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In the Gaza Strip, UN chief appeals for Palestinian unity; renews call for two-state solution

30 August – Visiting Gaza for the first time since taking office as United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres today called for Palestinian unity, saying division “only undermines the cause of the Palestinian people.”

Speaking to reporters at a UN-supported school in northern Gaza, the Secretary-General appealed for unity, in line with the principles of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which include rejecting violence and terrorism, and recognizing Israel's right to exist in peace.

“I have a dream. A dream to one day see the Holy Land with two states – Israel and Palestine – living in peace and security together,” Mr. Guterres told reporters in Beit Lahiya, Gaza, at a school run by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Making this second appeal, Mr. Guterres underscored the importance of a credible political process and actions to improve living conditions of Palestinians.

“It is important to open the closures, in line with resolution 1860” he said, referring the Security Council resolution from 2009 which called for an immediate ceasefire to the fighting between Israel and Hamas and lifting of blockades for food, fuel and medicines.

The resolution was meant to diffuse an intra-Palestinian conflict which flared when Hamas took over Gaza in 2007. Since then, Israel sought to isolate the group by restricting the movements of goods and people in and out of the strip.



Secretary-General António Guterres (at podium) speaks to the media at an UNRWA school in Beit Lahiya, Gaza. Photo: OSSG

In today's statement, Mr. Guterres that it was important to avoid the “build-up of the militantism” that can undermine the confidence between the two people,” he added.

The UN chief today appealed to the international community to strongly support humanitarian aid in Gaza. He ordered an immediate release of \$4 million from the limited resources of the Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF), to support the UN activities working for the benefit of the Gaza people.

Mr. Guterres, who toured the Israeli-Gaza border by helicopter and then crossed it by vehicle, called the conditions in Gaza, “one of the most dramatic humanitarian crises” he has seen during his time working as a humanitarian.

The two million people living in Gaza have lack access to basic services, such as electricity, food or healthcare. The real gross domestic product (GDP) is largely stagnant, unemployment is up and the infrastructure and private sector have been gradually debilitated, according to a UN report published last month.

Given the current trends, Gaza would become “unliveable” by 2020, according to the report.

'True peacemakers'

Wrapping up his trip to the Middle East, Mr. Guterres today also visited the Museum of the Jewish People, where he reiterated his ongoing calls for an end to anti-Semitism around the world.

Pledging that he will do all possible to stand against anti-Semitism and all other forms of bigotry and discrimination, Mr. Guterres stressed that anti-Semitism includes calls for the destruction of Israel.

“Israel is a Member State of the United Nations. It bears all the responsibilities and enjoys all the rights of every other Member State and, therefore, it must be treated as such,” he stressed.

Mr. Guterres described meeting families in Nahal Oz, a kibbutz close to the Gaza Strip. Speaking with relatives of a child killed by a Palestinian rocket, he told of a request to help the Palestinians in Gaza have better lives.

Calling the request a “fantastic example of solidarity, of humanity, of tolerance,” Mr. Guterres paid tribute to the “voices of these true peacemakers.”

“Let us not forget that those individual peacebuilders represent the best faces of their communities and serve as the human foundation so essential for a lasting peace, here and everywhere,” he said.

'Time to shift from logic of war,' put interests of Syrian people first, UN Security Council told



Duma, East Ghouta, Syria. Photo: UNOCHA

30 August – Calling for creative ways to work towards peace in Syria, the United Nations Special Envoy today outlined the political path forward, which includes holding another round of the so-named Astana talks and behind-the-scenes efforts by the international community.

“This is a time for realism and focus, for shifting from the logic of war to that of negotiation, and for putting the interests of the Syrian people first. If I could identify one thing above all that can make the difference, it will be a sense of unity of purpose internationally with clear priorities and common goals,” UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, told the Security Council.

He noted that the next round of what has become known as the

'Astana talks' – between the Syrian conflict parties and led by Russia, Turkey and Iran – will be held on 14 and 15 September.

These three countries “will need to keep actively working, as they have been doing, on de-escalation,” Mr. de Mistura said, adding that he and his team will be supporting these efforts.

The UN official also noted the key role that Saudi Arabia and other countries with influence over the opposition have in fostering “cohesion and realism of the opposition.” Mr. de Mistura said his office is ready to convene further technical talks to support Saudi efforts on unifying the opposition.

