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Measles deaths fall, but world still far from eliminating disease – UN-backed report

26 October – Annual deaths from measles dropped below 100,000 last year for the first time 90,000, United Nations and other international agencies reported on Thursday, as they warned however that the world is still far from reaching goals on eliminating the disease.

“We have seen a “substantial drop in measles deaths for more than two decades, but now we must strive to reach zero measles cases,” said Jean-Marie Okwo-Bele, Director of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Department of Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals, in a joint statement on Thursday for the Measles and Rubella Initiative (MR&I).

The study, published by MR&I – a partnership formed in 2001 between the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), WHO, UN Foundation, American Red Cross, and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – marks the first time that global measles deaths have fallen below 100,000 per year.

“Measles elimination will only be reached if measles vaccines reach every child, everywhere,” added Dr. Okwo-Bele.

Since 2000, an estimated 5.5 billion doses of measles-containing vaccines have been provided to children through routine immunization services and mass vaccination campaigns, saving an estimated 20.4 million lives.

However, the world is still far from reaching regional measles elimination goals.



A health worker marks a boy's finger with ink to show that he has been vaccinated against measles in India's Gujarat State. Photo: UNICEF/UNI133530/Pietrasik

According to the joint statement, people being treated with the first of two vaccine-required doses have stalled at approximately 85 per cent since 2009, far short of the 95 per cent coverage needed to stop the infections, and coverage with the second dose, despite recent increases, was only 64 per cent in 2016.

Some 20.8 million children are still missing their first measles vaccine dose – more than half of whom live in six countries. Nigeria has 3.3 million unvaccinated children; India has 2.9 million; Pakistan, two million; Indonesia, 1.2 million; Ethiopia, 0.9 million; and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 0.7 million are not immunized.

Since measles is a highly contagious viral disease, large outbreaks continue to occur in these and other countries in Europe and North America, putting children at risk of severe health complications, such as pneumonia, diarrhoea, encephalitis, blindness and death.

Countries with the greatest number of measles deaths rely most heavily on polio-funded resources. Once polio eradication is achieved, those resources, which support routine immunization services, measles and rubella vaccination campaigns and surveillance will be at high risk of diminishing and disappearing, reversing the progress made.

Fresh round of intra-Syrian talks set for 28 November, UN mediator tells Security Council



Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria at a press conference after meeting with the ISSG Humanitarian Access Task Force. (file)
UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

26 October – Announcing that he will convene the eighth round of intra-Syrian talks on 28 November in Geneva, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria on Thursday urged all stakeholders to seize the opportunity to find a solution to the crisis plaguing the war-torn country.

“I have asked for focus and realism because we need to get the parties into real negotiation over items where there is some prospect that they could begin to narrow the gaps,” said Staffan de Mistura, briefing the UN Security Council via videoconference.

“Time is not on our side,” he warned.

Mr. de Mistura also told the 15-member Council at the UN remains committed to the territorial integrity of Syria with the aim of a nationwide ceasefire and that any de-escalation must be interim in nature and not lead to any partitioning of the country.

During the upcoming, eighth, round of talks, within the framework of Council resolution 2254 (2015), the Special Envoy said he intends to realize a transitional political process that focuses on items with prospects of progress.

“Applying this logic, my considered assessment as the mediator is that, for round eight – and I would like to ask you for your support on this – we should see if we can move some aspects of the agenda concretely forward – just far beyond exploration, and into negotiation,” he added, noting also that a serious step on detainees, abductees and missing persons is needed.

Mr. de Mistura also explained that he would draw on contributions from civil society, including those of the Women's Advisory Board in support of Syrian women's demand that 30 per cent of negotiators consist of women, and asked for the Security Council's support in this regard.

Also in his briefing, the Special Envoy said that despite significant developments in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh), the terrorist group remains a potent threat, launching asymmetric attacks in and near the capital, Damascus.

“Without an inclusive political process, there is a real threat that Da'esh or similar entities could return and exploit the

feelings of marginalization and grievances. That's why we need a political process," he underscored.

African regional consultations on UN global compact on migration begin in Ethiopia



A group of Gambian boys survey the ocean from the beach during an outing from a Government reception centre that doubles as a lodging station for unaccompanied minors in Pozzallo, Sicily, on May 17, 2016. Photo: UNICEF/UN020035/Gilbertson VII Photo

26 October – Although the debate on migration has largely focused on Europe, the global compact being negotiated must be adapted to the realities and peculiarities of each region, including Africa, where more than half of migrants moved to other countries on the continent, a senior United Nations official said Thursday.

