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UN cites need for stringent building codes after deadly quakes hit Japan and Ecuador



A collapsed roadway following the devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake that hit the coast of Ecuador on 16 April 2016. Photo: WFP

19 April – The Head of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) said today that the deaths in Ecuador and the dozens of victims in Japan spotlighted a basic fact about earthquakes; that buildings, and not the shake itself, claim most lives.

“These earthquakes are a reminder of how important it is that we apply the highest standards possible when building in earthquake zones,” said Robert Glasser, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction. “It is buildings and damaged infrastructure which kill people when an earthquake strikes,” he stressed.

That makes structural safety a matter of life and death in zones, such as the Pacific ‘Ring of Fire,’ on which both Ecuador and Japan lie, in addition to the health risks posed by damaged water and sanitation systems and the hurdles that the impact on road networks can cause

for relief operations.

Noting that earthquakes and tsunamis are relatively rare natural hazards but account for nearly 750,000 deaths over the last 20 years and significant economic losses, he said that “urbanization within highly seismic zones has accelerated significantly in recent years and it is vitally important that this is done in a way that is earthquake-resistant for future



generations.”

Building codes must factor in earthquake risk

The existence – and, crucially, the implementation – of building codes that factor in earthquake risk is a critical factor in such regions, he stressed.

To improve safety even further, it is important to bring existing structures up to scratch, for example by retrofitting historic sites. Last April’s magnitude-7.9 Nepal earthquake, which killed 8,000 people, provided a grim illustration when it toppled the landmark Dharahara tower in Kathmandu.

The death toll in Saturday’s 7.8 magnitude temblor in Ecuador, the country’s strongest in decades, has already climbed to more than 400 lives. Rescue workers are still hunting in the rubble for survivors, and more than 2,600 people are listed as injured.

The quake destroyed 805 buildings and damaged more than 600 more, including scores of schools, according to data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

“Across Manabi and Esmeralda provinces, the earthquake has damaged or destroyed homes, hospitals, roads and businesses, power lines have been cut,” said UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien.

The collapse of several hotels in the Pacific coast tourist region has also made international headlines.

In Japan, meanwhile, the authorities said that at least 44 people died and 1,000 were injured in the two powerful earthquakes in the southwest of the country: a magnitude 6.4 on Thursday and a magnitude 7.3 on Saturday. They are the biggest since the massive earthquake and tsunami of 2011, which left more than 19,000 people dead or missing.

Case study for strictly-enforced building codes

Japan is a case study for strictly-enforced building codes that prioritise seismic risk reduction and are reviewed regularly in the light of developments in construction technology and early warning. As a result, the regular earthquakes that hit the country usually cause minimal damage.

Ecuador has also been bolstering its own building rules. In January 2015, its Ministry of Urban Development and Housing released new regulations, capping a process that began in 2008 and saw Ecuadorian officials and the construction sector work together with foreign experts to share lessons and best practice.

The issue was given fresh global impetus in March last year when the international community adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, a 15-year blueprint for saving lives and livelihoods in the face of natural and man-made hazards.

Besides seeking better seismic safety, the Sendai Framework also calls on countries to avoid construction on land susceptible to liquefaction, landslides and subsidence in the event of an earthquake.

“We need to build better in the first place and not just build back better after the event,” said Mr. Glasser.

INTERVIEW: Even as some 'guns go silent' in Syria, access to besieged areas is limited, says UN aid official

19 April – With a cessation of hostilities largely holding in Syria, the situation is “encouraging” but areas under siege remain particularly vulnerable, according to a senior United Nations humanitarian official.

“When guns go silent, that immediately translates to a number of positive things for people,” UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, Yacoub El Hillo, told the *UN News Centre*.

“They’re able to move around and go about their daily activities in a much more normal way,” Mr. El Hillo noted, despite “a lot of abnormality” from five years of conflict.

Asked what Syria’s most pressing humanitarian needs are, he replied: “Everything.”

Some 13.5 million Syrians are in need of some form of assistance and protection, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. This ranges from vaccinating children who are five-years of age and under, to providing shelter, food and water for the displaced, supporting education and health programs, and creating job opportunities.

These are the things “that keep us busy every day,” Mr. El Hillo continued, noting that while Syria was once well on its way to becoming a high-middle-income country, “today, 80 per cent plus of the Syrian people are poor, they live on less than \$2/day [...]” “That’s why the needs are huge. And because of the length of this crisis, their ability to cope has also been highly eroded.”

