



Briefing of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Yemen to the open session of the UN Security Council

Friday 22 November 2019

(As delivered)

Thank you very much, Madam President

Members of this Council may recall that, after the events in the south in August of this year, I called for decisive action to seize the opportunities available for peace in Yemen. And since then, the momentum to reach a political settlement in Yemen has been building. We have seen the parties work together with the support from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, regional powers, the international community and the United Nations to achieve compromise on a range of issues, including the situation of course in the south, the de-escalation of hostilities and specific economic challenges. These are none of them small issues and reaching compromises has been no small achievement of those involved.

Madame President,

We are now beginning to see the need in Yemen for the kind of leadership that creates peace. A leader for peace is one who practices the art of concession, of inclusion, and who encourages forbearance over entitlement. And now we are seeing some evidence of this kind of leadership, and I'd like in this briefing, Madam President, to give some examples.

The Riyadh Agreement, signed on the 5th of November between the Government of Yemen and the Southern Transitional Council is the first example. The events of August created what I had defined to this Council at the time as “an existential threat” to Yemen. The prospect of a breakup of the state was real and frankly terrifying. During the talks leading to the Riyadh Agreement, negotiated over 86 days, leaders from opposing parties sat down and agreed to work for a greater cause. And the mediator, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in the best traditions of that role, praised them for their courage rather than criticising them for the many weeks of slog that had gone into making that moment happen.

And we must all thank President Hadi and the leadership of the Southern Transitional Council, as well as the Saudi leadership for this example of how to bring out the best in the parties. And it should serve as a catalyst to move Yemen swiftly towards settling the conflict that is in front of us in this Council through political means.

Saudi Arabia’s achievement, in this regard, shows the positive role that regional support can play in all our efforts to reach peace. I had the privilege two weeks ago to meet the Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister, His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and he was very positive about the prospects of a comprehensive peaceful resolution to the conflict in Yemen and was clear to me that Saudi Arabia will support all efforts to make this happen and happen soon. This was confirmed on Wednesday by Saudi Arabia's King Salman in his message to the Shura Council, where he hoped that the agreement signed in Riyadh would open the door to broader peace talks. And I am grateful to the leadership of the King and that of the Crown Prince for their words of support.

Madam President

In what is perhaps an even more important sign that something is changing in Yemen, I would draw your attention to a simple indicator of the war itself. In the last two weeks, the rate of that war has dramatically reduced: there were reportedly almost 80% fewer airstrikes nation-wide than in the two weeks prior. And I realise these are short periods, but nonetheless, it is striking. And in recent weeks, there have been entire 48-hour periods without airstrikes at all for the first time since the conflict began.

We call this de-escalation, a reduction in the tempo of the war, and perhaps we hope a move towards an overall ceasefire in Yemen that Mark and I'm sure Ursula and other many members of this Council have been calling for for a very long time. The cessation of missile and drone attacks on Saudi territory announced by Ansar Allah on the 20th September has been sustained for a second month in a row. Efforts to de-escalate violence are holding. I hope we will all soon be able to build on this achievement.

And I should say here very clearly that I fully support and endorse all efforts which reduce the war in Yemen, and I'm sure the Members of this Council would agree with me. The United Nations continues to uphold its responsibility, our responsibility to bring the parties closer to ending the conflict. And what is taking place at the moment, both in the south and in the north lays the necessary, indeed vital groundwork for that process.

And the acts that we have seen translated into a reduction of tempo in the war and into an agreement on the south are the decisions of leaders who begin to see, perhaps as yet indistinctly, though clearly unmistakably, a prospect for peace. They are doing the right thing. Let us have a lot more of it.

Therefore, Madam President, we celebrate these achievements even as we prepare for our turn at the table.

Madam President,

My third example relates to the implementation of the Stockholm agreement, now, almost a year old. We have seen continued positive signs in Hudaydah, where the parties have taken further steps forward with implementing the agreement reached in Stockholm last year.

In an earlier briefing to this Council, Mark Lowcock and I both spoke of the urgent need for some creative flexibility on the part of the Government of Yemen to allow fuel ships expeditiously to enter Hudaydah to avoid the crushing damage to livelihoods of a fuel shortage, the outlines of which were already visible in Sana'a and in other cities. The Government at that time stood by their right to issue decrees for the purpose of raising taxes. A process which led to a politicised deadlock over fuel imports to Sana'a and surrounding Governorates.

But this month, the Government's Economic and Technical Team has agreed with my Office to establish a mechanism to have traders deposit the taxes and customs for commercial oil and gas shipments into a special account in the Central bank in Hudaydah under UN supervision. The proceeds will go to pay the salaries of the civil servants in Hudaydah and elsewhere as set out in the Hudaydah element of the Stockholm Agreement. And I am grateful to the Government and to Ansar Allah for the concessions needed to make significant progress on addressing the issue of this port revenues, and for breaking the logjam in the entry of fuel ships into Hudaydah.

The result is, fuel ships are now entering Hudaydah and a crisis has been averted due to the creative thinking of those involved.

In Hudaydah, the parties have also strengthened their adherence to the ceasefire. The establishment of the CeaseFire Enhancement and De-escalation Mechanism has allowed a reduction of the number of security incidents in the governorate: 40 per cent lower than before the mechanism came into effect.

And since the creation of five Joint Observation Posts on the frontlines in Hudaydah, we have also observed a decrease of approximately 80 per cent in the number of security incidents in the city. Indeed, remarkably, relatedly, but very much welcome, for several days in a row, there were no incidents in the city at all. I would like to commend, as I'm sure General Guha will, the parties for this constructive cooperation. Both achievements are remarkable and should be noted by all of us.

So Hudaydah I suggest, **Madam President**, is another example, of the value of creative concession supplanting the desire for victory.

UNMHA, the UN Mission for the Hudaydah agreement, has been playing a vital role in supporting the parties with the implementation of that agreement. I would therefore like to express my concern here about increasing restrictions imposed on the movements of the mission's personnel in Hudaydah. These restrictions not only hamper the mission's day-to-day operations, but also threaten the implementation of the mission's mandate. I hope that the relevant authorities will take all necessary measures to ensure the freedom of movement necessary for UNMHA to carry out its mandate.

Madam President,

In late October, my Office had the privilege of meeting for two days with 20 Yemeni women peace leaders from across the country. We discussed together the elements of any political settlement so as to ensure that their perspectives should be taken into account now before that settlement is negotiated. They also provided evidence of the intrinsic and I think perhaps unique contribution women's groups play in Yemen, as they do elsewhere, in improving local conditions during the conflict. We know how important it is to include both a gender perspective and women's participation in the processes of peace.

Madam President,

In conclusion, at my last briefing, I referred to signs of hope in Yemen. In this one I hope in this brief survey I have given evidence that these signs are beginning to produce results.

And this means that Yemen's leaders must now ask themselves what peace should look like. They will need to reach an agreement on the political and security arrangements to end the fighting, and we will be there to help them do so. They will need to lead in rebuilding the country, its economy and its social fabric, and we will all be there to make this happen. They will need to deal pragmatically with complex political challenges in a landscape that has changed dramatically during the years of conflict. The groundwork in addressing these issues must start now, but we believe, Madam President, as one Yemeni leader said so vividly to me, that we may soon see the return of civility into Yemen's social life..

Thank you very much.