In addition, he noted the importance of working with the Government of Syria. He said that it will be vital for those countries with influence to “assess the situation carefully and signal a genuine readiness for dialogue and inclusion” on the country's political future.

Today's briefing comes just weeks ahead of the annual high-level opening segment of the UN General Assembly, where the European Union will host a special event in New York which will serve as “an opportunity” to address future resilience and stabilization efforts, and support the humanitarian needs in Syria, Mr. de Mistura said.

These events will all take place ahead of the convocation of the formal intra-Syrian talks in Geneva later in October.

“This is designed to give time for the dynamics I have just described to reach a further stage of maturity,” the senior UN official said.

He added “it is my hope that both the Syrian Government and the opposition will come to Geneva then to engage in formal negotiations.”

Outgoing UN aid chief urges help for Syrians

Also today, the Council heard from outgoing Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien, who steps down tomorrow.

Addressing the Council for the final time after two years on the job, Mr. O'Brien made an emotional appeal for the 15-member body to do more to end the brutal civil war, now in its seventh year.

“I am still urging you, in the name of our common humanity, to find a way to stop the Syrian people paying the price of political failure,” he said. “The fact that month after month, it is the unremitting, fearful plight of the Syrian people which sears into our hearts and outrages and torments our minds, I am bound to reflect – surely we can do better.”

He expressed frustration at the “little progress” made in recent months in responding to the needs of thousands of people who remain besieged in Foah, Kefraya and Yarmouk.

Mr. O'Brien noted that on numerous occasions, despite agreement to distribute aid, the trucks were loaded only to be unloaded.

“This is disgusting. It's scandalous and an outrage and I urge all Member States – in particular those with the influence – to do all they can to bring the parties to their senses,” he urged.

I am told a new agreement among the parties was apparently reached on 27 August, but where is the evidence?”

He cautioned that thousands of people – mostly women and children – depend on the international community's collective action.

Among other points raised, he reiterated that civilians, humanitarians and health workers are not a target, and said that he stands in solidarity with the millions of civilians whose lives have been destroyed by the conflict.



Human rights violations indicate repressive policy of Venezuelan authorities – UN report

30 August – Extensive human rights violations and abuses have been committed in the wake of anti-Government protests in Venezuela and point to “the existence of a policy to repress political dissent and instill fear in the population to curb demonstrations,” a report by the United Nations human rights office has found.

“The policies pursued by the authorities in their response to the protests have been at the cost of Venezuelans’ rights and freedoms,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein in a news release issued today.

The report notes that the generalized and systematic use of excessive force during demonstrations and the arbitrary detention of protestors and perceived political opponents indicate that these were not the acts of isolated officials.

The report calls on the UN Human Rights Council to consider taking measures to prevent the human rights situation in Venezuela from worsening. Venezuela is currently a Council member.

Mass street demonstrations began in the country in April. Tensions between the Government and the opposition reached a new high about a month ago, when President Nicolás Maduro convened elections for the so-called Constituent Assembly, which could replace the current legislative body, the National Assembly.

The report indicates that of the 124 deaths linked to the protests being investigated by the Attorney General's Office as of 31 July, the security forces were reportedly responsible for 46 and pro-Government armed groups, known as armed colectivos, for 27. Responsibility for the remaining 51 deaths has not yet been determined.

According to reliable estimates from a local NGO, more than 5,000 people were detained since 1 April, with more than 1,000 reportedly still held as of 31 July. At least 609 civilians arrested in the context of protests were presented before military tribunals. The report calls on the Government to halt arbitrary detention and the use of military courts to try civilians.

The report documents attacks against journalists and media workers by security forces that were apparently aimed at preventing them from covering demonstrations.

“Demonstrators and journalists were labelled by high-level authorities as 'enemies' and 'terrorists' – words that did little to counter, and may even have contributed to, the climate of violence and polarization,” the High Commissioner said.

Warning that amid continuing economic and social crises and rising political tensions, there is a grave risk the situation in Venezuela will deteriorate further, Mr. Zeid encouraged the Government to follow up on the recommendations made in the report and to use its findings as guidelines to seek truth and justice for the victims of human rights violations and abuses.



