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**Syria: UN relief officials condemn targeting of civilians, infrastructure as airstrikes hit Raqqa**

A person walks amid destroyed buildings and rubble in Tabqa city, Raqqa governorate, Syria. Photo: UNICEF/Souleiman

**22 August** – Senior United Nations humanitarian officials for Syria today expressed deep concern over many civilians reportedly killed in airstrikes and other attacks in the last few days in Raqqa city, where coalition forces are fighting Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorists.

“The UN condemns attacks directed against civilians and civilian infrastructure. The humanitarian community reminds all parties to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to protect civilians and to spare no effort to prevent civilian casualties,” said a joint statement issued by Ali Al-Za'tari, the Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, and Ramesh Rajasingham, the acting Regional Humanitarian Coordinator.

These unconfirmed accounts come on the heels of an increasing number of reported civilian casualties due to intensified military operations, including airstrikes. In recent months, regular airstrikes and shelling in the city have reportedly resulted in scores of civilian casualties, including women and children, the statement said.

An estimated 75,000 people have been displaced from Raqqa city, but 18,000 to 25,000 civilians who remain trapped risk being killed by ISIL snipers or mines if they try to flee, or being used as human shields or killed in indiscriminate airstrikes if they remain.

## Worldwide remembrance of the slave trade 'a tribute to every victim' – senior UNESCO official



UNESCO earlier this year added to its World Heritage List the Mbanza Kongo, Vestiges of the Capital of the former Kingdom of Kongo (Angola) – one of the largest constituted states in Southern Africa from the 14th to 19th centuries – as an acknowledgement of its “outstanding universal value.” Photo: UNESCO/Joost De Raeymaeker

**22 August** – While the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition is a tribute to every victim and their resistance against slavery, it is also a reminder of the importance of teaching history, a senior United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural (UNESCO) has stressed.

“The legacy of the slave trade is a symbolic victory for human rights freedom; and the International Day acts as a reminder of the eternal effort to reaffirm human dignity and break down ignorance” Nada Al-Nashif, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences told *UN News* ahead of the Day, commemorated annually on 23 August.

Since its 1998 establishment, the commemoration has provided an opportunity to look back at the legacy of the slave trade and to understand how the uprising that began in 1791 in what is now Haiti was symbolic of a victory for freedom and human rights.

She explained that many regions of the world consider it to be a day of common heritage that symbolizes “a call for freedom, for justice and for dialogue among people.”

According to Ms. Al-Nashif, it is important to understand the limitation of interpretation, to change the silence and to act together to make resistance against slavery an inspirational force for future generation.

She underscored that its “call for truth” permeates UNESCO's work in appealing for social justice, the reduction of inequality and the preservation of human dignity and human rights.

### *Tracing history*

Aiming not only to break the silence, but to better understand the historic causes, methods and global consequences of the tragedy, UNESCO launched in 1994 the landmark Slave Route Project.

“Highlighting global transformations and cultural interactions,” Ms. Al-Nashif said the project showcased “how cultural pluralism and intercultural dialogue and understanding are critical to the culture of peace.”

Since its introduction, UNESCO maintains that the project has had a significant impact at local, national, regional and international levels – and has helped to effect a change in attitudes by 'de-racializing' the tragedy which, *de facto*, concerns humanity as a whole.

The Slave Route Project has contributed substantially to fostering greater awareness of the ethical, political, socio-economic and cultural aspects of this chapter of history, “and even the official recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity by the United Nations,” according to Ms. Al-Nashif.

Ms. Al-Nashif noted that project also speaks to “remedy the general ignorance on the history of Africa by reconstructing it – freeing it from racial prejudice – and re-reading the history through purely African perspectives or more objective views of scientists or researchers.”

Turning newly-nominated UNESCO World Heritage sites, Ms. Al-Nashif told *UN News* about Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site in Brazil and Mbanza Kongo, the Vestiges of the Capital of the former Kingdom of Kongo in Angola, saying “both [are] recognized to be of universal value.”