The situation is particularly bad in besieged areas, many of which remain outside the reach of aid workers despite the 27 February cessation of hostilities. These include Madaya, Zabadani, Al Fouaa, Kifraya, in the northwest of the country, as well as areas in the west, including Deir ez-Zor, which is controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, known as ISIL or Da’esh.

On 10 April, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) confirmed that it was able to drop 26 pallets loaded with food in platforms attached to high altitude parachutes. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) was able to collect at least 22 of these pallets for distribution to hungry families.

‘Ruptures’ in the cessation of hostilities

Speaking in Arabic for part of the interview, Mr. El Hillo called on the parties – be it the Government or the opposition parties – to end the siege in Deir ez-Zor and other parts of Syria, which he called a violation of international humanitarian law that “must come to an end.”

The current cessation of hostilities has held for seven weeks, but there have been ruptures and violations.

While typical of these types of agreement, Mr. El Hillo said he was concerned about the frequency of the ruptures and the increase in incidents.

“All must be done to ensure that the cessation of hostilities holds,” he stressed.



A woman in Wadi Barada, a town outside Madaya, Rural Damascus, watches a convoy carrying aid supplies. Photo: UNICEF/UN07160/Sanadiki

Funding is approaching 'a breaking point or has already broken'

Speaking more broadly about the ongoing conflicts in the world, Mr. El Hillo said the international community has to look at ways to improve way humanitarian aid is distributed. He added that for the last several years, numerous appeals have been announced, none of which are funded by more than 50 per cent.

Addressing root causes of conflict and finding more efficient ways of providing aid are among the aims of the World Humanitarian Summit which will be held in Istanbul, Turkey, on 23 and 24 May.

“I hope world leaders, when they come to the Summit next month, will be looking at how to actually overhaul the system of funding and financing humanitarian responses,” Mr. El Hillo said, “but also perhaps more importantly, addressing the root causes for these human miseries.”

World drug problem: UN adopts new framework for policies to 'put people first'

19 April – The United Nations today adopted a new framework putting people at the centre of global policies on drug control, which the head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) says can help promote the “urgent, united and concerted action we need.”

“Putting people first means reaffirming the cornerstone principles of the global drug control system, and the emphasis on the health and welfare of humankind that is the founding purpose of the international drug conventions,” the Executive Director of UNODC, Yury Fedotov, told delegates at the opening of the UN General Assembly special session on the world drug problem (UNGASS).

The three-day session kicked off with the adoption by the 193-member body of the new framework on countering the world drug problem, drafted last month in Vienna by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), the UN's top policy-making body on the issue. The document recognizes that to address and counter the world drug problem, appropriate emphasis should be placed on individuals, families, communities and society as a whole, with a view to promoting and protecting the health, safety and well-being of all humanity.

“Putting people first means balanced approaches that are based on health and human rights, and promote the safety and security of all our societies. Putting people first means looking to the future, and recognizing that drug policies must most of all protect the potential of young people and foster their healthy styles of life and safe development,” he added.

Mr. Fedotov further underlined that countries with limited resources and capacities to address the threats to peace, security, development and health posed by illicit drugs need to be assisted, including through support for alternative livelihoods, building accountable, effective judicial and law enforcement capacities to tackle supply, and enhancing prevention and treatment services.

As the lead entity in the UN system in addressing the challenges posed by illicit drugs, the Executive Director highlighted that the Vienna-based UNODC will remain fully engaged in helping States:

- To ensure access to controlled drugs to relieve pain and suffering
- To promote prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration approaches rooted in evidence, science, public health and human rights
- To stop the criminals, and prevent and counter illicit cultivation, production and trafficking
- And use all available tools, as provided by the conventions on drugs, corruption, transnational organized crime and terrorism, to tackle related organized crime, money-laundering and illicit financial flows



Heroin seizure in Turkmenistan. Photo: UNODC

In his remarks to the Assembly, the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Jan Eliasson, recognized that some aspects of the drug agenda are sensitive and controversial.

“I also know that some countries and regions have suffered more than others. It is therefore important that we listen to each other and learn from each other’s experiences, not least of how the well-being of people is affected,” he said.

Looking forward to 2019, when the current Political Declaration and Plan of Action adopted by the Assembly’s first special session on drugs comes to an end, Mr. Eliasson said the global community should focus on new challenges and threats, including the emergence of new psychoactive substances.

