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'At time of great division,' unity on Paris climate accord must be built upon – UN Assembly President



Closing Ceremony of COP21, Paris. UN Photo/Mark Garten

15 December - The President of the 193-member United Nations General Assembly today vowed to begin the hard work of carrying out the Paris Agreement on climate change, reminding the world that at a time of great division, the unity, leadership and collective responsibility demonstrated in the French capital should not be forgotten.

“And we must encourage climate actors to embrace opportunities for action, partnership and investment that drive implementation of the broader poverty eradication and sustainable development agenda,” said said Mogens Lykketoft, as he briefed Member States on the conference, widely known as COP21.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon also spoke to the Assembly this morning on a session on the outcome of the climate change summit, which ended in Paris over the weekend, as well as on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The UN chief called the Paris Agreement a triumph for people, the planet, and for multilateralism, because for the first time every country has pledged to curb their emissions, strengthen resilience and act internationally and domestically to address climate change.

Mr. Ban said that as a first step in implementing the Paris Agreement, he will convene a high-level signing ceremony in New York on 22 April of next year.

Assembly President Lykketoft noted that “at a time of great division in our world often linked to matters of resources, poverty, exclusion and climate stresses; this unity, leadership and collective responsibility should not be forgotten.”

“And a key part of this includes maximizing synergies between action on climate change and action on sustainable development goals,” he said.

Mr. Lykketoft outlined the concrete steps he will be taking to make sure that the Paris Agreement is implemented at a High Level Thematic Debate he will host in April, which will address this and other issues crucial to realizing the SDGs.

He said the Member States will take this is an opportunity to look at the inter-connections between the broader Paris agreement and overall SDG implementation, and to share thinking on how to effectively integrate climate action into sustainable development strategies.

Second, “we will look at how best to catalyze some of the means of implementing the SDGs in terms of technology, information and communication and in terms of financing in all its aspects, but in particular for sustainable, resilient and climate smart infrastructure.”

And third, he said, “we will examine how best to foster accountable and transparent multi-stakeholder partnerships to support the 2030 Agenda.”

“I hope that it will help us to build on the great outcome in Paris and to drive early action to end poverty, address climate change and achieve sustainable development,” he said.

Burundi: UN urges immediate action to stop ‘senseless’ violence



A young boy from Burundi, forced to flee his home due to violence, looks at his new surroundings in the Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania. Photo: UNICEF/Rob Beechey

15 December - Amid the “deadly escalation” of violence in Burundi, the United Nations rights chief today sounded alarm at the unfolding crisis in the country and urged all actors in the current crisis to take every step possible to stop the growing violence and engage in a meaningful and inclusive dialogue.

“More than ever before, there is an urgent need for decisive action from the international community to stop this senseless violence. We cannot turn our backs on the people of Burundi at this turning point of their history,” spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Cécile Pouilly told reporters in Geneva during a regular press briefing.

The latest call comes following the attacks on 11 December against several military camps in Bujumbura, which killed dozens of people in the course of heavy fighting prompting the

UN Secretary-General to condemn the attacks and add that “such acts of violence can lead to a further destabilization of the situation in crisis-torn Burundi.”

According to Ms. Pouilly, the security forces carried out intensive house searches later in the Musaga and Nyakabiga neighbourhoods, where they arrested hundreds of young men, allegedly summarily executing a number of them and taking many others to unknown locations.

“With this latest series of bloody events, the country seems to have taken a new step towards outright civil war and tensions are now at bursting point in Bujumbura,” said Ms. Pouilly.

She added that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein urged all stakeholders to start inclusive dialogue and added that there is an urgent need for decisive action from the international community to stop this senseless violence. We cannot turn our backs on the people of Burundi at this turning point of their history.

Burundi has been in the midst of a political crisis that has driven countless people fleeing to safety in neighbouring countries since President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to run for a controversial third term earlier this year. Mr. Zeid and a host of senior UN officials including Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon have repeatedly called for calm and the resumption of the national

dialogue that was suspended in mid-July.

At a press conference in the UN Headquarters today, two UN Emergency Directors briefed the media about their recent visit to the country and warned that “urgent action is needed to prevent a descent into catastrophic violence in Burundi.”

“Burundi is facing a critical crossroads. The levels of displacement and food insecurity are already concerning, but we risk another full-blown humanitarian crisis without urgent progress on the political front,” John Ging, the Emergency Director of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) told reporters.

At the same press conference, UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Emergency Director, Afshan Khan stressed that children are bearing the brunt of the violence in Burundi, as many have been killed wounded and arbitrarily detained and many more are living with the constant sound of gunshots and grenades.

“These violations against the children of Burundi must end now. Children must be protected from all forms of violence and their rights must be respected,” warned Mr. Khan.

According to UNICEF and OCHA, intensified violence in the country is worsening the humanitarian plight of an already vulnerable population, with over 80 per cent of families below the poverty line, 7 per cent of the population severely food insecure, and 58 per cent of people chronically malnourished, placing Burundi at 184 out of 187 on the recently released Human Development Index.

The UN agencies also added that many areas of the country are suffering the ill-effects of El Niño, with widespread flooding having destroyed homes and livelihoods.

Before the crisis, donor funding accounted for over half of Burundi’s budget, however, several bilateral donors have suspended budget support in response to the political crisis, which is further straining the provision of essential public services like health and clean water, warned the UN Agencies.