“Today’s consultation is an opportunity to analyse migratory trends, challenges and opportunities at the regional and sub-regional levels,” the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for International Migration, Louise Arbour, told the African Regional Consultative Meeting on the proposed global compact, which opened in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa.

Ms. Arbour said that most migration takes place within the same region, noting that in Africa, 52 per cent of migrants moved within the region, mostly between neighbouring countries.

She also emphasized the importance of an increased variety and scope of legal pathways for non-refugee migrants to access labour markets.

Indeed, both the push factors, such as conflict, poverty and climate change, and the pull factors, including labour shortages and informal economies in destination countries, remain too strong for migratory flows to be significantly curtailed.

In such a situation, she said, “the impact of policies seeking to stop migration will only encourage recourse to irregular channels and increase the cost of the journey for the individuals concerned, including them engaging the services of smugglers – too often, fatally.”

“We must therefore better understand what compels people to migrate through irregular channels, and expand regular and legal pathways to better manage the supply and demand in the world’s labour markets,” she stressed.

Consultations at the African regional meeting, which runs through Friday, will inform the process leading up to the adoption of the global compact on migration by the UN General Assembly in 2018.

The process to develop this global compact for migration started in April 2017. It will be the first, intergovernmentally negotiated agreement, prepared under the auspices of the UN, to cover all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner.

UN chief stresses need to support Central African Republic's peacebuilding strategy



Secretary-General António Guterres (left) holds a joint press briefing with President Faustin Archange Touadéra of the Central African Republic. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

26 October – On the third day of his visit to the Central African Republic (CAR), United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on Thursday called on the international community to support the conflict-ravaged country's peacebuilding and recovery strategy.

“There must be resources available for this country to have the solidarity it deserves to ensure its citizens a dignified life, and to ensure that government projects turn into a reality of peace, stability and prosperity,” Mr. Guterres told reporters in the nation's capital, Bangui, following a meeting on the country's plan regarding disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants and the security sector reform.

The Secretary-General saluted President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and his Government's efforts to consolidate peace in the country and pledged the UN's support to the extension of national institutions.

The UN chief highlighted the four linked components – security, State-building, national reconciliation and development – that shape the country's vision for peacebuilding and recovery.

On the security front, Mr. Guterres noted that the UN Security Council has been asked to strengthen the capacity of its peacekeeping mission, known by its French acronym, MINUSCA, and its operational capacity to better protect civilians in the CAR.

Also in the other areas, the UN supports the Government's projects, he said, stressing the importance of national ownership of those programmes.

The Secretary-General also called on armed groups to lay down their weapons so that they can participate in the political process of the country.

Noting that almost all religious conflicts he knows are caused by political manipulation, Mr. Guterres urged political, community and religious leaders in CAR to work towards true national reconciliation.

“Central African religious communities – Christians, Muslims and others – have always lived together,” he said. “It is imperative that political leaders, leaders of armed groups and community religious leaders call for genuine reconciliation, mutual respect, and the understanding that everyone must live together to build the new Central African Republic.”

In that regard, the international community must play its role. “We cannot leave the Central Africans abandoned. Everyone needs to be mobilized to help this country build a future that Central Africans deserve,” he emphasized.

Secretary-General meets African Union officials, local Central African leaders

In New York, Mr. Guterres' spokesman briefed the press on the Secretary-General's activities in the CAR, saying the UN chief met with ambassadors from the African Union and the Economic Community of Central African States, at the UN Mission headquarters.

He then had a separate meeting with local religious leaders and civil society leaders, telling them how much the CAR needs a strong and vibrant civil society.

Mr. Guterres also reiterated his zero-tolerance for any sexual abuse or exploitation by UN personnel as he outlined his new



approach, including a closer partnership with troop-contributing countries. He also introduced to them Jane Connors, the new Victims' Rights Advocate, who is accompanying him.

The Secretary-General then met with representatives of political parties. He told them that the current situation in the country can only be solved with a political solution, which cannot be imposed from the outside.

Mr. Guterres was then briefed by the European Union on its training mission of the armed forces of the CAR.

He also held a meeting with over 100 members of the UN military and police contingents at M'poko airport. In his discussion, the Secretary-General told them of his pride of being their colleague and for the work they are doing for the people of CAR. He also stressed that the UN's conduct in the country must be exemplary and that as UN staff need to protect vulnerable populations and their human rights.