“UN Member States, UNODC and the whole UN system must respond in a timely, effective and flexible fashion to these and other looming dangers,” he insisted. “We must base our decisions on research, data and scientific evidence. And we must not shy away from new ideas and approaches – even if these sometimes may challenge traditional assumptions.”

Meanwhile, General Assembly President Mogens Lykketoft recalled that a little over six months ago, UN Member States gathered in the same hall to embrace the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which sends “a signal to people everywhere that the transformation towards a more sustainable and just world was underway.”

He noted that during the three-day special session, States will discuss the challenges associated with the world drug problem and how best to address them: “Because no society can claim to be completely free from the dire consequences that illicit drugs bring, or to have no relation to its many causes. And no country can deny that addressing this problem is a common and shared responsibility,” Mr. Lykketoft stressed.

Taking the podium, Dr Margaret Chan, the Director-General of the UN World Health Organization (WHO), said an estimated 27 million people have drug use disorders, and more than 400,000 of them die each year.

“The health and social harm caused by the illicit use of psychoactive drugs is enormous. This harm includes direct damage to the physical and mental health of users, drastically reducing the length and quality of their lives,” she warned.

“In the view of WHO, drug policies that focus almost exclusively on use of the criminal justice system need to be broadened by embracing a public health approach. A public health approach starts with the science and the evidence. It tells us several things,” she added.

Dr Chan said the evidence shows that drug use can be prevented, drug use disorders can be treated, drug dependence that contributes to crime can be diminished, and people with drug dependence can be helped and returned to productive roles in society.

“WHO promotes a comprehensive package of interventions to achieve these objectives. The evidence shows they work,” she stressed, urging Member States to “remember the people” when they begin to implement the new framework.

'Yemeni people deserve no less,' says Ban, urging start of peace talks



Houses destroyed by airstrikes in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, July 2015.
Credit: OCHA/ Charlotte Cans

19 April – United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today urged all parties to the peace process in Yemen to “engage in good faith” with his envoy, so that talks can start without further delay.

“The Secretary-General is convinced that seizing this opportunity to move the process forward will help resolve outstanding issues and bring the end of this prolonged conflict closer. The Yemeni people and the region deserve no less,” said a statement attributable to the UN chief’s spokesperson.

The Secretary-General noted that the Yemeni Government delegation has arrived in Kuwait and looks forward to the participation of the Ansar Allah and representatives of the General People’s Congress in the talks.

He also recalled the commitment of all parties to a cessation of hostilities, which took effect on 10 April, and to the convening of inter-Yemeni talks in Kuwait.

Yesterday, the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, announced that the start of the peace negotiations had been postponed.

Ecuador: UN food convoy heads to quake-ravaged areas

19 April – The United Nations food relief agency has sent a convoy to assist some 8,000 people severely affected by the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that hit the coast of Ecuador, leaving more than 400 people dead and thousands more in desperate need of humanitarian aid.

At the request of Ecuador’s Government, the World Food Programme (WFP) and authorities organized truckloads with enough food to feed 8,000 people for 15 days in the worst-hit areas. WFP has also mobilized an emergency team to the quake-affected areas to assess the humanitarian and food security situation, the agency said in a press release.

Because the region was bracing itself for the impact of El Niño, emergency food assistance kits had been ready to go. The kits, including quinoa, rice, pasta, tuna, sardines, oatmeal and lentils, were designed months ago by WFP and the country’s Secretariat for Risk Management as the most effective type of assistance for people living in the coastal areas.

“This first delivery of food assistance will make a tremendous difference in the lives of people who are overcoming such hardship,” said WFP Country Representative Kyungnan Park. “WFP was ready to react swiftly to this emergency thanks to joint efforts with the Ecuadorian Government to prepare a response to the El Niño weather phenomenon, which is currently affecting the country.”

Additional food assistance will be delivered to 12,000 people and more than 1,000 hospital patients also affected by the earthquake. As more information about the extent of the damage and food needs becomes available, further assistance will



Loading trucks with WFP food for the quake-stricken town of Pedernales in Ecuador. Photo: WFP Media

be provided upon the Government's request.

Meanwhile, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) is reporting that at least 150,000 children are affected by the April 16 earthquake. According to preliminary Government reports, the earthquake damaged 119 schools, affecting 88,000 children. Some 805 buildings have been destroyed and 608 have been damaged. Two hospitals have entirely collapsed in Portoviejo and Chone.