Protesters in La Castellana, a neighborhood in eastern Caracas.
Photo: Helena Carplo/IRIN News

Syria: UN adviser warns trapped civilians face greater risks as Raqqa fighting intensifies



Displaced children and adults shown here fled ISIL-controlled areas in rural Raqqa to Ain Issa, the main staging point for displaced families, some 50 Km north of Raqqa City. Photo: UNICEF/Soulaïman (file)

30 August – The United Nations adviser on the prevention of genocide today expressed deep concern at the deteriorating situation of up to 25,000 civilians trapped in Syria's Raqqa, noting that civilians are used as human shields in this de facto capital of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorist group under intense bombardment.

“I am deeply disturbed by reports coming out of Raqqa of the horrendous situation faced by civilians caught up in the offensive to retake the city from the so-called ISIL,” said UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide Adama Dieng in a statement released by the Office of the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General.

International counter-ISIL coalition forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are carrying out airstrikes, and ISIL, which still controls Raqqa, is reportedly using civilians as human shields, he added.

ISIL fighters are reportedly killing those who try to escape, and coalition forces are targeting boats on the Euphrates river, which had been one of the remaining escape routes for civilians. Civilians in south of the Euphrates river are reportedly facing indiscriminate attacks by Syrian Government forces and their allies during military operations to retake the area.

“The legitimate aim of retaking Raqqa must not be achieved at such a high cost to civilians,” said the Special Advisor, urging all parties to adhere to their obligations under international human rights and international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians.

Reiterating calls for a humanitarian pause to spare civilian lives, Mr. Dieng warned that as the offensive to retake Raqqa reaches its final stages, the fighting is likely to intensify and increase the risks faced by civilians still trapped in the city.

Security Council extends African-led mission in Somalia, targets handover to national security forces



Foodstuff being loaded onto a truck at Baidoa Airport. It is part of the support that UNSOM will be giving to SNA soldiers as they fight alongside AMISOM troops. AU/UNISTPHOTO /Mohamed Guled

30 August – The United Nations Security Council today extended its authorization of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) until 31 May 2018, approving a reduction of its uniformed personnel to a maximum 21,626 by 31 December 2017, with an eye towards the gradual handover over of responsibilities to Somali security forces.

Unanimously adopting a new resolution, the Council decided that the downsizing – the first ever for the African-led operation – would include a minimum of 1,040 AMISOM police personnel and five Formed Police Units. A further reduction (from the current maximum of 22,126) to 20,626 uniformed personnel by 30 October 2018 would follow, unless the Council decides to accelerate that pace, taking into account the capabilities of Somali security forces.

Emphasizing that the long-term objective for Somalia, with international support, is for the Somali Security Forces to assume full responsibility for security, with AMISOM remaining critical during the transition, the Council welcomed the recommendation by the AU-UN review for a “gradual and phased” reduction and reorganization of the Mission.

Further by the text, AMISOM's strategic objectives would be to enable the gradual handover of its security responsibility to Somali security forces, to reduce the threat posed by Al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups, and to assist Somali security forces in providing security for Somalia's political process and peacebuilding efforts.

The Council decided that AMISOM's priority tasks would be, among other efforts, to conduct targeted offensive operations against Al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups, including jointly with the Somali security forces, and to mentor the latter in cooperation with the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and in line with national security structures.

It would reconfigure, as security conditions allowed, in favour of police personnel, and receive defectors on a transitory basis.

In conflict-affected Nigeria, UN agency teams with health workers to help the displaced



A nurse and a survivor of the Boko Haram insurgency at an antenatal check-up in north-eastern Nigeria. Photo: UNFPA Nigeria

30 August – Skilled health personnel are desperately needed in north-eastern Nigeria, the United Nations population agency today said, after training hundreds of health providers in Borno State on the basics of reproductive health needs.

“I have been working in the field of maternal health in this country for more than 35 years,” Hauwa Lassa, a retired nurse and midwife told the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in Maiduguri, where she works at a health facility in one of the displacement camps. “It is now with this crisis going on that the women need support. So I decided to come back to the health centre and help.”

Ms. Lassa was one of 300 women trained by UNFPA in a so-called Minimum Initial Service Package, which includes how to coordinate with humanitarian staff, provide clinical care for survivors of sexual

violence, prevent HIV through condom distribution, and helping get access to emergency obstetric care.