Free healthcare for young children and mothers has just been suspended, a cut which is likely to have severe public health impacts, they added.

The UN agencies reported that in the past four days, about 100 people have been killed by violence in Bujumbura, and an estimated 340 people have been killed since April.

“Action is needed now to prevent a descent into catastrophic violence. Worsening tension in a country with a history of deep ethnic divisions must be urgently addressed to protect civilians from further harm,” warned Mr. Ging.

Further, the UN agencies noted that popular protests following the political crisis have been heavily repressed by security forces, resulting in significant human rights abuses and repression of the media.

Additionally, they also reported that nearly 220,000 people have fled Burundi and an additional 15,000 people have been displaced within the country since April.

The Emergency Directors of seven UN agencies, the International Organization for Migration and three international NGOs travelled to Burundi from 2 to 5 December to assess the deteriorating humanitarian situation, according to the UN agencies.

Yemen: UN-sponsored peace talks kick off as ceasefire goes into effect



Yemen peace talks get underway in Switzerland. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

15 December - After months of relentless violence in Yemen, consultations facilitated by the United Nations began today in Switzerland aimed at finding a durable settlement to the crisis, including establishing a permanent ceasefire, securing improvements to the humanitarian situation and a returning to a peaceful and orderly political transition.

The talks kicked off with the announcement by the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, that the parties had agreed to a cessation of hostilities.

The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon welcomed the talks and added that peaceful and inclusive dialogue is the only way to end “suffering and rebuild confidence, trust and mutual respect amongst the Yemeni people following months of civil war and thousands of lives lost.”

“The Secretary-General also welcomes the declaration of cessation of hostilities accompanying the opening of the talks. He urges all parties to adhere to this cessation of hostilities and work towards a permanent and lasting end to the conflict,” said a statement issued by Mr. Ban's spokesperson in New York.

Additionally, Mr. Ban said he was encouraged by the letter he received yesterday from the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security and joined them in expressing hope that the talks will result in the end of the military conflict in Yemen and mark the country's return to the path of sustainable peace.

“He reiterates the necessity and value of women's meaningful participation in the peace process, in accordance with Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000) and 2241 (2015),” said the statement.

Further, the UN chief urged all parties at the peace talks to engage constructively and in good faith with each other and called on them to safeguard the national interest, agree on practical steps that will end the suffering of the Yemeni people and improve their daily lives.

Mr. Ban also encouraged all countries of the region and other United Nations Member States to create a conducive environment for the talks.

Welcoming the declaration of cessation of hostilities among the parties as a “critical first step towards building a lasting peace in the country,” Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed stressed at the same time that finding a durable solution is critical, warning that “anyone who does not participate in the solution is effectively helping to perpetuate the crisis.”

“The cessation of hostilities which was called today should mark the end of military violence in Yemen and the transition to progress based on negotiations dialogue and consensus,” said Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed, who added that making peace is a fundamental requirement to rebuild Yemen, rehabilitate the basic infrastructure, address the consequences of the war, provide the necessary environment to normalize life in all governorates, and resume economic activity.

The talks are being facilitated by the Special Envoy and attended by 24 Yemeni representatives and advisors. UN experts are working with the delegations present to provide support to develop agreements which improve humanitarian access and delivery and to aid in the development of a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire.

In his opening remarks to the consultations, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed said Yemeni people of all groups – men and women of all ages and communities – are undergoing unprecedented suffering as their beloved county “is being consumed by the flames of violence and armed conflict.”

“Here I would like to pause and reiterate once more that the only solution is a political one and that violence must cease. You have already effectively taken the necessary first step in that direction by agreeing on the cessation of hostilities, he said, stressing however that while there can be no doubt that that was a real achievement, the most important thing now is to focus efforts during the coming week on reaching a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.

“Moreover, should any violation occur, I would invite you to address that situation immediately and in a constructive and practical manner,” he underscored.

Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed went on to say that the people of Yemen are daily, indeed hourly, anticipating the outcome of the discussions. “This meeting is their only glimmer of hope and must not be extinguished,” he said, asking the participants: “Are you going to abandon Yemen and its people and lead the country into further violence and slaughter, or are you going to put Yemen first, awaken your humanitarian and patriotic consciences, activate the role of the institutions, and ensure the people of Yemen can live the dignified life they deserve?”

He explained that based on previous discussions, the purpose of the talks is to create a general framework for a comprehensive agreement on how to put an end to the crisis.

All were present to achieve a common goal, he said, namely to put an end to the armed conflict and return the country to an orderly, peaceful, political process based on UN Security Council resolution 2216 (2015) and other related Council texts, as well as the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council and its operational mechanisms and the outcome of the National Dialogue Conference.

“Moreover, I urge you to work at the same time on the issue of providing urgent basic services to the Yemeni people. I therefore invite you to work with the colleagues here present from United Nations humanitarian agencies to guarantee unconditional and unrestricted access to humanitarian supplies throughout Yemen,” Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed, recommending that the participants consider the practical steps that could be taken right away to provide vital services, revive the economy and facilitate the return of Yemeni refugees and displaced persons.

UN kicks off selection process of next Secretary-General; for first time in history to include input of all Member States

15 December - The 193 Member States of the United Nations will for the first time be included "totally" in the selection of the next UN Secretary-General, the President of the General Assembly said today, pledging to make the process as transparent and inclusive as possible.

