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UN chief calls for action on Myanmar and DPR Korea; launches reform initiatives

13 September – United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today reiterated his call for Muslims from Myanmar's Rakhine state to be granted nationality or at least a legal status that would allow them to lead a normal life, while also urging the international community to help provide assistance for the nearly 380,000 people who have fled into Bangladesh.

“I call on the Myanmar authorities to suspend military action, end the violence, uphold the rule of law, and recognize the right of return of all those who had to leave the country,” the Secretary-General said in his first press conference since the opening of the 72nd session of the General Assembly.

Mr. Guterres repeated his call for “an effective action plan” to address the root causes of the situation, which he said he been left to fester for decades and has now escalated beyond Myanmar's borders, destabilizing the region.

The Security Council is due to discuss the situation this afternoon in an urgent closed-door meeting, following an official letter from the Secretary-General expressing his concern.

“The humanitarian situation is catastrophic,” he said, noting that at the time of his briefing to the press last week, there were 125,000 Rohingya who had fled into Bangladesh. That number has now tripled to nearly 380,000 and people are arriving hungry and malnourished and finding shelter in makeshift settlements or with host communities.

“I urge all countries to do what they can for humanitarian assistance to be provided,” Mr. Guterres said. He also called on Myanmar authorities to ensure delivery of aid by UN agencies, non-governmental organizations and others.



Secretary-General António Guterres holds a wide-ranging press conference ahead of the general debate of the 72nd session of the General Assembly. UN Photo/Mark Garten

The humanitarian community has this week launched a \$77 million appeal to aid some of the stateless refugees for the next three months.

Political solution needed for Korean peninsula

Also in today's press briefing, Mr. Guterres reiterated his call for a political solution to the situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

He said that nuclear and missile tests by the county created "great instability and tension" on the Korean peninsula, throughout the region and beyond.

"Unity in the Security Council is critical. This week's unanimous adoption of a new resolution sends a clear message that the DPRK must comply fully with its international obligations," Mr. Guterres said referring to new sanctions, which among other measures, limit the imports of crude oil and oil products, ban textile exports, and prevent new visas for DPRK workers overseas.

Despite calling on countries to ensure full implementation of this and other relevant Security Council resolutions, Mr. Guterres urged the Council to use diplomacy whenever possible.

Mediation and gender initiatives launched

The UN chief also announced two initiatives today that he said would strengthen the UN's work and which are part of his broader reform agenda.

Reiterating his call for "a surge in diplomacy," Mr. Guterres announced a new High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation which will be comprised of 18 internationally-recognized personalities "who bring experience and skills, deep knowledge and extensive contacts" to this task.

He also launched his gender parity strategy for the United Nations, which aims to achieve parity at senior levels by 2021, and across the board by 2028.

"This roadmap fulfils an urgent need, a moral duty, an operational necessity – and a personal priority," he said.

While lauding the appointment of 17 women and 15 men to his Senior Management Group, Mr. Guterres said change must be made in attitudes and approaches.

"We must lead by example on gender equality and women's empowerment, which is one of the greatest human rights challenges and opportunities in our world," he said.

Concerns about Central African Republic

Among other issues raised during the press conference, Mr. Guterres highlighted the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR), which has seen a rise of 37 per cent in refugees and displaced persons in the past three months.

"This is grave cause for concern in a country where more than half the population are in dire need of assistance. I hope global leaders will give this crisis their attention during their talks next week," he said.

A high-level event on CAR is scheduled for Tuesday.



Somalia facing complex immediate and long-term challenges, UN Security Council told



A wide view of the Security Council Chamber as Michael Keating (left on screen), Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), briefs the Council via video link. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

13 September – Highlighting complex immediate and long-term challenges in Somalia, the head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in the country (UNSOM) called for practical support, as well as political encouragement to the Somali leadership, both at the Federal and the state levels.

“The worst of the famine threat has been averted [but] damage to lives and livelihoods, particularly women, children and marginalised groups, has been extensive,” said Michael Keating, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Somalia, briefing the Security Council.

“An imperative for Somalis is to escape the vicious cycle of recurring weather-related shocks,” he added.