“This, together with equipping the health facilities and hospitals with supplies for safe deliveries, access to family planning, and equipment to respond to sexual and gender-based violence is one of the cornerstones of UNFPA's work here,” said Ada Pouye, UNFPA's humanitarian coordinator in Nigeria.

The violence in north-eastern Nigeria destroyed more than 40 per cent of health facilities, and forced doctors and nurses to flee.

The UN agency said it is trying to provide urgently needed care in a country where one woman died of pregnancy-related causes every nine minutes, and where some 276,000 women are likely to become pregnant this year.

In addition to helping safely deliver babies and teach about family planning, UNFPA is also working with women and girls to immunize newborns.

“We have a special way of making women come back for the second immunization shot for their baby after 40 days,” said Mdapilawa Yatzubu, who also participated in the UNFPA training, and then returned to a health centre in the town of Biu.

“We give them a small gift, mostly soap. They all come back to collect the soap and have their health checked and the baby immunized with the second dose. This is how we follow up on them.”

UN agriculture chief says Uganda 'leading example' of sustainable refugee response

30 August – The head of the United Nations agriculture agency today called for greater funding for a sustainable response to the refugee crisis in Uganda, as he concluded a visit to the country's north hosting those crossing the border for safety.

“Uganda's refugee model is an example to the world,” said UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Director-General José Graziano da Silva in a news release, noting that the country allocates land to refugees for shelter and cultivation so that they can provide food for themselves rather than rely on food aid.

“It is vital that funds be mobilized to support this effort [...] so that refugees and their host communities can have a real opportunity to overcome hunger and poverty. Uganda is giving not only food and land but hope,” he added.



UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Director-General José Graziano da Silva in Uganda. Vegetable and crop seeds are provided to refugees to kick-start their food production. Photo: FAO/Anita Tibasaaga

Uganda is host to the fastest-growing refugee crisis in the world. Since July last year, more than one million South Sudanese refugees have crossed into the country.

The refugees are predominantly women and young people and come from farming or livestock herding communities.

Mr. Graziano da Silva visited two refugee settlements, Agojo and Mungula 1, in Adjumani district near Uganda's border with South Sudan.

At Agojo, the FAO Director-General helped distribute crop and vegetable seeds to more than 1,000 refugee and host community households. At Mungula 1, he inaugurated a micro-irrigation project that will provide the refugee and host community households with a reliable source of water for their crops and animals.

Prior to visiting the settlements, Mr. Graziano da Silva met with Uganda's Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda.

Under a new response plan, FAO is intensifying its efforts in providing livelihood assistance to refugees and host communities. The plan focuses on food and livestock production, nutrition, protecting the environment and enhanced technical support to the Government.

The Director-General's visit comes after UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on the donor community in June to strengthen their support to the refugee response. Uganda requires around \$2 billion annually for 2017-2020 to address refugee needs, and donors have so far pledged around \$358 million.

Security Council renews mandate of UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon



UNIFIL peacekeepers in southern Lebanon. Photo: UNIFIL/Pasqual Gorriz

30 August – The Security Council today extended the mandate of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Lebanon for one year.

In a unanimously adopted resolution, the 15-member body requested the Secretary-General to look at ways to enhance the efforts of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), including through increasing the mission's visible presence, through patrols and inspections, within its existing mandate and capabilities.

Originally established in 1978, UNIFIL was greatly reinforced after the 2006 fighting to oversee the cessation of hostilities between Israel and the Lebanese group Hezbollah. It is tasked with ensuring that the area between the so-called 'Blue Line' – separating Israel and Lebanon – and the Litani River is free of unauthorized weapons, personnel and assets. It also cooperates with the Lebanese Armed Forces so they can

fulfil their security responsibilities.

UNIFIL's initial mandate included confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon, and assisting the Government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area.

The Council affirmed its strong continuing commitment to the existing mandate of UNIFIL, also urging all parties to cooperate fully with the Security Council and the Secretary-General to make tangible progress towards a permanent ceasefire and a long-term solution as envisioned in resolution 1701, which helped end the 2006 hostilities in Lebanon between Israel and the Hezbollah.