Speaking to reporters at UN Headquarters in New York, General Assembly President Mogens Lykketoft highlighted a joint letter with the President of the Security Council that was sent out to all UN Member States today and which, he said, officially "starts" the process of soliciting candidates leading to the selection and appointment of the next UN chief.



President of the General Assembly Mogens Lykketoft. UN Photo/Mark Garten

According to the UN Charter, the Secretary-General is appointed by the General Assembly following the recommendation of the Security Council.

The letter issued today acknowledges the importance of transparency and inclusivity in the process. It also encourages Member States “to consider presenting women, as well as men, as candidates for the position of Secretary-General.”

In a new development, the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council “will offer candidates opportunities for informal dialogues or meetings with the members of their respective bodies...these can take place before the Council begins its selection by the end of July 2016 and may continue throughout the process of selection,” according to the letter.

“The process is started and the wish that the membership is for the first time in UN history is included totally in the

discussion of the next Secretary-General," Mr. Lykketoft, adding that he thinks "this is a watershed in the way that we are doing things."

Until [today], the selection process of the Secretary-general has been very secretive and involving mostly – or only the permanent five members of the Security Council," he said, referring to China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Of course, he continued, the permanent Council members "still have a very strong position in selecting proposals for the General Assembly, but I think if, out of this new process we are now embarking on, comes an imminent candidate supported by a majority of the membership, it will actually give the general membership an increased, *de facto* power in selecting the Secretary-General."

Mr. Lykketoft went on to explain that the presentation of candidates would also give Member States the opportunity to ask questions about their position on UN priorities, such as the Sustainable Development Agenda, peace and security, and other issues.

"But I would also say it would give the opportunity of candidates to answer questions about how should the UN system... possible be made better to deal with a more holistic view of the world challenges expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals," he noted, expressing the hope that such consultations would illuminate prospective candidates' political and organizational priorities.

To a question on the format of such consultations with prospective candidates, he said: "We are foreseeing open meetings with the membership of the United Nations, where you gentlemen and ladies of the press can follow the presentations and questions and answers [to and from] the candidates... that is my plan."

The next Secretary-General will assume the role in January 2017 and will serve a five year term, which can be renewed by Member States for an additional five years.

Two-year conflict has led to 'unrelenting crisis' for South Sudan's children, UN agencies warn

15 December - The children of South Sudan are among the most vulnerable on the planet, two leading United Nations humanitarian agencies said today, with a senior UN refugee official warning that the world's newest nation cannot afford to lose a generation of children, "as in them lies the future and hope of the young nation."

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), in a joint press release issued on the second anniversary since violence erupted in South Sudan, called for all parties to uphold their commitments to the Peace Agreement to allow the almost 1.5 million children to return home and receive an education.

The Agreement also calls for child soldiers to be released and reintegrated. An estimated 16,000 children have been forcibly recruited since the conflict between President Salva Kiir and his former Vice-President Machar erupted two years ago, and the killings, abductions and sexual abuse of youngsters have continued throughout the country.

UNICEF and UNHCR are urgently appealing to the global community for funds to provide shelter, education, health care, clean water, and other basic necessities for survival, as well as for the reintegration of children formerly in armed groups.

Over the past two years, the agencies said, 1.65 million people have become internally displaced, and more than 650,000 South Sudanese have sought international protection as refugees in neighbouring Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda.

"Two years since the current crisis erupted, South Sudanese represent the largest refugee population in the region, with



Ten-month-old Ayen in a UNICEF supported hospital in Bor, Jonglei State in South Sudan, with his mother. Ayen was treated for severe acute malnutrition. Photo: UNICEF/Sebastian Rich

nearly three quarters of a million people forced into neighbouring countries,” stated Ann Encontre, UNHCR’s Regional Refugee Coordinator for the South Sudan Emergency.

“With most of those displaced being children, South Sudan cannot afford to have a generation of children lost, as in them lies the future and hope of the young nation,” she added.

In South Sudan, children’s needs for medicines, food, and shelter far outweigh availability, and at least half a million have had their education disrupted, according to the agencies.

Neighbouring governments have generously opened their borders and provided access to available services, which, however, remain extremely limited or even inexistent in some settlement areas. In refugee locations, the enrolment rate for refugee children remains at a critically low 56 per cent.

Leila Gharagozloo-Pakkala, UNICEF’s Regional Director in Eastern and Southern Africa, said “respect for the Peace Agreement by all parties will enable children to reignite prospects and hopes for a dignified future.”

UN ends probe into Iran’s past nuclear activities, moving international accord closer to implementation



IAEA Director General Yukiya (centre) makes his way to the boardroom just before the start of the 1425th Board of Governors meeting in Vienna, Austria. Photo: IAEA/Dean Calma

15 December - The United Nations nuclear watchdog today closed the book on the possible military aspects of Iran’s nuclear programme, finding that they were limited to feasibility and scientific studies and did not proceed beyond 2009, bringing an international nuclear accord with Iran a step closer to implementation.

“My final assessment gives clear answers to two very important questions: did Iran engage in activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device? And, if it did, is it still doing so?” UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Yukiya Amano told the IAEA Board of Governors in Vienna before it adopted a resolution closing the long running investigation.

“The Agency assesses that a range of activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device were conducted in Iran prior to the end of 2003 as a coordinated effort, and some activities took place after 2003,” he said, stressing that while the IAEA could not reconstruct all details of Iran’s past activities, it could clarify enough to assess the whole picture.

