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Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Yemen

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New York City

October 31, 2016

AS DELIVERED

Thank you, Mr. President, and thank you, Special Envoy Ould Cheikh Ahmed, Under-Secretary-General O'Brien, and WPF Regional Director Hadi, for your briefings. Mr. Hadi, I pay you special thanks for bearing witness on behalf of Yemenis whose voices, as we all know, are too rarely heard in this conflict.

Recently, a father of four children in Sana'a reportedly asked his daughters to post their feelings about this war on Facebook. Fifteen year-old Kholoud wrote, "We, the children of Yemen, want to achieve our hopes: to study and play and achieve our goals." Now that is something you might expect almost any child of Kholoud's age to want. But Kholoud continued that in this conflict, "We sleep afraid, we wake up afraid, and leave our homes afraid." Kholoud's younger sister, 14 year-old Asma wrote, "We are afraid of catastrophe, as it is painful when a person kills others; mothers, fathers, and children." And their youngest sister, 12 year-old Haneen, reported that "every day, the noises get louder and louder next to us."

Although these voices are not with us enough, whether here in the Council or in our media – international media, regional media – when we do hear from people on the ground, people like Kholoud, Asma, and Haneen, they're pretty consistent. They demand, or they plead, for an end to their suffering.

We, as members of the Security Council, need to make the same demand, and we need to be united in doing so. The parties must stop escalating their attacks. They must, at long last, commit to peace. And we need immediate progress on three fronts: an immediate cessation of hostilities; a humanitarian surge, the likes of which we haven't seen in Yemen for the life of this conflict; and a prompt return to political talks.

First, the United States calls on the parties to recommit immediately to the cessation of hostilities, which means halting all military actions on the ground, in the air, and at sea. That includes an end to shelling and an end to airstrikes. A sustained cessation of hostilities is necessary to give the Special Envoy the space he needs to engage the parties on the terms of a political solution to the conflict.

There is very little good news in Yemen, but one small piece of good news is that we have seen that the parties can reduce the violence in Yemen when they show the will to do so. For all the concerns that many of us have about command and control, from April until August of this year, the cessation of hostilities led to a significant drop in airstrikes and in violence, and thus in suffering, on the ground. Now I don't think we can overstate the success; the cessation was far from perfect, but it provided some respite for Yemen's civilians, and it provided a backdrop to help encourage talks to continue. We need to get back to where we were with the cessation and it needs to be improved.

But since the Kuwait talks ended nearly three months ago, the parties have intensified their attacks. Last Friday, forces loyal to the Houthi and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh reportedly launched a missile from Yemen toward Mecca and Jeddah, one among several recent missile launches. The United States condemns these missile launches in the strongest terms. These attacks on Saudi territory are an

obvious attempt to derail the political process, and they must cease. As we have emphasized, every country has a right to defend itself, and the United States remains fully committed to the security of Saudi Arabia.

It is also incumbent on the Saudi-led Coalition and the forces of the Yemeni government to refrain from taking steps that escalate this violence and to commit to the cessation of hostilities. After 19 months of fighting, it should be clear that there is absolutely no military solution to this conflict. Those who believe that if one increases military pressure that's going to strengthen one's hand in political negotiations, have 19 months of evidence to show that is not the case. Increasing military pressure at this point, initiating new operations, is only going to prolong the unnecessary suffering. And the longer the conflict continues, the more Al-Qai'da in the Arabian Peninsula will use this vacuum to expand its presence and launch new attacks.

Airstrikes that hit schools, hospitals, and other civilian objects have to stop. In many cases, these strikes have damaged key infrastructure that is essential to delivering humanitarian aid in Yemen. The United States strongly condemns the airstrike on mourners at a reception hall in Sana'a earlier this month. This strike left 140 mourners dead and more than 600 injured. The Coalition has accepted responsibility, and we look forward to further reporting on their investigation of the attack, including on concrete measures taken to establish accountability, compensate victims, and make certain that such strikes are not repeated. And the United States will continue to underscore to the Coalition the need to take all feasible measures to reduce civilian casualties and target precisely, including verifying targets against a no-strike list.