In some of the worst hit areas, UNICEF says that mudslides are causing further damage to infrastructure and hindering access of relief teams and supplies. Some cities are still without full power and only 40 per cent of communication lines are working.

UNICEF is concerned about health, water and sanitation conditions in the coastal areas – which are already considered hotspots for Zika, Dengue, Malaria and Chikungunya.

“We are in a race against time to protect children from disease and other risks common in such emergencies,” said Grant Leaity, UNICEF Representative in Ecuador.

Mali: UN mission renews call for calm after two demonstrators killed in Kidal



Bystanders on the street of Kidal, Mali. UN Photo/Mark Garten

19 April – The United Nations mission in Mali renewed its call for calm as well as its commitment to the implementation of the peace process following a demonstration yesterday morning in the Kidal region in the north of the country, in which two demonstrators were killed and four others were wounded.

“MINUSMA [UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali] strongly deplores the loss of lives, offers its condolences to the bereaved families and wishes a speedy recovery to the injured,” the Mission said in a statement.

The Mission said that yesterday morning at about 10 a.m., a violent demonstration took place in Kidal, where demonstrators, some equipped with molotov cocktails, broke onto the airstrip secured by MINUSMA, ransacking and setting fire to secured facilities.

The Mission said it remains committed to establishing the facts, and that a board of inquiry has been set up.

“Its work is currently under way and the conclusions should enable to identify the origin of the gunfire. MINUSMA intends to take its share of responsibility, if applicable,” the Mission said.

Kidal's airstrip is an essential asset for supplying humanitarian aid, providing support to local communities, as well as supporting the operations of MINUSMA and its partners. The airstrip and the airport facilities had been rehabilitated by MINUSMA earlier this year, following months of work and heavy financial investments.

“MINUSMA calls to everyone's sense of responsibility,” the Mission stressed, adding that it has regular contacts with Malian authorities and leaders of local communities in order to ease tensions, and noting the appeal for calm issued by the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA).

“MINUSMA renews its call for calm and its commitment to the implementation of the peace process alongside Malians,” the Mission said.

South Sudan: UN refugee agency warns of worsening civilian situation



UNMISS police and military conduct integrated search operations for weapons and restricted items at Protection of Civilian sites in Juba, capital of South Sudan. Photo: UNMISS

19 April – The United Nations refugee agency today expressed extreme concern over a combination of new fighting in previously peaceful areas, food insecurity and severe humanitarian funding shortages, which continue to cause a worsening of the situation in South Sudan for many civilians.

Recent fighting between Government and opposition forces in Western Bahr al Ghazal has displaced more than 96,000 people to Wau town, in the northwest of the country, Ariane Rummery, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),

told reporters in Geneva, noting that neighbouring countries are now reporting rising refugee inflows.

“With the Regional Refugee Response Plan funded at just 8 per cent, many life-saving services are threatened,” Ms. Rummery said. “UNHCR is extremely concerned.”

The spokesperson said that an estimated 52,000 South Sudanese have fled into Sudan since late January, exceeding planning projections for 2016. At present, the refugees are mainly in East and South Darfur and West Kordofan.

UNHCR non-food item distributions by truck in East Darfur are expected to begin on Wednesday and distributions have already taken place to all new arrivals in South Darfur and to some of the new population in West Kordofan, she said.

Ms. Rummery noted that the World Food Programme (WFP) has been distributing one-month food rations to new arrivals in East and South Darfur, and is prepared to begin distributions in West Kordofan pending security clearance from authorities. Together with partner agencies, a three-month response plan has been prepared to accommodate an additional 120,000 new arrivals before June.

In addition, Ms. Rummery said that Uganda has seen a sharp increase in refugee arrivals from South Sudan since January, sometimes as many as 800 individuals per day. In all, 28,000 South Sudanese – 86 per cent of them women and children – have sought refuge in Uganda.

The site where the South Sudanese refugees are sheltered, Maaji III, which is in the north-west of the country, is nearing capacity and basic life-saving services and other services are severely stretched, the spokesperson said.

She also said that Ethiopia, which hosts some 285,000 South Sudanese refugees, is seeing a recent – albeit more modest – increase in arrivals after a long period in which there were very few new refugees.

