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UN supporting national relief efforts as Hurricane Irma threatens nearly 50 million people

Satellite imagery of Hurricane Irma in the Atlantic Ocean. Source: NOAA

7 September – United Nations agencies are supporting relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Irma, which has already wreaked havoc on Antigua and Barbuda and other Caribbean islands and is en route towards the United States.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Irma, a Category 5 storm, made landfall on northeast Caribbean islands during the early hours of 6 September, affecting Antigua and Barbuda, Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, St Barthélemy, St. Martin, the US Virgin Islands and other islands in the eastern Caribbean Sea.

Irma was predicted to hit Puerto Rico before continuing to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba, Turks and Caicos and south-eastern Bahamas.

About 49 million people are directly in Hurricane Irma's projected path, including more than 10.5 million children.

"The Secretary-General is saddened by the reports of immense destruction and loss of life in the Caribbean region since Hurricane Irma made landfall on Antigua and Barbuda on Wednesday," said a statement issued today by his Spokesman.

"The United Nations system is already working to support national relief efforts," added the statement.

Also issuing a statement today was the new UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock.

"In the days preceding the storm's landfall, humanitarian agencies began to pre-position supplies and technical experts to

support national and regional relief efforts,” he stressed.

OCHA said there is continued risk of catastrophic damage from hurricane force winds, storm surge, and flooding in areas on Irma’s trajectory.

In a press release, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) warned that more than 10.5 million children live in the countries that are likely to be exposed to the damage from Hurricane Irma.

Children in the islands of the Eastern Caribbean, Dominican Republic, Haiti and Cuba are at risk, including over 3 million under the age of five.

“Strong winds and torrential rains have already barreled through some of the smallest and most exposed islands in the eastern Caribbean, including Anguila and Barbuda,” said Patrick Knight, Head of Communication for UNICEF in the Eastern Caribbean, speaking from Barbados. “As the extent of the damage becomes clear we are seeing severe levels of destruction. Our priority is to reach all those children and families in the affected communities as soon as possible.”

Early estimates suggest that 74,000 people, including 20,000 children, have been affected.

Local authorities said communication networks in many of the affected areas have been affected either totally or partially. Infrastructure, including roads, bridges, hospitals and schools have also suffered varying degrees of damage.

In Barbuda, 90 per cent of the infrastructure has been destroyed, and it is anticipated that this will include up to 132 schools.

UNICEF’s immediate concern is providing drinking water and sanitation to affected communities, as well providing child protection services for both children and adolescents, including psycho-social support for those affected. UNICEF will also support the reestablishment of education systems and early learning systems as safe spaces.

The World Food Programme (WFP) said yesterday that an aircraft bound for Haiti and carrying some 80 metric tons of emergency food supplies and other equipment on behalf of WFP, CARE and Catholic Relief Services is due to leave the UN Humanitarian Response Depot in Dubai early this morning local time.

Also yesterday, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) said it is sending experts on crisis recovery to support the people of the Caribbean.

UNDP has activated its crisis preparedness plans in several countries in the region, and will support them both during the immediate response to this disaster and in crucial early recovery activities like debris and waste management, emergency employment and supporting core government functions, if asked.

“The Hurricane may severely impact people’s livelihoods—directly affecting women, men and children—impacting crucial activities for people, communities and entire countries such as agriculture, fisheries and small and medium enterprises,” said Jessica Faieta, UNDP Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.



Marginalization, perceived abuse of power pushing Africa's youth to extremism – UN study

7 September – Deprivation, marginalization and perceived state violence or abuse of power are pushing young Africans into the clutches of violent extremism, a groundbreaking study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reveals.

“This study sounds the alarm that as a region, Africa’s vulnerability to violent extremism is deepening,” Abdoulaye Mar Dieye, UNDP Africa Director, said today at the launch of the report in New York.

“Borderlands and peripheral areas remain isolated and under-served. Institutional capacity in critical areas is struggling to keep pace with demand. More than half the population lives below the poverty line, including many chronically underemployed youth.”



A former Al-Shabab fighter at a rehabilitation centre in Baidoa.
Photo: Guy Oliver/IRIN

Exploring the factors that shape the dynamics of the recruitment process, prompting some individuals to gravitate toward extremism, where the vast majority of others do not, the study *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*, also finds that many who joined faced marginalization and neglect over the course of their lives, starting in childhood.

With few economic prospects or outlets for meaningful civic participation that can bring about change, and little trust in the state to either provide services or respect human rights, the study suggests that such an individual could – upon witnessing or experiencing perceived abuse of power by the state – be tipped over the edge into extremism.

Government action the ‘tipping point’

In one of the study’s most striking findings, 71 per cent of recruits interviewed said that it was some form of government action that was the ‘tipping point’ that triggered their final decision to join an extremist group.

The actions cited most often were killing or arrest of a family member or friend.