“The Agency also assesses that these activities did not advance beyond feasibility and scientific studies, and the acquisition of certain relevant technical competences and capabilities. The Agency has no credible indications of activities in Iran relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device after 2009.”

In July Iran and a group of six countries – China, France, Germany, Russia, United Kingdom and United States – reached a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to resolve the nuclear issue, entrusting the IAEA with verifying and monitoring Iran’s commitments.

Iran’s nuclear programme – which it states is for peaceful purposes of energy production, but some other countries contend is driven by military ambitions – has been a matter of international concern since the discovery in 2003 that it concealed its nuclear activities for 18 years in breach of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Under the JCPOA Iran pledged never under any circumstances to seek, develop or acquire nuclear weapons, and the UN Security Council is to consider ending sanctions imposed for its NPT violations once it receives IAEA’s report on verification.

“JCPOA Implementation Day will occur when the Agency has verified that Iran has implemented measures specified in that agreement,” Mr. Amano said today. “I will inform the Board promptly when the Agency has verified that the preparatory steps have been completed.”

He also called for addressing the issue of funding the additional IAEA activities in Iran under the JCPOA, noting that verification and monitoring require predictable funding.

“Significant progress has been made on the Iran nuclear issue, but now is not the time to relax,” Mr. Amano concluded. “This issue has a long and complex history, and the legacy of mistrust between Iran and the international community must be overcome.”

“Much work lies ahead of us. All parties must fully implement their commitments under the JCPOA. Considerable effort was required in order to reach this agreement. A similar and sustained effort will be required to implement it,” he stressed.

UNICEF urges swift action, ‘robust financing’ to close water and sanitation gaps in sub-Saharan Africa



A little girl waits to fill her water container in the village of Kikonka, Bas-Congo province, Democratic Republic of Congo. Photo: UNICEF/Olivier Asselin

15 December - Some 180,000 children under the age of five die every year – roughly 500 a day – in sub-Saharan Africa due to diarrhoeal diseases linked to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) warned today ahead of a conference in the region on boosting financing for the sector.

Aiming to help bring universal access to water and sanitation to West and Central Africa, UNICEF has convened, in cooperation with the Government of Senegal and the African Minister's Council on Water, the first West and Central Africa Innovative Financing for Water Sanitation & Hygiene, which will be held in the Senegalese capital from today through Thursday, 17 December.

“With children dying every single day, with millions stunted, with such a huge economic toll, it cannot be business as usual,” said UNICEF Regional Director for West & Central Africa Manuel Fontaine, adding that the pace of progress has to speed up exponentially – and it will take strong policies, robust financing, and a major shift in priorities among those who have the power to act.

According to UNICEF, nearly half of the global population without access to improved drinking water lives in sub-Saharan Africa currently and some 700 million people in the region lack access to improved sanitation.

With a population which has nearly doubled in the last 25 years, access to sanitation only increased by 6 percentage points and to water by 20 percentage points across the region in the same period, leaving millions behind, UNICEF stated.

The agency went on to emphasize that without speedy action, the situation could drastically worsen within the next 20 years, as rapidly rising populations outstrip the efforts of governments to provide essential services. For example, the number of people in the region who defecate in the open is higher now than it was in 1990. Meanwhile, open defecation has been linked to an increase in stunting among children.

As for the conference, UNICEF has invited 24 governments in the sub-region to meet with major investment banks, international organizations, businesses and experts.

The aim is to find new mechanisms to raise the estimated \$20 to \$30 billion annually that the water, sanitation and hygiene sector will need to bring universal access to those services to West and Central Africa.

UN estimates are that global economic losses due to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene amount to \$260 billion dollars per year. As the sub-region with the worst access, West and Central Africa carries a significant portion of this burden.

According to UNICEF, no country in West and Central Africa has universal access to improved drinking water. Cooperating with World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF released a Joint Monitoring Programme Report 2015, showing that the highest coverage rates are in Sao Tome & Principe (97 per cent), Gabon (93 per cent) and Cabo Verde (92 per cent). At the other end of the spectrum there are countries where roughly half the population does not have access, with the lowest rates in Equatorial Guinea (48 per cent), Chad (51 per cent) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (52 per cent).

Access to sanitation is even more challenging. In the countries with the best coverage, as many as one in four persons still lack adequate sanitation. Equatorial Guinea (75 per cent), Cabo Verde (72 per cent), and Gambia (59 per cent) are the top three in terms of access. The lowest coverage is in Niger (11 per cent), Togo (12 per cent), and Chad (12 per cent).

However, funding for the sector of water, sanitation and hygiene is uneven and insufficient, noted UNICEF. No African country has allocated more than 0.5 per cent of GDP to those sectors. Meanwhile, of the 3.8 billion overseas development aid (ODA) allocated for water, sanitation and hygiene sector in 2012, approximately three-quarters went to water, and the remaining quarter to sanitation.

UNICEF said that most ODA funding goes to countries which are already doing well, and while rural water and sanitation access is far behind urban, both external and domestic funding goes primarily to urban systems.

“While we know what needs to be done, we have to figure out a way to do it faster and better,” emphasized Mr. Fontaine. “There are a lot of options on the table; what is not an option is to continue to allow children to pay for our lack of action,” he added.

