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國際運輸勞連

International Transport Workers' Federation  
Federación Internacional de los Trabajadores del Transporte  
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Internationale Transportarbeiter-Föderation  
Международная федерация транспортников  
الاتحاد الدولي لعمال النقل

Mr António Guterres  
Secretary-General  
United Nations  
405 East, 42nd Street  
New York, NY, 10017  
United States of America - USA

Via email: [antonio.guterres@un.org](mailto:antonio.guterres@un.org)

Our ref: OGS/SMC/jm

07 July 2020

Dear Mr Guterres,

### **Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen: The urgent reopening of Sana'a International Airport**

We write to you on behalf of the International Transport Workers' Federation, the almost 20 million transport workers we represent around the world, and, in particular, our affiliates in Yemen concerned about the human and humanitarian consequences of the ongoing conflict in the country. The ITF is joining an urgent appeal from the Employees and Workers Syndicate of Yemen Airways to support the reopening for humanitarian purposes of the airport of the capital city Sana'a.

By its [Resolution 14](#), brought by Yemeni affiliate unions and passed by the ITF Congress 2018, representing the consensus of our highest governing body, the ITF committed to take action to pressure the international community and alliance forces to keep the ports and airports of Yemen open for humanitarian supplies and to guarantee free movement of all people in Yemen.

We understand that Sana'a airport has been closed to passengers for approaching four years. It was first closed in August 2016 by the government of Yemen and coalition forces, and has continued to operate United Nations and Red Cross flights only during that time.

The only alternative operating airports are in Aden and Seiyun, which are a perilous 24-hour journey away by road via checkpoints and areas of active fighting.

#### *Humanitarian and Human Rights Impact*

In a September 2019 [report on the Situation of Human Rights in Yemen including violations and abuses since September 2014](#), the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen informed the UN Human Rights Council that the total closure of Sana'a airport to commercial flights, as part of the "coalition blockade on Yemen", "prevented thousands of Yemenis from seeking medical care abroad,...further limited cargo importation and severely restricted the ability of civilians to enter and leave the north of Yemen" where two thirds of the population live. This, therefore:

- Has had a “**significant impact on the right to health**”;
- “[Drastically limited] **freedom of movement**”;
- “Drastically **limited imports** and...also significantly contributed to the **deterioration of the Yemeni economy** and hence to the current **humanitarian crisis**”; and
- Puts “enormous strain on the availability of food on the market and significantly increases the **risk of large-scale famine** in Yemen”.

The Group cited a Norwegian Refugee Council report highlighting the fact that **more people had been killed by the airport closure and lack of access to medical treatment abroad, than had been killed in air strikes in the conflict**. Hundreds of thousands are sick, injured, and in need of services that are unavailable in the country. Shipments of medical supplies generally transported only by air, particularly for chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, kidney failure, and heart disease, have stopped.

Even prior to the conflict, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [reported](#) that one third of commercial airline travel with Yemenia Airlines had been for the purposes of medical treatment abroad (7,000 citizens per year). Following intensification of the conflict in March 2015, the airline said that “the majority of the Yemenia flights were like flying ambulances, almost humanitarian in nature, with a third of all passengers seeking urgent and serious medical treatment”. By the end of 2016, only 45 per cent of Yemeni health facilities were functional and most were operating at a reduced capacity due to a lack of resources, staff, and medical supplies.

In such circumstances, commercial flights in Yemen are effectively predominantly *humanitarian* in nature and must be permitted into and out of Sana’a. This preventable loss of life must stop.

Further, with [80%](#) of Yemen’s commercial and humanitarian imports, including food and fuel, subject to blockades, the population is facing the largest famine the world has seen for decades, with potential victims in the millions.

#### *Support for reopening*

The call for reopening commercial aviation in Sana’a has been supported by, at least:

- UN Secretary-General’s [Special Envoy for Yemen](#);
- Human Rights Council’s [Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen](#);
- [Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Ad Interim](#)
- [Security Council](#) members, including Russian Federation;
- [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#);
- [Yemeni Women’s technical Advisory Group](#) formed by the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen (OESGY);
- [UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee](#);
- EU Parliament in [Resolution](#) on the situation in Yemen 2017/2849(RSP);
- Brazil, Cyprus and Germany in the [report](#) of the Universal Periodic Review Working Group on Yemen to the Human Rights Council presented June-July 2010;
- Fifteen aid/humanitarian groups, including Oxfam, and Norwegian Refugee Council;
- [Human rights organisations](#): Mwatana for Human Rights, Yemen; The Colombia Law School Human Rights Clinic, New York; the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, Beirut; the Cairo Institute for Human Rights, Geneva; International Federation for Human Rights (‘FIDH’), Geneva.

## *Covid-19 Pandemic*

Covid-19 has increased the urgency of this crisis further. In a [May 2020 Statement](#) on Yemen, the Principals of the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, directors of UNICEF, WHO, IOM, FAO among others), noted that **regular passenger flights and fast-tracked global supply chain logistics are vital to provide the oxygen and medical supplies needed to manage the Covid-19 crisis.**

Restrictions placed on humanitarian activities in the North have created huge challenges to delivering aid. Furthermore, [news](#) of a fuel crisis in Sana'a and surroundings at the end of June saw drivers queuing two days for fuel, making transport, including access to the distant airports, increasingly difficult. Furthermore, fuel is also being used for purposes previously serviced by electricity, indicating a likely impact on medical care and other services.

## *UN Assistance*

There were [reports](#) in mid-June of the UN attempting to broker an agreement on medical evacuations but it remains unclear if and when an air bridge might be opened. In December 2018, UN-led talks in Sweden had helped parties come some way towards an [agreement](#) to reopen Sana'a airport, with international flights to stop at Aden airport en route as a confidence-building step. The success of such agreements and direct flights finally being realised is even more urgent with the additional health crisis of the pandemic. We note and appreciate the commitment of the UN to finding a resolution; but this cannot go on any longer.

**The ITF urges the UN Secretary General to make every effort to bring all parties to agree to reopen flights to Sana'a airport as a matter of urgency for:**

- **Global supply chain goods, including food and medical supplies such as oxygen for the treatment of Covid-19;**
- **Civilian commercial flights in and out of the country, at least for citizens to receive medical treatment abroad (with appropriate Covid-19 precautions in place);**
- **Flights operated by the government to repatriate Yemeni citizens currently abroad, with PCR Covid-19 testing facilities in place at the airport.**

We thank you in advance for your urgent attention to this matter. We are available for further conversations with you and your team should you wish and look forward to receiving your response.

Respectfully,



Stephen Cotton  
General Secretary, ITF

CC:

Martin Griffiths, UN Special Envoy for Yemen