Against this backdrop, the study urges governments to reassess militarized responses to extremism in the light of respect for the rule of law and human rights commitments. It also highlights the importance of focusing on development in addressing security challenges.

“Delivering services, strengthening institutions, creating pathways to economic empowerment – these are development issues,” Mr. Dieye added.

Another key recommendation calls for local-level interventions, such as supporting community-led initiatives building social cohesion, as well as amplifying the voices of local religious leaders who advocate tolerance.

However, it cautions that these initiatives must be spearheaded by trusted local actors.

Key findings

Based on responses to questions including on family circumstances, childhood and education, religious ideologies, economic factors, state and citizenship, the study also finds that:

- Majority of recruits come from borderlands or peripheral areas that have suffered longstanding marginalization and report having had less parental involvement growing up.

- Most recruits expressed frustration at their economic conditions – with employment the most acute need at the time of joining – as well as a deep sense of grievance towards government: 83 per cent believe that government looks after only the interests of a few, and over three-fourths said they have no trust in politicians or in the state security apparatus.
- Recruitment in Africa occurs mostly at the local, person-to-person level, rather than online, as is the case in other regions – a factor that may alter the forms and patterns of recruitment as connectivity improves.
- Some 80 per cent of recruits interviewed joined within a year of introduction to the violent extremist group – and nearly half of these joined within just one month.
- In terms of exiting a violent extremist group, most interviewees who surrendered or sought amnesty did so after losing confidence in the ideology, leadership or actions of their group.

The report is based on a two-year, in-depth study, including interviews with some 495 voluntary recruits who joined Africa's most prominent extremist groups, including Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab.

According to UNDP estimates, some 33,300 people in Africa have lost their lives to violent extremist attacks between 2011 and early 2016.

Violence perpetrated by the Boko Haram terrorist group alone has resulted in the deaths of at least 17,000 people and displaced millions in the Lake Chad region.

At high-level forum, UN stresses importance of education in building 'culture of peace'



Young people at the launch of the International Year of Youth, celebrated annually on 12 August. UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

7 September – Education can promote ideals of non-violence, equality and mutual respect, United Nations officials said today at a high-level event on how to achieve a culture of peace amid current global challenges and threats to stability, prosperity and the planet.

“We have to teach our children the values of peace, tolerance, equality and respect. They should be under no illusions as to the self-destructiveness of the alternative,” said the President of the General Assembly, Peter Thomson, who convened the all-day event in New York with a focus on early childhood development.

“We must equip them with the skills and education they need to peacefully resolve disputes; to confront injustice and intolerance; and to reject all forms of discrimination and hate,” he added.

Mr. Thomson noted that creating peaceful and just societies is dependent on eradicating poverty, increasing inclusive prosperity, promoting human rights, strengthening the rule of law, and building effective and accountable institutions – the goals of the Sustainable Development Agenda which has guided the international community's anti-poverty efforts since 2015.

“Fostering a culture of peace requires all of us – individuals, nations and international organisations – to work together to promote understanding of our common humanity,” the senior official said. “We must promote intercultural respect, strengthen interreligious understanding, and inspire people's hopes for the future. Above all we must unite for peace.”

The event brought together representatives from UN Member States, UN system entities, civil society, media, the private sector and others with an interest in exchanging ideas and suggestions on ways to build and promote a Culture of Peace, and to highlight emerging trends that impact its implementation.

In addition to early childhood education and investment in children, Secretary-General António Guterres stressed the need to invest in youth to promote world peace.

He called young men and women “the barometer of social discontent, economic marginalization and political exclusion,” and said they must be recognized as active agents of change and custodians of peace.

In a speech delivered by his Senior Advisor on Policy, Ana María Menéndez, the Secretary-General also recognized women’s contributions and participation in long-term peace efforts. He said that women’s meaningful participation generates a different perspective in solving problems, and needs to be supported in all aspects of life.

Mr. Guterres also highlighted the importance of investing in inclusion and cohesion, so that diversity is seen as a benefit and not a threat.

“To prevent intolerance, violent extremism and radicalization, we need to promote the inclusion, solidarity and cohesion of multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious societies. It is the best antidote to racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism,” he noted.

The first such forum on the Culture of Peace was held in September 2012, and recognized the need for continual support to further strengthening the global movement for peace.

UN, partners seek \$106 million in humanitarian aid for drought-hit Kenya

7 September – The United Nations and its humanitarian partners in Kenya today appealed for \$106 million to scale-up their response to the most urgent needs resulting from the egregious effects of the drought in northern Kenya.

“We as the UN family and the humanitarian community stand with the Government and people of Kenya to address the devastating effects of the drought on some of the country’s most vulnerable communities,” said Siddharth Chatterjee, UN Resident Coordinator in Kenya, urging donors to pledge additional resources to support relief efforts in the critical months ahead.

A news release from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that the previous appeal for Kenya, launched in March 2017, has been only 43 per cent funded.