Ms. Al-Nashif said that Valongo, the former harbour area in Rio de Janeiro is “one of the most important wharfs in world history, because as many as 900,000 African men, women and children were held there before being sold in the Brazilian market and, for the two decades that it existed, was a hub for how the African diaspora came to the New World.”

The Vestiges were also a principal slave trade route through which enslaved people were transported to the Americas and Caribbean.

“The archaeological traces of the past speak to the many tangible and intangible heritage elements that still exist and have been honoured now,” she stressed.

Ms. Al-Nashif added that slavery is not a thing of the pass.

“Today we talk about modern slavery and human trafficking; the pushback on multilateralism and human rights; about race, identity and culture; and the challenges on how we can co-exist together,” she concluded.

## Justice vital to help Iraqi victims of ISIL's sexual violence rebuild lives – UN report



A Yazidi Kurd from Sinjar who was abducted by ISIS, pictured here in Mamilyan Camp for internally displaced persons in Akre, Iraq. Photo: Giles Clarke/ Getty Images Reportage

**22 August** – The Iraqi Government must ensure that the thousands of women and girls who survived sexual violence by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorist fighters receive care, protection and justice, and that children born because of such violence do not face a life of discrimination and abuse, a United Nations report published today says.

“The physical, mental, and emotional injuries inflicted by ISIL are almost beyond comprehension. If victims are to rebuild their lives, and indeed those of their children, they need justice and they need redress,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in a press release.

Victims have been subjected to rape and sexual assault, forced displacement, abduction, deprivation of liberty, slavery, forced religious conversion, and cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment. Women from the Yazidi and other minority communities have been especially vulnerable to abuses of human rights and violation of international humanitarian law.

The report notes that the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government have taken some positive steps to promote women and children's rights and to address the needs of those who have suffered abuses at the hands of ISIL.

However, the report says, the criminal justice system largely fails to ensure the appropriate protection of victims, requiring significant legislative and institutional changes to facilitate access to justice and to ensure the care and protection of victims in such proceedings.

The situation of hundreds of children born to women in ISIL-controlled areas without birth certificates or whose ISIL-issued documents are not accepted by the Government of Iraq or the Kurdistan Regional Government is also deeply troubling, the report says.

Birth registration requires the parents to present proof of marital status and two witnesses must confirm the circumstances of the child's birth – exceedingly difficult in the case of children whose parents may be dead or missing; where the father's identity is not known; where a child has been abandoned due to stigma or for those who live in IDP camps where no civil status offices or courts operate.

“Children who were born in ISIL-controlled areas have the same legal rights as any other Iraqi citizen and the Government

must ensure they are protected from marginalisation and abuse, neither exposed to discrimination through references on their birth certificate that they were born out of wedlock or have a father linked to ISIL, nor left unregistered and at risk of statelessness, exploitation and trafficking,” the High Commissioner stressed.

The report makes several recommendations on access to justice; provision of support and care for victims; information and counselling services to reunite separated families, and the importance of birth registration.

## Senior UN political official concerned by recent incidents that undermine Middle East peace process

**22 August** – A senior United Nations political affairs official today voiced concerns over recent developments that undermine efforts to end the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including Israel's move to amend a law to cement its control over East Jerusalem.

“Jerusalem is a final status issue that must be resolved through negotiations between the parties,” Assistant-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Miroslav Jenèa told the Security Council during his briefing on the situation in the Middle East.

He said that if approved, the proposed amendment to the “Basic Law: Jerusalem the Capital of Israel” would further cement Israeli control over occupied East Jerusalem and would limit the ability of both sides to reach a negotiated solution that is in line with UN resolutions and prior agreements.

“Any move which could impact demographics in the city is extremely worrisome and could spark violence,” he said.

Citing the latest settlement activities by Israel, he said that “such actions only fuel perceptions that those working to obstruct the two-state solution are gaining the upper hand” and reiterated that settlements are illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace.