Crisis in Rakhine 'decades in the making' and reaches beyond Myanmar's borders – UN rights expert

26 October – Voicing concern that hate speech and incitement to violence against Myanmar's Rohingya community has been “cultivated for decades” in the minds of the country's people, a United Nations human rights expert urged the Security Council to act strongly to resolve the crisis.

“The crisis in Rakhine state has not only been decades in the making but has for some time gone beyond Myanmar's borders. For a very long time now this issue has not been simply a domestic affair,” said Yanghee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the country, presenting her report to the UN General Assembly's main body dealing with human rights and social and humanitarian issues (Third Committee).

“It has been cultivated for decades in the minds of the Myanmar people that the Rohingya are not indigenous to the country and therefore have no rights whatsoever to which they can apparently claim,” she added.

In particular, the Special Rapporteur stressed that given the gravity of the situation, it is uncertain how long it might take for the Government to establish conditions for the safe and dignified return of the Rohingyas, and to ensure they can rebuild their lives.

Furthermore, she noted that while the plight of the Rohingyas remains her main concern, the country has numerous other human rights challenges, including consistent reports of religious intolerance against Christians and Muslims across Myanmar.

Many communities have also suffered from the development of “Special Economic Zones” and some people had their land confiscated, she said, adding also that rights violations and decreased humanitarian access have been alleged as a result of reported clashes between armed forces and ethnic armed groups.

It is unclear whether Myanmar's peace process had advanced since the signing of the nationwide ceasefire agreement two years ago, questioned Ms. Lee, underscoring that all those responsible for human rights violations must be held to account and that this should begin with full access for the UN Human Rights Council's fact-finding mission.

The Special Rapporteur also urged the Government to publicly embrace all the communities which make up the population of Myanmar and use its majority in Parliament to strike down all discriminatory laws, to show that all groups in Myanmar have equal rights.



Yanghee Lee, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, briefs reporters at UN Headquarters. UN Photo/Kim Haughton

“I have in the past commended Myanmar's flourishing, widening democratic space. However, it seems to me that national legislation is effectively resulting in the criminalization of legitimate expression,” said Ms. Lee, calling on the Government to press ahead with constitutional reform “to allow for proper operation of the rule of law.”

Furthermore reform of laws that contravene human rights standards should be prioritized, she added.

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.

‘Imagine the potential of one billion children;’ UNICEF urges investment as Africa’s youth population surges

26 October – If Africa is to keep pace with an unprecedented demographic transition – African’s under-18 population will reach 750 million by 2030 – scaled-up investment in health, education and women’s protection and empowerment will be needed or the continent will face a ‘bleak’ future, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reported Thursday.

“Investing in health, protection, and education must become an absolute priority for Africa between now and 2030,” said Leila Pakkala, UN Children Fund (UNICEF) Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa.

According to UNICEF’s report *Generation 2030 Africa 2.0*, some 11 million education and health personnel will be needed to keep pace with the projected unprecedented population growth of children in Africa – an increase of 170 million children between now and 2030.

“We are at the most critical juncture for Africa’s children,” Ms. Pakkala underscored. “Get it right, and we set the foundation for a demographic dividend, which could lift hundreds of millions out of extreme poverty, and contribute to enhanced prosperity, stability, and peace.”

The report identifies three key issues for investment: health care, education and the protection and empowerment of women and girls. Concretely, to meet minimum international standards in health care and best practice targets in education, Africa will have to add 5.6 million new health workers and 5.8 million new teachers by 2030.

According to the report, almost half of the continent’s population is under 18 years old – and the majority of the population in around one-third of the 55 African Union member States is children. Current projections foresee the number of Africa’s children topping one billion by 2055.

‘Imagine the potential of one billion children’

“Imagine the potential of one billion children,” said Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF’s Regional Director for West and Central Africa. “If Africa steps up its investments in children and youth now, transforms its education systems and empowers women and girls to participate fully in community, workplace and political life, it will be able to reap faster, deeper and longer dividends from its demographic transition.”

Conversely, if investments do not occur in Africa’s youth and children, the once-in-a-generation opportunity of a demographic dividend may be replaced by a demographic disaster, characterized by unemployment and instability.

UNICEF recommends three policy actions to create the socio-economic conditions for Africa’s coming generations.