This recent spike in the rate of arrivals from South Sudan followed a long lull with an average daily arrival rate of less than one for the past two months, according to Ms. Rummery. UNHCR and partners have been providing basic assistance, including corn soya blend to children, plastic sheets, mosquito nets, blankets, sleeping mats and water jerry cans at the camp.

Ms. Rummery went on to say that while fighting has subsided in the Western Equatoria region of South Sudan since February, some 12,000 people crossed into the Democratic Republic of the Congo and sought shelter in the north-eastern

province of Haut-Uélé in the past few months.

The local communities have been welcoming of the refugees, but capacities are stretched, and thousands of the more recent arrivals have settled in very precarious conditions. The area is difficult to access and there are few humanitarian organizations present, the spokesperson said.

In addition, the conflict in Western Equatoria has forced thousands of South Sudanese from Source Yubu and Ezo to cross the border and seek asylum in the Central African Republic. As of 11 April, UNHCR had registered 10,454 South Sudanese refugees in the town of Bambouti, located in a difficult-to-reach area in the easternmost part of the Central African Republic.

The new arrivals in Bambouti greatly outnumber the host community, estimated at about 950 inhabitants, putting a severe strain on resources. Many refugees are suffering from malaria, waterborne diseases and malnutrition. Access to potable water, food, health care, sanitation and shelter is urgently needed for the entire population, Ms. Rummery said.

The spokesperson also said that UNHCR's Kakuma Operation in north-eastern Kenya has recorded a steady increase in new arrivals from South Sudan, rising from an average of 100 people a month at the start of this year to 350 people a week over the past two months.

Ms. Rummery noted that 2.3 million people have had to flee their homes since violence broke out in South Sudan in December 2013, 678,000 of these across borders as refugees and 1.69 million displaced inside the country.

Afghanistan: UN condemns Taliban attack in Kabul



Photo: UNAMA/Fardin Waezi

19 April – The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) today condemned the Taliban attack in Kabul that killed at least nine people and injured an estimated 300 others.

According to the Mission, provisional information indicates that at least two of those killed and the vast majority of the injured are civilians, including seven children and seven women. The civilian casualty toll is expected to rise.

“This attack shows the devastation caused by the use of explosive devices in urban areas and once more demonstrates complete disregard for the lives of Afghan civilians,” said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the Secretary-General’s Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan, in a press release.

“The use of high explosives in civilian populated areas, in circumstances almost certain to cause immense suffering to civilians, may amount to war crimes,” he added.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack centred around a National Directorate of Security (NDS) office in the Puli Mahmud Khan area of the Afghan capital. It reportedly took place during rush hour on a crowded street when a vehicle borne improvised explosive device detonated, followed by armed men entering the NDS compound. The blast caused extensive harm, injuring civilians within a one kilometre radius.

UNAMA said it reiterates its call for the Taliban to immediately cease all attacks in civilian-populated areas. The Mission also extended its condolences to the families of those killed and a speedy recovery for those injured, and affirmed its continued support to the people of Afghanistan.

UN rights chief welcomes release of 83 prisoners in Myanmar



OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani. Photo: UN Multimedia

19 April – The United Nations rights chief today welcomed the release of a second wave of 83 prisoners on Myanmar's New Year last Sunday, by Presidential amnesty.

This follows the release of 199 political prisoners on 8 April who had charges dropped against them or were pardoned, including students who were facing a prolonged trial following a protest against the National Education Law in March 2015.

At a press briefing in Geneva, Ravina Shamdasani, the Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, reported that the newly released prisoners include:

- Land rights activist Naw Ohn Hla who had been jailed six times for various peaceful protests
- Human rights defender Nay Myo Zin
- Community campaigner Htin Kyaw
- Five journalists from the Unity newspaper who were sentenced to seven years in prison in 2014 after the publication of an article
- Four labour activists convicted for supporting garment workers on strike
- Htin Lin Oo, sentenced in 2015 to two years in prison with hard labour for "insulting religion" after he delivered a speech criticising the misuse of religion to incite religious hatred

The Government announced that these releases were part of its commitment to promote national reconciliation. President U Htin Kyaw also stated in his New Year address that sustained effort would be made in the future to prevent "those who act legally for political causes or for their own conscience from being imprisoned".