We also strongly condemn Houthi/Saleh forces for all the cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia and the shelling of populated areas, especially in Taiz. On October 4, the UN reported that artillery fire in the center of Taiz killed at least 10 civilians, including six children, and injured 17 others. The civilian death toll underscores again that the parties need to commit to a cessation of hostilities.

That brings me to my second point, the need for a humanitarian surge of a different order. The statistics that Under Secretary-General O'Brien and Mr. Hadi have presented show that the problem is getting worse. Just take one – the 370,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition, up from 320,000 last year. Severe acute malnutrition means one thing – unless these kids get an immediate course of medical treatment, they will likely die. Consider that for a moment – hundreds of thousands of children, infants and babies in many cases, on the brink of dying not from bombs or shells, but just because they cannot get a simple course of nutritional supplements. And millions more are at risk.

So let's focus on how we can respond. All member states should demand – here at the UN and in our bilateral relationships and conversations – that the parties allow complete and unfettered humanitarian access. That means authorities on the ground need to approve the UN's plans to distribute aid and let convoys through checkpoints. It also means that the roads, bridges, and ports that are vital for delivering aid need to be protected from the fighting. The UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism, UNVIM, has helped facilitate imports of basic food and medicine into Yemen, and as Mr. O'Brien noted, it deserves all of our continued support and full cooperation from the parties.

But some additional steps that should be taken – the parties need to reopen the airport in Sana'a to civilian flights once again, allowing critically injured Yemenis to leave and Yemenis who are stranded abroad who wish to return, to get back to their homes. And when fuel and medicine do enter Yemen, the parties need to allow these goods to reach hospitals in all parts of the country. The cranes at Houdeida port need to be repaired and the parties should facilitate the UN's plans to repair them, to restore capacity at what had long been a vital port and source of influx of many, many goods.

At the same time, one has to stress that no amount of aid can make up for the void left by Yemen's collapsed economy. And that is why we are concerned about the consequences of the Yemeni government – its decision to move the Central Bank – and we call on the government to continue paying salaries nationwide. These salaries are one of the few sources of income left for many Yemeni families. And I was struck by Mr. Hadi's account that often just a small amount of money is what is needed for a mother to be able to move from one part of the country to a place where a nutritional supplement is available. When salaries are taken away, a critical source of income is taken away and it becomes more likely that infants and children are going to die of starvation.

My third point, and final point, is on the urgent need for a political solution. The Special Envoy has presented both parties with a credible and balanced roadmap for ending the conflict, together with a security plan for Sana'a. The roadmap addresses the concerns of the Yemeni government about sequenced withdrawals from the key cities of Sana'a, Taiz, and Hudaidah. And it addresses the concerns of the Houthi and the GPC about the transition of executive authority. The roadmap is a basis for a negotiation – it is not a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. Now is not the time for any of the parties to hedge, stall, or add new conditions. The parties should engage with the Special

Envoy immediately to hammer out the details of a final agreement.

Of course, moving forward with this roadmap will require the parties in Yemen to compromise – not a strong suit. It is long past time for them to do so. The people of Yemen cannot afford for the parties to continue acting on the illusion that they will achieve a total victory. It won't happen.

Let me conclude. Earlier, I mentioned the problem of severe acute malnutrition, joining many voices around this table. A recent BBC documentary called *Starving Yemen* profiled one such case – a toddler named Abdelrahman, who was born at the start of the conflict. Abdelrahman is an 18-month old now, but he weighs as much as a six-month old. He is also lactose intolerant, requiring a baby formula that used to be widely available before the conflict. But now, his family cannot find this specific formula anywhere. Looking at Abdelrahman, his mother finally breaks down in this documentary. She says, "I'm losing my son and there is nothing I can do about it. I've seen children like him on TV – they die."

At the 11th hour, an especially determined doctor just barely managed to find a three-month supply of formula to keep Abdelrahman alive. But consider again, there are more than 370,000 kids suffering severe acute malnutrition like Abdelrahman, with just as many anguished mothers at their bedsides; mothers who have seen kids like this on TV but never imagined they would be holding one. The Special Envoy is offering a way out of the fighting. The plight of children like Abdelrahman should compel the parties to negotiate and to cease hostilities immediately. And we, as members of this Council, should unite in demanding it.

Thank you.

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