Yemen: much bigger than anything any professional in this field has seen during their working lives.

Some people – including some of you – will be thinking: “Hang on a minute. They’ve told us this before, and it didn’t happen”.

That is correct. We warned of famine in Yemen at the beginning of last year, as part of the Secretary-General's call to action which also flagged the risk in Somalia, South Sudan, and north east Nigeria. The response – a dramatic scaling up of the UN coordinated relief effort - helped mitigate the worst impact of the crisis.

I issued a similar warning when I briefed you on 8 November last year on the likely effect of the economic blockade that had just been imposed by the Coalition following missile attacks on Riyadh from inside Yemen. The blockade was removed, and supervised imports of food, fuel and medicines resumed through the Red Sea ports.

What I am telling you today is that the situation is now much graver than on either of those two occasions.

Why is that?

Firstly, because of the sheer number of people at risk. In my update for you last month, I said that an additional 3.5 million people are likely to become severely food insecure in the months ahead, added to the 8 million we are already reaching each month through the UN coordinated response effort. A total of 11 million.

That's what I said on 21 September. We now think, Mr. President, that estimate was wrong. Our revised assessment, the results of new survey work and analysis, is that the total number of people facing pre-famine conditions, meaning they are entirely reliant on external aid for survival, could soon reach not 11 million but 14 million. That is half the total population of the country.

And secondly, beyond the sheer numbers, while millions of people have been surviving on emergency food assistance for years, the help they get is enough merely to survive. Not to thrive. The toll is unbearably high. The immune systems of millions of people on survival support for years on end are now are literally collapsing, making them – especially children and the elderly – more likely to succumb to malnutrition, cholera and other diseases.

Last month, I explained the two recent developments which have deepened the crisis: first the intensification of fighting around Hudaydah, choking the lifeline which the aid operation and commercial imports rely on; and second the recent further collapse of the economy.

What has since happened on those two issues?

Fierce clashes continue in Hudaydah, including intense fighting, shelling and air strikes in Hudaydah City over the last several days. More than 570,000 people have been forced from their homes across Hudaydah Governorate since fighting escalated in mid-June. Due to ongoing clashes, the eastern road from Hudaydah City to Sana'a remains blocked, which impacts trade and convoys from the key ports that serve all the population centres of northern Yemen. Clashes have also continued to block access to a milling facility that contains enough aid-financed grain to feed 3.7 million people for a month, and several humanitarian warehouses have been occupied for over two months.

The parties to the conflict continue to violate international humanitarian law. Since late May, more than 5,000 separate violations have been recorded, including mass civilian casualties and destruction or damage to critical civilian infrastructure including hospitals, electricity and water systems, markets, roads and bridges.

Delays in issuing visas, restrictions on importation of equipment and cargo, retraction of permits, interference in humanitarian assessment exercises, interference in monitoring and other obstructions all limit the ability of humanitarian agencies to provide life-saving assistance to innocent civilians.

In the absence of a cessation of hostilities, especially around Hudaydah, where fighting for more than four months now has damaged the key facilities and infrastructure on which the aid operation relies, the relief effort will ultimately be simply overwhelmed. The time, surely, has come for all the parties to heed these warnings.

On the economy, the central problem, as I explained last month, is that Yemen is almost entirely reliant on imports for food, fuel and medicines. And the available foreign exchange – from what little remains of oil exports, from money sent home by Yemenis

out of the country, and from international assistance – has been simply inadequate to finance adequate levels of imports to support the population.

Since 2015, gross domestic product, the national income of Yemen, has shrunk by 50 per cent. More than 600,000 jobs have been lost. Hundreds of thousands of civil servants and pensioners have not received regular payments since late 2016. More than 1.5 million families are no longer receiving support through public safety-nets. More than 80 per cent of Yemenis now live below the poverty line.

The collapse in the domestic economy has been partially – but only partially - mitigated by aid efforts, including generous funding this year from the Gulf, the United States, European countries and other donors, and that has allowed the UN and its partners to dramatically scale-up relief efforts.

Aid agencies are implementing the world's largest humanitarian operation in Yemen. More than 200 organisations are working through the UN Humanitarian Response Plan and have delivered assistance to each and every one of Yemen's 333 districts this year. As many as 8 million people are receiving life-saving assistance every month.

But because the aid operation cannot conceivably meet the needs of all Yemenis, I called last month for an urgent and substantial injection of foreign exchange, and the resumption of payments to pensioners and key public sector workers like teachers and health professionals.

There have been constructive discussions on both these issues, and indications of further support especially from Gulf countries. Today's announcement that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will provide \$70 million to cover allowances for 135,000 teachers all over the country is important. However, I fear, overall, that action in these areas still looks to be both too small and too slow to reverse the trajectory towards famine. My plea is that those concerned address this as a matter of great urgency.

At the same time, the Government of Yemen appears to be planning further restrictions on traders importing essential commodities.

Traders trying to import six key commodities - wheat, rice, sugar, milk, cooking oil and fuel oil derivatives - are now being told, as a result of new Government regulations, that they must secure lines of credit from the Central Bank. But only a handful of lines of credit have been issued since June, mostly in just the last few days.

Enforcement of these regulations is already having alarming effect. Two vessels carrying more than 29,000 metric tons of fuel have at the Government's request been refused entry into Yemen in recent days. I described the impact of desperate fuel shortages last month: if current trends continue, water services and sanitation facilities will inevitably be either curtailed or cut altogether.

The Government has announced that it intends to extend enforcement of the new regulations to food imports starting 9 November. Unless steps are taken to expedite the process or waive the new requirements, imports of key food commodities and fuel could, we assess, fall by half.

That would, for reasons I have explained, be the death knell for countless innocent civilians, most of them women and children.

So, Mr. President,

I call on all stakeholders to do everything possible to avert catastrophe. We urgently seek your support in this Council for action in five areas:

First, a cessation of hostilities in and around all the infrastructure and facilities on which the aid operation and commercial importers rely. A humanitarian cease-fire would reflect the obligations of the parties to the conflict to uphold international humanitarian law and to do everything possible to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance. As we have previously made clear, the UN is ready to play an enhanced role in ensuring the appropriate use of key facilities especially around Hudaydah.

Second, protection of the supply of food and essential goods across the country.

Humanitarian and commercial imports must flow into all ports and onwards to their final

destinations. This means lifting planned and existing restrictions on imports and keeping the main transport routes open and safe.

Third, a larger and faster injection of foreign exchange into the economy through the Central Bank, along with expediting credit for traders, and payment of pensioners and civil servants.

Fourth, increased funding and support for the humanitarian operation. Given projected increases in needs – potentially up to 14 million people, as I have said - and inevitable lead times, aid agencies need additional resources now to start scaling up relief efforts.

And fifth, with so many lives at stake, we call upon the belligerents to seize this moment to engage fully and openly with the Special Envoy to end the conflict.

He and I discuss these issues all the time and have agreed on the five issues I raised before you today.

Thank you.