At high-level forum, top UN officials urge bridging digital divide to ‘power’ sustainable development



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (left) and General Assembly President Mogens Lykketoft at the WSIS+10 High-Level Meeting at UN Headquarters. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

15 December - Citing remarkable achievement of the information and communication technologies (ICT) for development, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today that the focus now lies on bridging the digital divide to facilitate inclusive Internet access for all in order to enable the implementation of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

“Information and communication technologies (ICT) have reached into every walk of life. They have sparked innovation and entrepreneurship. They have created new forms of public engagement and economic activity that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.

They help people connect, organize and act towards common purpose,” said Mr. Ban in his remarks at the High-Level meeting to review the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society, also called WSIS, held 10 years ago.

Delegates from Member States and observer entities began meeting today at UN Headquarters for the two-day event, known as WSIS+10 High-Level Meeting, plan to adopt an that identifies emerging trends, fresh priorities and innovations for advancing information and communications technologies.

Highlighting the reach of ICT, Mr. Ban told all the attendees to aid in maximizing the benefits of ICT for people everywhere.

“This High-Level review is timely coming just three months after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. ICTs can be an engine for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They can power this global undertaking,” said the Secretary-General.

However, the UN chief noted that despite the remarkable achievements of the ICT there is a prominent digital divide prevalent, including gender digital divide.

“Today, more than 80 per cent of households in developed countries have Internet access. Meanwhile, two out of three households in developing countries do not. Women are half the global population – yet 200 million fewer women than men have access to the Internet,” said Mr. Ban, adding that mobile technologies and digital currencies also present huge potential to reach the two billion women and men who are still unbanked around the world.

He stressed the need to encourage innovation in financial technology to help promote financial inclusion, enlarge

opportunities and grow productive economies.

Looking ahead, Mr. Ban said work must be undertaken collectively to strengthen trust and promote a global culture of cybersecurity, by enhancing a shared commitment and action by all partners to protect and enhance human rights, while fighting cybercrime and cyber-attacks.

“By 2020, it is anticipated that there will be six times as many devices connected on the Internet as people. We must cooperate to consider the implications of this and ensure that the Internet evolves into an inclusive space for the public good. Therefore let us intensify our work to build an open, reliable, safe, secure, stable and inclusive Internet,” the Secretary-General added.

Lastly, he stressed that ICTs and the Internet must help in achieving the targets set by the UN and the Member States this year, including climate action, sustainability, prosperity for all nations and communities sharing one planet.

“Let us ensure that the results of this High-level Meeting will help us reach our shared destination – a sustainable, equitable and connected world for everyone, everywhere,” Mr. Ban concluded.

In an opening statement, Mogens Lykketoft, the President of the General Assembly, said ICT has played an increasingly important role in promoting economic and social development, such as enhancing productivity, facilitating trade, creating quality jobs, providing ICT-based services such as e-health and e-learning, and improving governance.

“While recognizing these achievements and this great potential, we must not lose sight of the remaining challenges,” he said, echoing the Secretary-General’s concern that various forms of digital divides still exist within and among countries. Moreover, new challenges have emerged relating to Internet stability and security, data ownership and exercise of human rights online.

“[The] outcome document [set to be adopted tomorrow] recognizes many of these challenges and the work that lies ahead. It recognizes also the linkages between ICTs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” Mr. Lykketoft stated.

“The adoption of the outcome document from this meeting will mark the conclusion of the WSIS+10 review process. But it will also mark the beginning of a new phase of the journey – a journey that seeks to fully harness the power of ICT to realize the SDGs and to leave no one behind,” he said.

The two-day meeting, convened by Assembly President Lykketoft, in close collaboration with ITU and other UN agencies and programmes such as the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), is expected to result in a road map for efforts to put ICTs at the heart of new development strategies.

‘Unrelenting’ Israeli-Palestinian violence leaves nearly one person dead every day – UN rights office



A Palestine Red Crescent Society responder tends to the wounded during a Bethlehem skirmish. Clashes with the Israeli army in the West Bank have left many injured by rubber bullets and tear gas. Photo: Oren Ziv/IRIN

15 December - Although international attention has waned regarding the crisis in Israel and the Occupied Palestine Territory, the United Nations human rights office today warned that the region is still rife with violence and the recent escalation in the fighting has claimed 117 Palestinian lives, along with two foreign nationals and injured thousands more.

“We continue to be gravely concerned at the unrelenting violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and in Israel [...] the level of killings, injuries and arrests has continued, with on average one person dying every day,” the spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Cécile Pouilly told reporters in Geneva during a regular press briefing.

The spokesperson said that the “unacceptable” wave of stabbings, shootings and car rammings continues to kill and injure Israelis and at the same time, the response from

Israeli security forces has resulted in alleged attackers, protesters and even bystanders being killed and injured.

She also voiced deep concern over reports of excessive use of force by Israeli forces and added that all instances of the use of force resulting in death or injury by law enforcement officers should be the subject of prompt, independent and impartial investigations.

Continuing, Ms. Pouilly noted that in the H2 area of Hebron alone, there have been 16 alleged attacks against Israelis since 1 October, and of the 17 Palestinians involved in such incidents, 16 have been shot dead, with one injured and arrested.

The spokesperson also warned that punitive demolitions of Palestinian houses and the withholding of bodies of alleged attackers from their families can only aggravate the situation.

Lastly, Ms. Pouilly called on both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to act decisively to de-escalate the situation.

