Statement by the High Commissioner for Human Rights to the United Nations Security Council on Yemen

December 22, 2015

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

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Madame President.

Distinguished members of the Council.

Thank you for this opportunity to brief the Council on the latest developments in Yemen.

I am encouraged by the recent efforts exerted by the parties in the conflict, with the support of the United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, aimed at reaching a peaceful solution. The preceding intensification of the conflict in Yemen resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of civilian casualties and an aggravation of the already dire humanitarian situation. It also continues to undermine prospects for peace.

Conditions of life have become untenable for the vast majority of people in Yemen. The combined impact of violence and artificial impediments to the delivery of humanitarian assistance has proved disastrous. At least 21 million people, 80% of the population, are currently reliant on some measure of humanitarian assistance, while approximately half the population is suffering from malnutrition.

Furthermore, the findings of my Office indicate that there continues to be an intensification of existing patterns of violations, including – amongst others - the violation of the right to life, destruction of civilian objects and infrastructure and illegal detention, at the hands of all parties to the conflict. As the violence continues to intensify, the number of civilian casualties across the country continues to rise. According to the information gathered by my Office in Yemen, over 2,700 civilians have been killed and more than 5,300 injured since the start of the conflict. My office has also documented dozens of cases of alleged illegal detention, primarily at the hands of the Popular Committees.

Sadly, it is the children who are bearing the brunt of the conflict in Yemen. There has been a steady increase in the number of children killed and injured. This year alone, over 600 children have been killed and more than 900 have suffered serious injury. This is a fivefold increase compared with the entire year of 2014.

In September, I presented a report on the situation of human rights in Yemen before the 30th session of the Human Rights Council. The report addressed credible allegations of violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law as gathered by my office. The report also presented the Human Rights Council with a number of recommendations, principal amongst which is a call for an international investigation into credible allegations of violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law and accountability for the perpetrators.

The Government of Yemen had earlier announced its intention to create a national commission of investigation, which I welcomed. The Human Rights Council subsequently adopted resolution 30/18 which calls on my Office to provide technical assistance to a national commission of inquiry and to report back to the Council on the situation of human rights in Yemen at its 33rd session. The recruiting and deployment of new staff members to support follow up on the Human Rights Council resolution are currently pending approval by the Fifth Committee.

I have observed with extreme concern the continuation of heavy shelling from the ground and the air in areas with high a concentration of civilians as well as the perpetuation of the destruction of civilian infrastructure - in particular hospitals and schools - by all parties to the conflict, although a disproportionate amount appeared to be the result of airstrikes carried out by Coalition Forces

My Office will continue to document credible allegations of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in the context of Yemen, and will continue to call upon all parties involved to abide by, and commit themselves to, the protection of civilians and hold those responsible for serious violations of international law to account. In that regard, I also strongly encourage the Government of Yemen to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court or urgently accept its jurisdiction.

I further call on the Council to do everything within its powers to help restrain the use of force by all parties and to urge all sides to abide by the basic principles of international humanitarian law, including by immediately removing all impediments to humanitarian assistance and fully cooperate with the Humanitarian Response Team.

Madame President.

Unless Yemen and the world urgently rise to meet the extraordinary challenges presented by this situation, the consequences could be even more catastrophic.

To that end, I urgently call on the Council to expedite and intensify diplomatic efforts to bring about a ceasefire and help create a framework for negotiating a comprehensive and sustainable peace in Yemen. Any military solution that falls outside of the context of a negotiated agreement may - in the short term – bring about an immediate strategic advantage to one side or another. Nonetheless, it will inevitably render Yemen and its neighbours less stable and secure over the longer term.

Madame President.

Failure to act decisively does not only spell misery for the millions of vulnerable people in Yemen today. It would inevitably push the country into an irreversible process of Balkanization, the consequences of which would lie outside of anyone’s control. The potential ramifications of a failed state in Yemen would almost inevitably create safe havens for radical and confessional groups such as the so-called ISIS. This, in turn, could expand the conflict beyond Yemen’s borders, potentially shattering regional stability.

Finally, in the light of the enormity of this crisis – it is imperative that relevant stakeholders put aside their political and ideological differences in order to achieve our common goal to re-establish some measure of security and stability in Yemen.

Thank you Madame President.