Another pressing issue before the country, Mr. Keating said, is of political problems becoming complicated by ill-defined relationships between various branches of the State, and in such a situation, the Federal Government's management of the situation to prevent them from threatening progress on core objectives and the stability of the state was crucial.

In that context, he highlighted that the working relationship between the President and the Prime Minister as well as the determination of the federal Government to deliver “tangible economic and security benefits” for the population is very encouraging.

He also highlighted progress on preparing and passing important laws, such as the Telecommunications Bill and the Human Rights Commission Act, and said that completing the constitutional review was a critical task for the successful holding of elections in 2020-2021.

“The legislative framework and agreement on the electoral model are urgently needed,” he said, adding that these would help dispel scepticism on whether Somalia can move away from the so-called “4.5 model” to universal suffrage.

Realizing vast economic potential depends on addressing political issues

Highlighting the country's economic potential in sectors ranging from agribusiness, livestock, fisheries, trade to renewable and other energy sources, Mr. Keating stressed that realizing the potential is contingent upon success in reaching a political settlement between the Government and the private sector, as well as on Government policies and capacities to implement them.

“A critical requirement will be raising revenues, whether from domestic sources or by accessing concessional finance,” he said, noting the Prime Minister's appeal for immediate budget support to allow the Government to deliver on jobs and security, and to strengthen relations with Federal Member States by means of fiscal transfers.

The UN envoy also informed the Security Council of the UN-World Bank collaboration to devise a “surge support” package for public works, and urged partners to follow the European Union (EU), Norway and Sweden's lead to use Recurrent Cost and Reform Financing Facility to that end.

Mogadishu is safer, but larger security situation volatile

Further in his briefing, Mr. Keating noted security improvements in the capital, Mogadishu, but added that the Al-Shabaab terrorist groups continues remains a potent threat that the overall security situation in Somalia remains volatile.

“Addressing insecurity and the continuing threat from Al-Shabaab requires vigorous implementation of the National Security Architecture Agreement and of the Comprehensive Approach to Security,” he said, noting that international partners have started working on its components.

He also underscored the need to ensure predictable funding for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) given that it continues to play an indispensable role in protecting Somali progress and people and as national security forces are not yet ready to shoulder full responsibilities.

At the same time, Mr. Keating added, support should also continue for the Somali security forces to strengthen their capacity.

Concluding his briefing, he informed that the UN is working with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union, the European Union (EU) and other partners to strengthen national conflict resolution capacities as well as to facilitate agreements in specific locations.

Nigeria: Famine averted but millions still at risk, stresses top UN relief official

13 September – Noting important progress in delivering life-saving aid to millions in north-east Nigeria, the top United Nations humanitarian official underscored that international assistance to people suffering amid the crisis must not dwindle.

“We have averted famine, but millions of people are still at risk if more international help is not forthcoming,” said Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, at the end of a two-day mission to the country.

“At next week's General Assembly in New York, I will urge world leaders to maintain their financial and political support for the Lake Chad Basin crisis, and to work with the Nigerian authorities to bring stability to the north-east,” he added.



UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock, speaks with displaced women at the Wege Camp site in Pulka, north-east Nigeria. September 2017. Photo: OCHA/Ivo Brandau

In particular, Mr. Lowcock, also the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, noted the Nigerian Government's leadership and coordination of relief efforts and welcomed the Vice President's assurance to extend the Government's own food aid programme.

He also highlighted that the international system has also rapidly scaled up and saved millions of lives, reaching two million people with food assistance every month as well as providing life-saving nutritional support to hundreds of thousands of children.

However, the humanitarian situation remains precarious.

Since the beginning of the Boko Haram conflict, more than 20,000 people have been killed, thousands of women and children abducted, many forced into displacement, and subjected to violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. In north-east Nigeria, at least 8.5 million people are dependent on humanitarian assistance.

Recalling his visit to Gwoza – a town which the Boko Haram declared capital of its territory in 2015 before Government forces took it back the same year – and meeting Fatima, a nine-year-old girl who fled with her family to the town four years ago, Mr. Lowcock said that though many towns in the region are relatively safe, more needed to be done to bring safety to the rural areas.

“In the meantime, Fatima and millions of others like her will rely on humanitarian assistance,” he noted.