ICC Prosecutor calls on Security Council to help bring high-profile indictees to justice for Darfur war crimes

15 December - The Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) today chided the United Nations Security Council for its “empty promises” to bring Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir to trial for atrocities in Darfur, even as his victims cry out for justice amid indiscriminate killings and mass rape.

“Despite my repeated requests for the Council to take action with respect to Sudan’s blatant disregard of its obligations, and in violation of [it’s] resolutions, my appeals continue to be unheeded,” Fatou Bensouda told the 15-member body, noting that it was the Council itself which had referred the case of Sudan to the ICC more than 10 years ago.

“I observe with great regret that the adoption of each resolution has, in practical terms, amounted to no more than an empty promise,” she added, stressing that Mr. Al-Bashir is not only a fugitive from justice who continues to travel across international borders, but he also harbours other fugitives and refuses to facilitate their surrender to the ICC.

In 2005, the Council asked the Hague-based Court to investigate war crimes in Darfur. ICC judges issued arrest warrants in 2009 for Mr. Al-Bashir and other top officials for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in the western Darfur region, where up to 300,000 people may have died and over 2 million been displaced since civil war erupted in 2003 between the Government and rebels.

“If I may be so bold, this Council must do more to demonstrate its commitment to Darfur,” Ms. Bensouda stressed. “It must confidently play its part in facilitating the arrest of suspects against whom the Court has issued warrants of arrest. It must act concretely on the Court’s non-compliance communications.”

Ms. Bensouda, who has pleaded for Council action in her presentations before it over the past three years, noted that year after year, the victims’ hopes for justice and a durable peace have been dashed.

“Instead, the people of Darfur have continued to endure desolation, alleged gross violations of human rights, indiscriminate killings, mass rape and sexual abuse, while the individuals against whom ICC arrest warrants have been issued, and who may be implicated in these crimes, continue to evade justice,” she declared.

“Countless victims have been demoralized. After all, who can blame them when attaining justice appears so remote; not the least because of the absence of adequate follow-up and support from the Council. Their frustration and resignation in the face of inaction must weigh heavily on our collective conscience,” she said, urging the Council to take appropriate measures.

“Terrible crimes allegedly continue to be perpetrated in Darfur,” she concluded. “Only strong and committed action by the



International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda briefs the Security Council on Sudan and South Sudan. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Council and States will stop the commission of grave crimes in Darfur and ensure that the perpetrators of past crimes are held accountable.”

UN rights chief urges Cuba to halt harassment of activists and respect human rights



Street scene in Camajuani, a municipality and town in the Villa Clara Province of Cuba. Photo: PAHO/WHO

15 December - The top United Nations human rights official expressed concern today over the extremely high number of arbitrary arrests and short-term detentions of individuals, including human rights defenders and dissidents, in Cuba in recent weeks.

“There have been many hundreds of arbitrary arrests and short-term detentions – which in my view amount to harassment – in the past six weeks alone, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said today.

These often take place without a warrant and ahead of specific meetings or demonstrations, and seem to be aimed at preventing people from exercising their right to freedom of expression and to peaceful assembly, he continued.

Mr. Zeid was particularly shocked that a number of people, including members of the Ladies in White non-governmental organization, were arrested on 10 December, Human Rights Day.

“This shows an extraordinary disdain for the importance of human rights on the part of the Cuban authorities,” he said.

The High Commissioner urged the authorities to respect everyone’s right to freedom of expression, and to peaceful assembly and association, and to stop arbitrarily arresting people, in particular before, during or after peaceful demonstrations.

“I call for the release of all those arbitrarily arrested who may still be in detention as a consequence of the legitimate exercise of their rights,” Mr. Zeid concluded.

Afghanistan: despite intensification of violence, UN official reports progress in overall relief assistance

15 December - Amid rising levels of violence in Afghanistan that has now spread across a large part of the country, the United Nations Deputy Special Representative for the country reported overall progress in the ability to provide relief aid to those in need, as all parties of the conflict have shown an increase respect for humanitarian laws.

“For the first time, we have noted that the Taliban had made a statement about a unilateral ceasefire to allow assistance to reach all the people of Afghanistan. This highlights the fact that there is an overall concern that humanitarian assistance needs to be provided for all the people of Afghanistan based on their needs alone,” said Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Mark Bowden in a press briefing at UN Headquarters in New York.



Afghans start their journey to Europe in trucks on this road in Afghanistan's Nimruz Province near the border of Iran in October 2015. Photo: Jim Huylebroek/IRIN

Mr. Bowden added that the ability to deliver assistance in Afghanistan has improved over the last year and added that it could be possibly continued even in the coming year. “This comes from a better recognition the international humanitarian law by all parties of the conflict. And that means that despite a difficult security situation, the ability to meet the needs of the population are there,” he added.

Recently, there has been a marginal increase in the level of violence in country with the nearly 8,346 civilians who were killed between January and September 2014, making it the highest number of civilian casualties ever accounted, reported Mr. Bowden, noting that the rise in violence has been more noticeable since the handover of security from international

forces to Afghan security forces.

“The conflict is changing in nature, in the way it is being fought and the impact is primarily on civilian population [...] also, there has been a change in control of areas. Twenty-three districts’ administrative centres in 2015 had one time or the other been captured compared to the three in 2014,” he stated, highlighting the differences in the level of conflict.