"The continued release of political prisoners and the commitment to take preventive measures are important steps in the right direction," said Ms. Shamdasani. "We encourage the Government to build upon such human rights gains to ensure that all the people of Myanmar enjoy their fundamental freedoms. In doing so, we encourage the Government to ensure that all those who have been arbitrarily detained, including in remote areas, are also promptly released."

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), among those who remain behind bars are interfaith activists, Pwint Phyu Latt and Zaw Zaw Latt, who were sentenced in February 2016 to two years' imprisonment with hard labour under the Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act 1947, and U Gambira, also known as Nyi Nyi Lwin, a prominent figure in the 2007 Saffron Revolution, who is currently on trial in Mandalay under the same legislation.

"Our office stands ready to provide its expertise in support of efforts by the Government and Parliament to reform remaining laws that do not conform with international standards and have been used in the past to jail peaceful critics, and to take further strides in promoting and protecting human rights in Myanmar," Ms. Shamdasani concluded.

UN agency welcomes Jordan's measures to improve Syrian refugees' access to jobs

19 April – The United Nations refugee agency today welcomed a series of recent measures by the Government of Jordan that could help up to 78,000 Syrians to be able to work legally in Jordan in the short term and thousands more in the coming years.

“We believe the combined effort of these various initiatives will go a long way to help Syrian refugees become more sufficient and bring economic benefits to Jordan, which has felt the macro-economic consequences of a region in flux and the heavy cost of fighting in Syria,” Spokesperson Ariane Rummery of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told the media in Geneva.

Over 640,000 Syrian refugees are registered with UNHCR in Jordan, with more than 85 per cent living outside of camps. A recent study showed nine out of 10 Syrians living outside camps live below the Jordanian poverty line of JOD68, or \$87, per capita per month.

The most recent of the new measures, launched earlier this month, is a 90-day grace-period that allows employers in the informal sector to freely obtain work permits for Syrian refugees, regularizing their employment. This potentially puts those refugees on the same footing as migrant workers who are allowed to work in areas such as construction, agriculture, the service industry, food and beverages, wholesale and some factories, the spokesperson said.

The temporary waiver of fees, which range between \$170 to \$1,270, depending on the sector, is an important reprieve as many Syrian refugees have been sinking into poverty amid the prolonged war at home, increasing the risk that they would work illegally, she added.

For employers, the new grace period also allows them to legalize workers and avoid steep fines of between \$280 and \$2,100 that led to the closure of some 70 businesses to date.

Since the beginning of March, Jordanian authorities have also allowed Syrian refugees to use UNHCR-issued asylum-seeker cards and Jordanian Ministry of Interior identity cards to obtain work permits. Previously, the only way to do so was using a passport and proof of legal entry into the country.

As most Syrian refugees lack passports and proof of legal entry status, many were precluded from having jobs. Authorities have now removed that requirement, paving the way for thousands more Syrians to be legally employed.

UNHCR launched earlier this month a pilot project to help 2,000 Syrians get jobs in the export garment sector, as a partner of the 'Better Work Jordan' programme run by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The refugee agency is also running weekly job fairs for Syrian refugees in community centres close to the relevant industrial zones, including in Irbid and Zarqa. The first refugees are expected to start work in garment factories next week.



Syrian refugees in Jordan. Photo: UNICEF/Aho Yousef

Somalia: UN envoy welcomes progress in preparations for elections in 2016

19 April – The Security Council heard today from the top United Nations official in Somalia that political progress is being made in the country, but that much remains to be done in a short period, including completing the electoral process for 2016 and boosting support to the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).

“The progress is real but reversible,” Michael Keating, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), told the 15-member body during an update on the situation in the country.

“The State formation and electoral processes remain vulnerable spoilers. AMISOM needs financial and management support and cannot stay forever,” he added.

The Special Representative highlighted that this past week, Somali leaders from all Federal member states and interim regional administrations reached agreement on the electoral model to be used later this year.

“This significant achievement paves the way for practical planning,” he said, noting that “much remains to be done in a very short period.”

Mr. Keating said that the electoral process envisaged for 2016 will be significantly different from 2012, as the electoral college will be “a hundred times larger” and there will be a “genuine choice” of candidates.

Voting will take place not just in the capital, Mogadishu, but in each of the capitals or seats of government of the existing and emerging Federal states. A two-tier structure comprising federal and state-level representatives will implement the process.

In addition, Mr. Keating highlighted that 30 per cent of the seats in Parliament are being reserved for women, an “admirable commitment” that he said in practice will not be easy in a clan-based model, but could mark a “major milestone” in making women’s political empowerment and leadership a reality.