Mr. Lowcock travelled to Niger and Nigeria from 9-12 September, shortly after beginning his roles as the top UN relief official on 1 September.

While in the two countries, he also held meetings senior government officials, UN humanitarian agencies, international non-governmental organizations and the diplomatic community.

Following Lankesh's murder, UN rights experts urge Indian Government to protect free speech

13 September – A group of independent human rights experts today called on the Government of India to create a safer environment for independent voices, after Indian journalist and human rights defender Gauri Lankesh was killed earlier this month.

“The Indian authorities should unequivocally condemn the killing of Gauri Lankesh, investigate it, bring all the perpetrators – including the masterminds – to account, and take seriously the safety of journalists,” said the Special Rapporteurs on freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye, on summary or arbitrary executions, Agnes Callamard, and on the situation of human rights defender, Michel Forst.



They called the murder of Ms. Lankesh, who was shot dead outside of her home on 5 September a “terrible and painful tragedy” and a “vicious attack” on the freedom of the press.

“We urge the authorities in India to take active steps to reverse a political climate that in recent years have become increasingly polarized and hostile, especially to the media and those exercising the freedom of expression,” the Special Rapporteurs said, adding that they are in contact with the Government regarding the situation.

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Ms. Lankesh was known as a “rationalist,” a term used in India for people who stand against the use of religion in politics.

OHCHR confirmed that her killing is the fourth in the last three years of activists who had opposed the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in politics.

“Governments have a responsibility to build a safe environment for independent voices, including those of journalists critical of the authorities,” they said.

UN Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

Security Council calls on Guinea-Bissau leaders to 'find common ground' for swift resolution of political crisis



Wide view of the Security Council. UN Photo/Loey Felipe (file)

13 September – Concerned by the political crisis in Guinea-Bissau, the United Nations Security Council today urged political actors to “put the interests of [the people] above all other consideration” and called on the country’s leaders to engage in genuine dialogue, find common ground and implement the Conakry Agreement of 14 October 2016, including by appointing a consensus Prime Minister, as required by that accord.

In a statement read out by Tekeda Alemu, of Ethiopia, which holds the Council’s presidency for September, the 15-nation body expressed deep concern about the unresolved political impasse in Guinea-Bissau, citing the inability of its leaders to reach a lasting and consensual solution, and the failure of both the National Assembly to hold plenary sessions since January 2016, and of four consecutive Governments to adopt a work programme and national budget.

Urging political actors to place the people’s interests above all other considerations, the Council called upon national leaders — including the President, Speaker of Parliament and the heads of political parties — to abide by their commitments to restore political stability and refrain from rhetoric and acts that might undermine peace and national cohesion.

Implementation of the Conakry Agreement, the primary framework for a peaceful resolution of the political crisis, could help restore confidence and enable the international community to fulfil pledges made at the 2015 Brussels Conference, it stated.

The causes of instability in Guinea-Bissau remain unaddressed, the Council noted, stressing the need for the Government to continue to take concrete steps in such areas as security sector reform, reinforcing the judicial system’s fight against corruption, improving public administration and providing basic services to the population.

Underlining the importance of legislative and presidential elections scheduled for 2018 and 2019, respectively, the Council stressed that implementation of the Conakry Agreement would bring Guinea-Bissau closer to political stability and bolster public confidence in advance of the voting.

The Council also welcomed the extension by an additional three months of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Mission in Guinea-Bissau (ECOMIB), calling for its continued operation beyond that extension.

Ahead of talks on Venezuela, UN chief voices support for political solution



Secretary-General António Guterres addresses journalists at a press conference at UN Headquarters (file). UN Photo/Evan Schneider

12 September – United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today expressed his full support for a new initiative to negotiate a political solution to the situation in Venezuela.

In a statement from his spokesperson, the Secretary-General voiced encouragement for mediation ahead of a round of talks due to be held tomorrow in the Dominican Republic between Venezuela’s Government and the opposition.

“The Secretary-General reiterates his firm conviction that the situation in Venezuela requires a political solution based on dialogue and compromise between the Government and the opposition to ensure peaceful coexistence among all Venezuelans,” according to the

statement.

The spokesperson added that Mr. Guterres “encourages the Venezuelan political actors to seize this opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to address the country's challenges through mediation and peaceful means.”