The Deputy Special Representative said that an estimated 6.3 million Afghans have been affected by the widespread conflicts and displacements that are occurring at a rapid pace with nearly 196,000 people fleeing their homes during the last year.

He added that by the end of the year, an estimated 200,000 people would be displaced, marking a 64 per cent increase in that population from 2014.

Afghanistan, Mr. Bowden continued, is plagued by many natural disasters, such as recurring floods that displace many every year; and in 2015, the earthquake in Badakhshan province added to the humanitarian burden.

On a positive note, he reported that in the last year there was a reduction in the number of attacks against humanitarian workers, humanitarian organizations, schools and health centres.

He also said that international community responded well to the crisis in Afghanistan, with the current humanitarian assistance programme being funded up to 70 per cent, which is one the highest levels of response of the humanitarian appeal.

Looking ahead at the coming year, the Deputy Special Representative said that one of the critical factors that need to be addressed is to be able to respond to the spikes in humanitarian need, such as a surge in displacement.

Citing the example of the recent attacks in Kunduz, Mr. Bowden said the UN had been able to provide non-food items and immediate support to the displaced due to availability of adequate contingency stocks and the financial mechanism to provide rapid assistance.

“I think we will need to be prepared for the same sort of situation to occur in the coming year, which is why the common humanitarian fund is going to be a critical element of our response... [as it will be] the mechanism that will enable the humanitarian community to respond nimbly to meet the needs of any potentially large displacement that takes place,” said Mr. Bowden.

Expressing concerns at the increasing migration out of Afghanistan, most notable in Europe, Mr. Bowden said most of those migrants are driven by economic circumstances in a country where the economy has shown no signs of growth. But it is also fuelled by continuous population displacement from the rural areas and urbanization, he added.

He said the UN will be looking over the next year to address the migration issues, especially the number of returnees to Afghanistan.

“Pakistan has 1.4 million undocumented Afghans there who are at risk of being returned. The capacity of Afghanistan to cope with that number or the numbers of returnees is quite limited,” Mr. Bowden concluded.

South Sudan: more UN peacekeepers to be sent in to protect civilians amid ceasefire violations



The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) peacekeepers in Likuangle Payam, Jonglei State. Photo: UNMISS

15 December - The Security Council today increased the United Nations peacekeeping force level in strife-torn South Sudan by over 1,000 to a ceiling of 15,000 troops and police, and extended its mandate for another six months, citing protection of civilians “by all necessary means” as its top priority.

In a resolution adopted just two weeks after the top UN peacekeeping official called for the increase in the face of repeated ceasefire violations by both the Government and opposition, the 15-member body asked Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to prioritize the complete deployment at the new level, including tactical military helicopters and unarmed unmanned aerial systems.

The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was originally set up on the eve of the country’s independence in July, 2009, with an initial ceiling of 7,000 and a mandate to support the Government in peace consolidation by fostering state building and economic development.

But both ceiling and mandate changed radically two years ago when a conflict erupted between President Salva Kiir and his former Vice-President Riek Machar, killing thousands, displacing over 2.4 million people, tens of thousands of whom have sought refuge at UNMISS bases, and impacting the food security of 4.6 million.

UNMISS currently has some 12,500 uniformed personnel on the ground.

Today’s resolution voiced grave concern that according to reports “there are reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity, including those involving extrajudicial killings, rape and other acts of sexual violence, enforced disappearances, the use of children in armed conflict, arbitrary arrests and detention, and attacks on schools and hospitals have been committed by both Government and opposition forces.”

It asked Mr. Ban to develop a plan for UNMISS “to take appropriate action to deter and respond to any escalation of violence in and around Juba (the capital), in order to effectively protect civilians, and to protect critical infrastructure.”

To deter violence against civilians, it called for “proactive deployment, active patrolling with particular attention to IDPs (internally displaced persons), including but not limited to those in protection sites and refugee camps, humanitarian personnel and human rights defenders, and identification of threats and attacks against civilians.”

It also urged a mission-wide early warning strategy, including information gathering and monitoring, to counter threats and attacks against civilians, as well as full investigation of abuses against children and women, including all forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

Warning the Council that South Sudan is at a critical juncture, Under-Secretary-General for UN Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous called for an increase in UNMISS forces earlier this month.

Security Council renews UN peacekeeping force in Abyei for another five months



UN peacekeepers on patrol in Abyei. UN Photo/Stuart Price

15 December - The United Nations Security Council today extended for another five months its interim peacekeeping force in Abyei, a resource-rich area contested by Sudan and South Sudan, calling on both sides to swiftly resume regular meetings to resolve the oil-rich territory's final status.

“Continued cooperation between the Government of Sudan and Government of South Sudan is also critical for peace, security and stability and the future relations between them,” the 15-member body said in a resolution, authorizing until 15 May, 2016, the 4,500-strong UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA).

The force, set up by the Council in June 2011 after the outbreak of violence when Sudanese troops took control of the area shortly before South Sudan became independent, is entrusted with overseeing demilitarization and maintaining security, and the Council today called for a resumption of border demarcation discussions.

Noting that some 90,000 people still depend on humanitarian aid, it stressed the urgency of facilitating aid delivery to all affected populations, and demanded that all parties allow all humanitarian personnel full, safe and unhindered access to civilians.

It underscored that UNISFA's protection of civilians mandate includes taking necessary actions to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence, irrespective of the source of such violence.