The revised appeal, which covers September to December 2017, complements the Government’s 13-month extended response plan.

However, the third phase of the Government’s response is likely to be delayed due to political developments, making the revised appeal even more critical.

“The Government of Kenya is doing its part with its resources stretched to breaking point. So should we,” said Mr. Chatterjee.

An estimated 5.6 million people have been affected by the drought, including 3.4 million people lacking enough food. Of them, 2.6 million people face severe food insecurity, including 500,000 experiencing ‘emergency’ levels of food insecurity.

A total of 369,277 children in the arid and semi-arid counties of Kenya now require urgent treatment for acute malnutrition, and, in the worst-affected counties, like Turkana South, the acute malnutrition rate is as high as 37 per cent, more than twice the emergency threshold of 15 per cent.



Children are missing out on education as most schools have closed due to the drought in Bandarero village, Moyale County, Kenya. Photo: OCHA/Rita Maingi

Global food prices fall in August as cereal output heads for record high – UN



Farmers beat rice to release grains near the village of Kamangu, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photo: FAO/Olivier Asselin

7 September – Global food prices dipped in August, mainly as the prospect of bumper cereal harvests pushed up expectations for larger grain inventories, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said today.

A news release said that the FAO Food Price Index declined 1.3 per cent from July, ending three months of consecutive increases.

However, the Index – tracking the monthly change in international market prices for five key commodity groups – remained 6 per cent above its value a year earlier.

The drop in August was largely driven by a 5.4 per cent decline in cereal prices, reflecting a sharp fall in wheat prices as the outlook for production in the Black Sea region improved.

FAO raised its forecast for global cereal production to a record 2,611 million tonnes. Worldwide stocks of cereals are also expected to reach an all-time high by the close of seasons in 2018, according to the latest FAO Cereal Supply and Demand Brief, also released today.

The new estimates reflect larger anticipated wheat harvests, as improved production prospects in Russia more than offset downward revisions made for Canada and the United States, as well as higher maize and barley outputs in Brazil and Russia. Global rice production in 2017 is also now forecast to reach a record high.

Meat prices dropped 1.2 per cent in the month, while sugar prices slipped by 1.7 per cent – driven by favourable cane harvest prospects in leading producers Brazil, Thailand and India, as well as by weaker international demand in the wake of higher tariffs imposed by China and India.

But vegetable oil prices rose 2.5 per cent, led by rising quotations for palm, soy, rapeseed and sunflower oils.

Dairy prices also rose 1.4 per cent from July, led by greater demand for butterfat in Europe and North America.

Vital that users verify accuracy before hitting ‘Share’ button, UN meeting on combatting #fakenews told

7 September – Amid the increasing proliferation of fake news and the resulting challenges in discerning accurate information from false ones, a United Nations forum today discussed ways to tackle the complex issue as well as equipping the consumers of information with the necessary skills and tools to assess the credibility of any media message and news source.

“Today’s world is the most connected [one] through [the use of] social media and technology; we are oversaturated with news,” said Maher Nasser, the Director of the Outreach Division at the UN Department of Public Information, at the event *Unravelling #FakeNews from opinion-making information*, organized by the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC).



A person browsing through social media on their laptop computer (content blurred to protect privacy). File Photo: World Bank

In his remarks, Mr. Nasser spoke of the complexities in distinguishing



accurate news from non-accurate ones, especially in an environment when algorithms, employed by social media platforms to present content to users, often depend on the users' interactions with their circles and thereby create bubbles of existence.

Furthermore, the ease of sharing of information in today's interlinked world adds a new dimension to these complex challenges, he added, underscoring the importance of users verifying the information – by looking through trusted sources and ascertaining their accuracy – before passing it on to their networks of friends and followers.

The event also included discussion on news literacy that saw the participation of Alan Miller, the Founder and CEO of News Literacy Project; Mitra Kalita, the Vice President of Programming at CNN Digital; Áine Kerr, Manager of Journalism Partnerships at Facebook; Dina Temple-Raston, Counterterrorism Correspondent at National Public Radio; and Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, Executive Director at the National Association for Media Literacy Education.

The discussion was moderated by Jordi Torrent, Project Manager of the Media Literacy Initiative at UNAOC.

Also on the subject of fake news, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) yesterday presented options to the Members of the European Parliament to counter the growing problem and its impact.

Highlighting the seriousness of disinformation and the deliberate discrediting of professional media, Guy Berger, the Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO, urged better protection of journalists and called for investigation and prosecution in instances when purveyors of fake news are involved in fraud, such as misusing the names of reputable news brands.

He also called on the media to boost its credibility, through highlighting reliable brands and public service broadcasting, and to avoid advertising that has links to fake stories as well as to be more transparent about ownership and political leanings.

“In addition, journalists should do more to follow, debunk and tell the stories about the fake news phenomenon,” said Mr. Berger.