



Security Council

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Letter dated 18 August 2020 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

On 15 July 2020, Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, gave a briefing to the Security Council on the increasing environmental and humanitarian risks posed by the *Safer* oil tanker, as well as the efforts that were being undertaken by the United Nations to assist with this issue. By way of follow-up, I would like to bring to your attention an update on the status of such efforts.

First, I would like to underscore my deep concern about the condition of the *Safer* oil tanker, an ageing floating storage and offloading vessel moored off the west coast of Yemen, 60 kilometres north of Hudaydah. With almost no maintenance since 2015, the *Safer* – carrying 1.1 million barrels of oil (four times the amount involved in the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989) – risks causing a major oil spill, explosion or fire.

On 27 May 2020, seawater leaked into the engine room, threatening to destabilize and sink the entire vessel, potentially releasing all the oil into the sea. A temporary fix succeeded in containing the leak, but it is unlikely to hold for very long. A spill would have catastrophic environmental and humanitarian consequences, including the destruction of livelihoods, and shut down the Hudaydah port, a vital lifeline for millions of Yemenis who depend on commercial imports and humanitarian aid.

The tragic explosion in Beirut on 4 August 2020, and the recent alarming oil spill in Mauritius, demand the world's vigilance and urgent action to avert preventable loss of life and livelihoods and significant ecological damage where possible. For now, the *Safer* remains an avoidable tragedy – but not for long. If a spill, an explosion or a fire were to occur, mounting an effective response would be severely constrained given the limited availability of specialist equipment and personnel amid the ongoing conflict.

Second, allow me to enumerate the potential disastrous consequences of an accident. Research by independent experts indicates that an oil spill could destroy Red Sea ecosystems on which almost 30 million people depend, including 1.6 million Yemenis. All the fisheries along the west coast of Yemen would be affected within days and the livelihoods of the fishing communities would collapse, at a time when 90 per cent of these populations are already estimated to need humanitarian aid. The shores of Hudaydah, Hajjah and Ta'izz would likely be the worst hit.

An oil spill could lead to the closure of the key port of Hudaydah for up to six months. Experts estimate that a six-month closure would increase fuel prices in Yemen by 200 per cent for months, double food prices and hinder the delivery of vital



humanitarian aid to millions of Yemenis. At this time of economic hardship, the risk of famine may again already be on the horizon. Yemen cannot afford the closure of its largest port, as it is almost entirely dependent on imports for its basic needs, including food and medicines.

Other Red Sea littoral countries, including Djibouti, Eritrea and Saudi Arabia, would suffer as well. A spill could also debilitate one of the world's busiest commercial shipping routes through the Red Sea, which accounts for some 10 per cent of global trade. However, expert research indicates that the vast majority of affected people would be the millions of Yemenis along the west coast, whose livelihoods would be destroyed, and those in mainly northern communities away from the coast who rely on Hudaydah port to bring in essential goods.

If fire erupts on the *Safer* for any reason, more than 8.4 million people would be exposed to harmful levels of pollutants.

Overall, the impact of an oil spill from the *Safer* tanker would cost an estimated \$1.5 billion over 25 years.

Third, allow me to summarize the background of the situation at hand. The Government of Yemen and the Houthis (who also refer to themselves as Ansar Allah) first approached the United Nations to provide support in resolving the issue of the *Safer* tanker in early 2018. Nevertheless, the escalation of military hostilities on the west coast of Yemen throughout most of 2018 precluded safe access to the tanker. With the Yemeni parties concluding the Stockholm Agreement (S/2018/1134, annex) in December 2018, which included a governorate-wide ceasefire in Hudaydah, safe access became possible once again.

After extensive negotiations in the first half of 2019, both Yemeni parties approved the deployment of a United Nations technical team to assess the damage and conduct any feasible immediate repairs. In August 2019, the Houthis granted the United Nations the entry permits to travel to Hudaydah, but did not provide the final clearances necessary to access the tanker by sea. They further raised several demands (including some unrelated to the *Safer*) that led to the cancellation of the mission. Since then, the United Nations has repeatedly attempted to obtain the required authorizations to deploy the expert team.

Fourth, following the seawater leak into the engine in May 2020, the United Nations intensified efforts to deploy a technical expert mission. We remain keen to assist with the *Safer*, with two priorities in mind: (a) conducting a technical assessment of the condition of the tanker; and (b) making any feasible repairs while on-site during the assessment. This expert-driven assessment is a crucial first step to understanding the scope of the problem, deciding what repairs are possible and what equipment and resources are needed to conduct such repairs and determining the next course of action to neutralize the threat posed by the tanker, on the basis of scientific evidence. The United Nations has no prejudgment as to the outcome of the assessment mission and will support any option that could result in a safe, secure and environmentally sound solution.

Since the Security Council meeting on 15 July 2020, my Special Envoy for Yemen, in cooperation with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat and the United Nations Office for Project Services, has continued to engage with Houthi leadership to enable the deployment of the United Nations mission to the vessel. The Houthis reverted with a range of technical questions, which have been answered in writing. The mission is ready to deploy pending authorization by the Houthis, who control the territory where the *Safer* is moored.

As we continue to engage with the Houthis to overcome all remaining obstacles and provide the necessary permits and authorizations for the technical team, I remain

open to other possible options to address this matter. We also welcome and call for the engagement of Member States on this important issue. I will keep you informed of any relevant developments, and rest assured that this issue will remain a top priority for the United Nations system.

Averting this calamity should not be politicized. It is about people's lives. The Yemeni people are already facing impossible odds: a war, a free-falling economy, diseases, shattered public institutions, unreliable infrastructure, hunger and uncertain futures. The *Safer* is a solvable problem and does not need to be added to their many other burdens.

I should be grateful if you would bring the present letter to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) António **Guterres**