Mr. Jenèa said that the recent crisis in Jerusalem's Old City – including several violent attacks and the resulting temporary closure of the Al-Aqsa Mosque – highlighted the unsustainability of the current situation, and the need for a political horizon and a clear re-commitment by the international community and both parties to realizing a two-state solution that meets the legitimate national aspirations and security needs of both Palestinians and Israelis.

Commending Israel and Jordan for bringing the crisis to an end, as well as religious leaders on both sides of the conflict for their calls for de-escalation, he said continued coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority was paramount in the current context.

Turning to Gaza, he recalled a recent UN country team report that expressed concerns that the enclave could become unlivable by 2020. He noted that since the hostilities between Hamas and Israel three years ago that killed nearly 1,500 civilians, the overall humanitarian conditions have worsened, with some 29,000 people remaining displaced despite reconstruction efforts.

Mr. Jenèa went on to call on Palestinian leaders to address the destructive consequences of their ongoing divisions, urging Hamas to ensure that calm is maintained by ending the militant build-up against Israel and to do its utmost to sustain security at the border with Egypt.

Israel for its part should also step-up measures to lift its closures and facilitate Gaza's development in line with Council resolution 1860 (2009). In addition, he called on donors to respond urgently to the \$25 million humanitarian appeal issued in



Miroslav Jenca (right), Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, addresses the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East. At his side is Ambassador Abdel Latif Aboulatta, Permanent Representative of Egypt to the UN and President of the Council for August. UN Photo/Kim Haughton

July in the wake of the electricity crisis, and to fill the current 70 per cent funding gap.

He urged all parties to the conflict to take the necessary steps for an enduring peace.

## UN human rights chief welcomes rape law reform in Lebanon, Tunisia, Jordan

**22 August** – Today, the top United Nations human rights official welcomed the repeal of laws in Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan that allow rapists to avoid criminal prosecution by marrying their victims.

“To punish a rape victim by making her marry the perpetrator of a horrible crime against her – there is no place in today's world for such hideous laws,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in press statement.

He warmly welcomed the stand that lawmakers in Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan have taken towards eliminating violence against women and ensuring that perpetrators of such violence are held to account.

According to the High Commissioner's Office (OHCHR), on 16 August, Lebanon voted to repeal article 522 of its penal code, a law that exempted from criminal prosecution a person accused of rape who agreed to marry the victim. Two weeks earlier, on 1 August, Jordanian lawmakers also voted to abolish a similar provision – article 308 of its penal code.

In Tunisia, on 26 July, the Parliament adopted a law on eliminating violence against women and eliminating impunity for perpetrators, recognizing that violence against women includes economic, sexual, political and psychological violence. The law will come into effect next year. Tunisia has also established two human rights institutions this year dealing with human trafficking and improving the enjoyment of individual liberties and equality.

“These are hard-won victories, thanks to the tireless campaigns over the years by human rights defenders – in particular women human rights defenders – in Tunisia, Lebanon and Jordan,” underscored High Commissioner Zeid.

He noted however that in Lebanon, article 505 of the Penal Code continues to allow those accused of having sex with a minor to go free if they marry their victims, while article 508 allows for marital rape, and called for the article to be repealed and for marital rape to be criminalized.

“I call on the Governments and people of these countries – and other countries in the region – to build on this positive momentum, and to work towards the swift repeal of other legislation that condones sexual violence against women and girls and perpetuates discrimination against them in clear violation of international human rights law,” concluded Mr. Zeid.



UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.  
UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

## UNICEF warns use of children as 'human bombs' is on the rise in north-east Nigeria



A 17-year-old girl, 'Aminata,' forced to live with Boko Haram for two years, sits in an internally displaced persons camp in Maiduguri, Borno state, Nigeria. UNICEF/Abubakar

**22 August** – The United Nations children agency today expressed extreme concern at the appalling increase in the cruel and calculated use of children, especially girls, as “human bombs” in north-east Nigeria.

“Since the beginning of January 2017, 83 children had been used as so-called human bombs, 55 being girls, most of them often under 15 years old,” UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) spokesperson Marixie Mercado told reporters at today's regular press briefing in Geneva.