It condemned the intermittent presence of security forces from both sides in Abyei and reaffirmed that UNISFA may undertake weapons confiscation and destruction, voicing “grave concern at the threat to peace and security in Abyei arising from the illicit transfer, destabilizing accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons.”

Amid escalating hate speech against Muslims, UN rights officials denounce intolerance, incitement

15 December - Expressing “grave concern” at the outpouring of intolerance and hate speech in public discourse and in the media in recent weeks, which focused particularly on Muslims, senior United Nations human rights officials urgently called on those in positions of authority and political leadership to act responsibly and with respect for both international and national laws.

“We are sickened by blatant manifestations of hatred and intolerance, including by public figures in response to terrorist attacks by violent extremists, particularly the deliberate and dangerous spread of misinformation and the manipulation of people's fears and concerns for political gain,” said the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, and the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, Jennifer Welsh in a joint statement.



Jennifer Welsh, Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect and Adama Dieng, Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide. UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras/Amanda Voisard

The Special Advisers also “strongly and unreservedly” condemned all criminal attacks by violent extremists, wherever they may take place and underlined that the damaging effects of linking such attacks to a specific population, based on its identity has resulted in discrimination and targeting of Muslim populations.

Additionally, they recalled that any “advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence” is prohibited under international human rights law and by the national laws or constitutions of many countries.

The Special Advisers noted that in recent weeks, there have been numerous acts of intimidation and violence against Muslims and Muslim sites, including vandalism of mosques as well as discriminatory, xenophobic and racist statements.

Some of these statements, they said, have referred to all Muslims – and all refugees and asylum-seekers originating from Syria and Iraq – as “terrorists.”

The Special Advisers also referred to calls by politicians for Muslims to be prevented from entering the United States, to be registered in a national database, or to be forced to carry identification that would highlight their religion, and other calls for governments to refrain from accepting refugees from Syria and Iraq.

“This is unacceptable. Refugees from Syria and Iraq are fleeing precisely the kind of violence that we in the West also fear. To turn them away when they are seeking refuge is an affront to our common humanity,” said the statement.

“At this time when the world is facing complex challenges, including confronting extremist violent groups and individuals, Governments and other leading actors in society should publicly counter lies, prejudice and fear” the Special Advisers stated.

Despite progressive laws, gender-based violence ‘pervasive’ in South Africa, UN expert warns



In 1998 in South Africa, women factory workers show the palms of their hands, calloused and scarred from their work, outside the town of Randfontein in Gauteng Province. Photo: UNICEF/Giacomo Pirozzi

15 December - Warning that deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes make violence against women “an almost acceptable phenomenon” in South Africa, a United Nations human rights expert today urged the Government to strengthen its fight against gender-based violence through awareness and education at all levels of society.

“The violence inherited from apartheid still resonates profoundly in today’s South African society dominated by deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes towards the role of women in society which makes violence against women and children an almost accepted social phenomenon” said the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonovic, today, in a press release after her first official visit to the country, from 4 to 11 December.

Stressing the need for change, she said “despite an arsenal of progressive laws and policies to deal with gender-based violence put very ably in place, there has been little implementation, hence impact and gender-based violence continue to be pervasive and at the level of systematic women’s human rights violation.”

The independent expert said that different forms of violence against women and girls existed throughout the country, including femicides, or gender-related killing of women; domestic violence; and gang-rapes, which led to lethal consequences.

With regard to the high number of gender-related killings, the rights expert encouraged South Africa to establish a ‘femicide watch,’ whereby data and information on each case would be carefully analysed to determine any failure in the response’s chain to protect women. The number of killings would also be released annually – helping to develop and bolster further preventive measures.

In the context of domestic violence, Ms. Šimonovic called for risk assessment and crisis management along with orders that would guarantee immediate protection.

Warning that girls as young as eight years old can be forced into marriage, she elaborated on reports that Ukuthwala continued to be practiced in some rural areas. The UN expert added that the practice was associated with abduction, kidnapping, assault and rape.

“It needs to be clearly stated that such practice violates the constitutional rights to dignity, freedom and security of the person,” she underscored.

Other harmful practices include virginity testing and accusations of witchcraft.

She said that there was insufficient specialized training for all front-line responders of gender-based violence, namely the police, prosecution office and courts. The expert called for better police awareness to protect women victimized in domestic partnerships; to manage the reporting and investigation of sexual offenses; and to refer the sexually abused to medical services.

Ms. Šimonovic cautioned against secondary traumatization, which could occur when hearings were conducted in a non-victim friendly manner. She outlined that while mandated by the Sexual Offenses Act, victim-friendly rooms at police stations were lacking, leaving women without adequate security in the presence of perpetrators.

The expert also highlighted the need for gender-sensitive education for magistrates – pointing to judiciary gender stereotyping, which leads to perpetrator leniency. She expressed concern that there were no established risk assessment and crisis management. The rapporteur pointed out that protection orders were not available immediately and, citing human or financial resource shortages, even when issued, were often not adequately followed-up by police.

During her eight-day visit, Ms. Šimonovic met with Government officials at the federal and provincial levels; representatives of civil society organizations; and academics, including in the Diepsloot and Khayelitsha townships. She also visited a women's prison, met with numerous women survivors of gender-based violence.

In 2016, the Special Rapporteur will present a comprehensive report with her conclusions and recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council.