Three sisters, ranging in age from two to five years old, and their friends are at a camp in Galkayo, Somalia, waiting to be vaccinated. Along with education support, UNICEF is also supporting polio and measles vaccine programmes in the camp. Photo: UNICEF/Mony (file)

The first is to improve health, social welfare, and protection services to meet international standards; or beyond, in countries close to attaining them.

Secondly, it recommends Africa's educational skills and vocational learning system be adapted through curricula reform and access to technology to meet the needs of a twenty-first century labour market.

The report also prescribes that Africa secures and ensures the right to protection from violence, exploitation, child marriage and abuse; removes barriers preventing women and girls from participating fully in community, workplace and political life; and enhances access to reproductive health services.

UN-Americas action plan seeks to strengthen protection of human rights defenders in region



In Uruguay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein (centre) alongside Commissioners from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, launches the Joint Action Mechanism on protection of human rights defenders in the Americas. Photo: OHCHR South America

26 October – The United Nations human rights office and its counterpart in the Americas have launched a new and deeper cooperation plan to address one of the most pressing problems in that region – the protection of human rights defenders.

“Human rights defenders are vital for the healthy functioning of societies, and yet in recent years they have been increasingly targeted in the Americas,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in a news release.

“They are subjected to threats, smear campaigns, arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment, and even torture. Many run the risk of violent, even fatal attacks, including by private individuals linked to business interests or powerful criminal gangs,” he added.

Joint Action Mechanism to Contribute to the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in the Americas was launched Wednesday by the

Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), a principal and autonomous organ of the Organization of American States.

In 2016, three out of every four recorded murders of human rights defenders worldwide took place in the Americas, and 41 per cent of these killings were of people standing up against extractive or development projects, or defending the right to land and natural resources of indigenous peoples, according to the release.

“Amid continuing impunity for perpetrators, we are seeing a worrying trend of the law being misused to criminalize the activities of human rights defender to silence them or punish them,” said IACHR Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders José de Jesús Orozco.

“This is one of the reasons why the launch of our joint action mechanism is so important and timely as, by acting together and systematically, we can have a greater impact,” he added.

The joint action mechanism will strengthen the two organs' already extensive cooperation on emblematic human rights cases and situations of particular concern, building on their national, regional and international capacities, drawing on their complementary strengths and creating stronger connections between their staff.

Among the specific actions that are planned, IACHR and OHCHR will study the measures countries in the region have in place to protect human rights defenders, and produce a manual of best practices.

UN envoy 'confident' Baghdad and Erbil can work hand in hand to overcome differences

26 October – Even as Iraq breathes a sigh of relief with the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or Da'esh), it has been hit by another crisis – one between Baghdad, the capital, and Erbil, in the Kurdistan region – the top United Nations official in the country has said.

“The post-Da'esh period has brought to the fore many serious problems that accumulated over the years and remain unresolved,” Ján Kubiš, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, said Tuesday.

“Challenged by the unilaterally declared independence referendum Baghdad has taken steps to re-assert the constitutional order, re-establish the federal authority,” he added, noting that the strained Baghdad-Erbil relations, including deficiencies in the implementation of the Iraqi Constitution.

According to Mr. Kubiš, the developments have, sadly, triggered confrontation between the erstwhile partners who worked together to overthrow dictatorship in the country and, more recently, fought together against ISIL.

The differences have also added to insecurity, fragmentation and difficulties, bringing about new waves of displacements, this time mostly of Kurds.

Adding that the UN continues to closely monitor the situation, provide humanitarian assistance to communities affected as well as work to protect human rights, guided by the principle of impartiality and with the interests of Iraqi people – including in Kurdistan region – at heart, Mr. Kubiš expressed confidence that Iraq will be able to overcome the crisis.

“A solution lies primarily in stopping military activities and in de-escalation, including ending public inflammatory statements and confrontational actions,” he said, also highlighting the need for dialogue between Baghdad and Erbil on the basis of the Constitution.

Stressing the importance of preserving the unity and re-establishing stability of the country and peaceful coexistence amongst all Iraqis, based on equal rights and justice in the condition of good and democratic governance, the UN envoy said that the UN stands ready to provide needed assistance, if requested.

“We are confident that the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan regional government, just like they banded together to defeat Da'esh, can work hand in hand to overcome their differences through dialogue and away from confrontation to resolve all outstanding issues in a manner that is consistent with the Constitution,” he concluded.



Ján Kubiš. UN Photo/Amanda Voisard