“The 27 other children were boys and one was an infant strapped to a girl,” she continued.

She pointed out that since 2014, children have been repeatedly used in this way, calling the number of children used so far this year alone was “already four times higher than what it was for all of 2016.”

“Children used as human bombs are, above all, victims, not perpetrators,” Ms. Mercado underscored.

She went on to say that the use of children in such attacks has a further impact of creating suspicion and fear of children released, rescued, or escaped from Boko Haram. “They face rejection when they tried to reintegrate their communities which compounds their suffering,” she explained.

Ms. Mercado painted a dire picture, describing the situation as a massive displacement and malnutrition crisis – “a deadly combination for children.”

She said that 10 per cent of the persons displaced by the insurgencies in north-east Nigeria are children, and the vast majority of them in Borno state, where most of those attacks are taking place.”

North-east Nigeria is one of the four countries or regions facing the spectre of famine, with up to 450,000 children at risk of severe acute malnutrition this year, according to UNICEF.

UNICEF is providing psychosocial support for children who had been held by Boko Haram and the agency is also working with families and communities to foster the acceptance of returned children – including through social and economic reintegration support.

As of July, UNICEF has supported more than 3,000 children and 1,200 women. It also backed reconciliation activities in north-east Nigeria led by communities, religious leaders and influential women to help promote tolerance, acceptance, and reintegration.

Noting that a \$1 billion dollar appeal to minimally help sustain people in Nigeria is only 60 per cent funded, Jens Laerke, Spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, told reporters at the briefing that the situation for civilians in the area was extremely grave.

Humanitarian Coordinator Edward Kallon stressed that women and children in Borno state face grave human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence. He noted that, since the start of the conflict in 2009, more than 20,000 people had been killed with thousands of women and girls abducted and abused.

In total, 8.5 million people in the worst-affected states of Borno, namely Adamawa and Yobe, need of humanitarian assistance. In its eighth year, this crisis shows no sign of abating, said Mr. Laerke. Food insecurity affects 5.2 million

people, some of whom are on the brink of famine.

## UN aid workers urge safe passage for civilians fleeing northern Iraq ahead of battle

**22 August** – Warning of harassment, revenge attacks and abuse of civilians displaced from the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar, United Nations refugee and migration agencies today called for people trying to flee the city ahead of military operations to have safe passage.

“We fear that Iraqi civilians are likely to be held as human shields again and that attempts to flee could result in executions/shootings,” Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told journalists in Geneva about the ongoing operations to retake the city.

He also noted reports of people being denied access to safety and stopped along the way.

“We call on all parties to the conflict to allow civilians to leave the conflict area and to access to safety,” Mr. Mahecic said.

Thousands of civilians are believed to be in Tal Afar, which has been without aid since the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorist group took control of the surrounding communities in 2014.

Since April this year, more than 30,000 people fled Tal Afar district, many living in camps sheltering other displaced families mainly from Mosul, some 65 kilometres south-west.

Conditions in the district are believed to be “very difficult,” Mr. Mahecic said, noting a lack of food, water and electricity.

“People are said to have been surviving on unclean water and bread for the past three to four months,” he told journalists.

Those who fled have often had to walk in temperatures up to 50 degrees Celsius for up to 20 hours at a time, amid shooting, and often leaving behind children, elderly and disabled who are too vulnerable for the trip.

“Many talk of seeing dead bodies along the way, and there are reports that some were killed by extremist groups. Others appear to have died due to dehydration or illnesses,” said Mr. Mahecic.

In the past four day, some 1,500 people arrived at nearby emergency sites managed by the UN International Migration Agency (IOM)

In conjunction with partners, IOM and UNHCR have been treating arrivals with food and water, transporting them to hospitals, if needed, and helping them settle in camps.

IOM is preparing additional aid for hundreds more arrivals expected in the coming days.



UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) emergency teams respond to thousands of civilians fleeing Tal Afar since the launch of the military campaign to retake the city from ISIL on 20 August. Photo: UN migration agency (IOM)