He said that once the cabinet has formalized the National Leadership Forum decision, it will go to the Federal Parliament.

“We call upon it to expedite endorsement of the model to allow timely implementation,” Mr. Keating said. “I welcome the continued commitment by Somali leaders, in line with this Council’s expectations, that there will be no extension of constitutionally mandated term limits.”

Calling the 2016 electoral model “literally unique, a once-off,” the Special Representative said it is a midway point between the election of 2012, when only 135 electors selected 275 Members of Parliament and 2020, when “all Somalis will have a say.”

“Work is now under way to that end,” he stressed.

Progress amid insecurity

As for the “many outstanding issues” in the country, the Special Representative said that the state formation process in



Michael Keating, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM). UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Hiraan and Middle Shabelle has encountered difficulties and delays.

“The international community is eager to support an inclusive agreement reached among clan leaders in both regions,” he said.

Expressing hope that the formation of the next state administration will take place soon, Mr. Keating said that this will set the stage for agreeing on the status of the Federal capital.

In addition, he said that the technical review of Somalia’s Provisional Federal Constitution has advanced, and that “politically contentious issues” are scheduled to be discussed at the next Leadership Forum meeting in May.

“This activity amounts to a historic opportunity for all Somalis to contribute to shaping the political and legal foundations of their country,” Mr. Keating said.

“Some major issue may only be addressed after the electoral process. But already there has been significant progress. The rule of law and its centrepiece, the Federal constitution, will be the strongest guarantee of long-term stability and democracy in Somalia,” he added.

Progress, however, is taking place “amid great insecurity,” the Special Representative stressed, another reason why progress is reversible.

Assistance needed to address short-term realities

Moreover, he said that Al Shabab remains a potential threat, and an incursion into the coastal area of Puntland in mid-March highlighted the vulnerability of the north. Although facing significant casualties, Al Shabab continues to carry out repeated asymmetric and conventional attacks.

Paying tribute to the bravery of AMISOM and its troops, and to the courage of the Somali security forces and people in confronting Al Shabab, Mr. Keating also emphasized that “they need and deserve our continued support.”

“The trilateral partnership – between the Federal Government, the African Union and the UN – remains a cornerstone of the peace- and state-building endeavour in Somalia,” he said.

The country’s security and prosperity depend on success in reversing dependency on aid and in addressing the root causes of fragility, conflict and violent extremism, Mr. Keating said. A comprehensive political strategy is also required, embracing economic investment in the drivers of growth, job creation, education, the rule of law and respect for human rights, as well as in capable security and counter-terrorism forces.

“This is a formidable agenda,” he said. “It requires commitment both by Somalia’s political and traditional leaders, as well as concerted support from its neighbours and international partners.

It also requires addressing short-term realities, such as drought and acute food insecurity, Mr. Keating said. While donors are responding with assistance, “much more” is needed, he stressed.

Ban heralds opening of permanent home for ICC as 'milestone' in global effort to uphold rule of law

19 April – In The Hague, Netherlands, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon today attended the official opening of the permanent premises of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which he called “a milestone in global efforts to promote and defend human rights and the rule of law.”

“International criminal justice is an integral part of the architecture of international relations,” Mr. Ban said at a ceremony chaired by the President of the ICC, judge Silvia Fernández, and Sidiki Kaba, President of the Assembly of States Parties to the Court’s founding Rome Statute.

The Secretary-General said he would continue to urge UN Member States that are not yet party to the Statute to ratify or accede to it.

“The International Criminal Court can continue to count on the full and unwavering support of the United Nations,” he said, stressing that both the Court and the UN strive to end impunity and ensure respect for human rights throughout the world. “Both seek to ensure that the rule of law will prevail,” he added.

The ICC completed its move to its new, permanent premises on 14 December 2015. The ICC needed a purpose-built facility designed for its activities, to fulfil its mandate in the fight against impunity for perpetrators of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression.

The building complex consists of six towers that are connected on the ground and first floors and offer over 1,200 workplaces. The largest tower, the Court Tower, accommodates three courtrooms and the media centre. Since its opening on 1 July 2002, the ICC occupied temporary quarters in two buildings in another area of The Hague.



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon speaks at the opening of the Permanent Premises of the International Criminal Court (ICC), in The Hague, Netherlands. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas