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19 December – The Security Council today renewed the authorization for United Nations relief agencies and their partners to use routes across conflict lines and border crossings to deliver lifesaving assistance to millions in north-west and southern Syria through Turkey and Jordan.

In a resolution adopted by a recorded vote of 12 in favour and three abstentions (Bolivia, China and Russia), the 15-member Council called on Syrian authorities “to expeditiously respond to all requests for cross-line deliveries submitted by the UN and its implementing partners and to give such requests positive consideration.”

Also in the resolution, the Council underscored the need for a political solution to the conflict in Syria and urged all concerned stakeholders to facilitate a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition to end the conflict.

“The Syrian people will decide the future of Syria,” stressed the Council.

The use of cross-line routes was first authorized by the Council in July 2014 through a resolution that also tasked the UN with monitoring the loading of the aid consignments as well as their openings, such as by customs officials, to confirm the humanitarian nature of these relief consignments.



Inter-agency convoy to Duma, east Ghouta in the buffer-zone crossing the conflict line. Photo: OCHA/Ghalia Seifo (file)



The renewal today authorizes the cross-border aid deliveries as well as the monitoring of consignments until 10 January 2019.

Aid workers face overwhelming access challenges

Also today, Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator told the Council that the situation for close to 400,000 Syrians trapped in in eastern Ghouta, an area designated as a “de-escalation zone,” remains unbearable with intensive air and ground-based strikes reported daily – except for a two-day pause – since mid-November.

The situation is particularly dire for more than 500 individuals in need of urgent medical evacuation, of whom over 420 are women, children and the elderly.

“There have already been 16 civilian deaths among those waiting for permission to leave eastern Ghouta for medical reason [...] all that is needed is the green light from the Syrian authorities for these people to go to hospitals just a few miles outside of eastern Ghouta,” said Mr. Lowcock.

In his briefing, the top UN relief official also outlined the continuing challenges humanitarians face in delivering vital assistance to the millions in need across the war-torn country, including in places which have not seen any relief supplies in months.

No real progress from the Geneva talks, UN Special Envoy says

Also during the same meeting, the UN Special Envoy for Syria told Council members the latest round of intra-Syrian talks between the Government and opposition, which wrapped up last week in Geneva, failed to achieve any real progress.

“The opportunity to begin a real discussion or negotiation was not seized,” said Staffan De Mistura.

“A golden opportunity was missed for many reasons: psychological, because we are at the end of the year; political, because we are at the end, we want to believe, of a major military operation; and from a human point of view because most Syrians have been asking and waiting for this in order to see the situation changing for them,” he said.

Speaking to the press last Thursday, Mr. De Mistura had expressed disappointment at the Syrian Government’s lack of engagement on any issue other than counter-terrorism, before adding that he intended to call a new round of talks in January.

UN agencies scale up work in Bangladesh as Rohingya refugee crisis enters fourth month

19 December – As the Rohingya refugee emergency in Bangladesh enters its fourth month, United Nations agencies are scaling up their relief work to respond to a range of issues, including outbreak of diphtheria, lack of access to sanitation and sexual violence.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has released \$1.5 million from its contingency fund to deploy additional staff and resources to combat a rapidly spreading outbreak of diphtheria among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. The disease has killed 21, with more than 1,500 probable cases reported.

“The Rohingya refugees are an extremely vulnerable population, with low routine vaccination coverage,” said Roderico Ofrin, Regional Emergency Director, WHO South-East Asia Regional Office. “The funds released will be crucial to sustaining our efforts until we receive more support from donors for this response.”

For 2018, the health sector will request additional funding to help 1.2 million people living in refugee camps and temporary settlements.

Meanwhile, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), people are continuing to arrive in Bangladesh from Myanmar.

However, the agency reports that the pace of the influx has now slowed, with estimated average arrival rates having dropped from 745 per day in November to 100 per day so far this month.

In a UNHCR-supported quick assessment survey, refugees expressed numerous worries, including feeling unsafe at night given weak shelters and a lack of lighting, and concerns about general safety.

Access to sanitation is still insufficient, leading sometimes to long queues for latrines. Women and girls are anxious about the shortage of private bathing spaces, forcing some to wash outside their shelters in the early morning hours.

The survey also found that some children have to walk longer distances to fetch water and bring firewood. Parents and children want access to education and more safe places for children to play.

Health services are also a wide concern. Increased mental health support for those who have witnessed the killings or suffered torture or rape remains crucially needed.

Refugees cite continued feelings of depression and rejection, especially among the elderly and disabled. Many young people are worried about their uncertain future.

Some refugees said that irregular food distributions and long queues had meant going hungry for days.

Drawing upon the findings of this latest assessment, UNHCR will further refine and reinforce its protection and assistance.



A young child walking through the Chonkhola camp for Rohingya refugees in Chakdhala, Bangladesh. Refugees are unable to leave the camp; due to a diphtheria outbreak, everyone must be vaccinated before they can be moved to the main camps around Kutupalong. Photo: UNHCR/Andrew McConnell

UNICEF says 2017 has been a 'very difficult year' for children in Central African Republic



The humanitarian community distributed high-energy biscuits to 1,500 children and debilitated adults who suffered from starvation and thirst for more than 72 hours during an outbreak of violence in Mbomou Prefecture, Central African Republic in May 2017. Photo: OCHA/Yaye N. Sene.

19 December – For children and women in the Central African Republic, 2017 has been a very difficult year and sadly, the situation is not expected to improve in the coming months, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said Tuesday.

“2017 has seen a dramatic increase in violence. The previously unstable regions, such as the center and the north west, have remained very tense. In addition, the entire south-west that had previously been spared by the crisis, is now the worst-hit region,” said Christine Muhigana, UNICEF Representative in the country, at the regular press briefing in Geneva.

Children and women are of course the first victims: half of the population in CAR is in need of humanitarian support, that is 2.5 million people, including 1.3 million children.

Currently, 20 per cent of the schools are closed because of insecurity, and those that are open have too many pupils and not enough teachers.

Reports of children’s rights violations are on the rise. In 2017, 50 per cent more documented incidents than the previous year, twice the number of children recruited into armed groups.

Immunization campaigns have been disrupted in several regions due to persistent insecurity, and basic healthcare needs are not met especially in regions where the NGOs are no longer able to operate.

“As UNICEF Representative, I am very concerned about the lasting impact this crisis is having on children. We have a whole generation at risk of growing up traumatized, without proper education, without healthcare and constantly exposed to the most horrific violence,” she said.

UNICEF has helped provide temporary learning spaces for over 50,000 children in 2017, and plans to do so for 85,000 children in 2018.

The agency also provided support for children released from armed groups to reintegrate into society.

Through a rapid response mechanism, UNICEF has been able to provide non-food items, such as mats, mosquito nets, blankets, and cooking supplies, to nearly 25,000 households and emergency water and sanitation interventions to almost 72,000 people.

At the same time, the agency received only 46 per cent of the funding needed to meet the humanitarian needs this year.

“In 2018 the needs are growing: we are going to need every support we can get, if we do not want the children of CAR to be left to a terrible fate,” she said.

Over 130 civilians killed in 11 days in airstrikes in Yemen, reports UN rights office



A child's bicycle lies amid rubble of a destroyed house in Yemen's capital, Sana'a. (File) Photo: OCHA/Charlotte Cans

19 December – Voicing deep concern over the surge in civilian casualties in Yemen in airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition, following the killing of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh earlier this month, the United Nations rights office has urged all parties to the conflict to ensure that civilians are protected.

According to Rupert Colville, the spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 136 civilians and non-combatants – including women and children – have been killed and another 87 injured in airstrikes in Sana'a, Sa'ada, Al Hudaydah and Taizz governorates in the period from 6 to 16 December.

“We urge all parties to the conflict to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law, including their obligation to respect the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution,” Mr. Colville told the press at a regular media briefing in Geneva Tuesday.

“They should take all feasible precautions to avoid, and in any event to minimise, the impact of violence on civilians,” he stressed.

Among the incidents verified by OHCHR, four civilians were killed and four injured on 9 December when coalition airstrikes hit the official Yemen TV channel, Qanat Al Yemen, which has been under the Houthis control since September 2014.

At least another seven civilians were killed when airstrikes struck a hospital in Al Hudaydah on 10 December. Some Houthi military vehicles were reported to be next to the hospital compound at the time of the airstrikes.

On 13 December, coalition airstrikes struck a prison building and a prison yard at a military police compound in the Shaub district of Sana'a, killing at least 45 people and injuring 53. All victims were reported to be detainees and said to belong to resistance forces loyal to President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

The airstrikes also claimed the lives of a number of children.

On 16 December, nine children and one woman – returning home from a wedding party – were killed in coalition airstrikes in Marib governorate and another 14 children died when airstrikes hit a farmhouse in Al Hudaydah governorate.

OHCHR 'greatly concerned' over reported violations by Houthis

Also at the briefing, the OHCHR spokesperson expressed concern over reported recent violations by Houthis against members of former President Saleh's political party, the General People's Congress (GPC) including attacks and arbitrary detentions.

“There have also been unconfirmed reports of summary killings and detention of people affiliated to the GPC, although verification of these reports by our Office has been difficult as witnesses fear possible repercussion from the Houthis,” said Mr. Colville.

Since the eruption of violence in Yemen in March 2015 and as of 14 December, the UN rights office has documented total of 5558 civilians killed and 9,065 injured.

UN rights chief calls for independent probe into Israeli forces 'shocking' shooting of amputee

19 December – Shocked at the “incomprehensible” killing of a wheelchair-bound amputee protester by Israeli security forces, the top United Nations human rights official has called on the country to open an independent and impartial investigation into the incident.

“International human rights law strictly regulates the use of force in the context of protests and demonstrations. The lethal use of firearms should only be employed as the last resort, when strictly unavoidable, in order to protect life,” Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said on Tuesday.

“However, as far as we can see, there is nothing whatsoever to suggest that Ibrahim Abu Thurayeh [the protester] was posing an imminent threat of death or serious injury when he was killed,” he added, stressing: “Given his severe disability, which must have been clearly visible to those who shot him, his killing is incomprehensible – a truly shocking and wanton act.”

According to the news release, Ibrahim Nayef Ibrahim Abu Thurayeh, a 29-year-old man from Gaza, who reportedly had both legs amputated after an Israeli attack on Gaza in 2008, was among hundreds of Palestinians marching across farmland towards a fence following Friday prayers on 15 December to protest against the United States’ decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

He appears to have been killed by a bullet to the head when he was approximately 20 meters from the fence, it added.

Since President Donald Trump’s 6 December statement concerning the status of Jerusalem, protests have been held throughout the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and in occupied Gaza. The response by the Israeli security forces has resulted in five people being killed, hundreds injured and large-scale arrests of Palestinians, noted OHCHR.

The biggest flashpoint has been in Gaza, where three people have been killed as protesters burned tires, threw stones, sang songs and waved flags along the fence. Israeli security forces have responded with firearms, including live-ammunition, to disperse the protesters.

According to the UN rights office, the use of live ammunition has resulted in over 220 people being injured in Gaza, including 95 on Friday alone, in addition to tens of others who sustained injuries from tear gas or rubber bullets, read the news release.

It also noted reports that suggest a preliminary internal Israeli army investigation has taken place.

“Nevertheless, the High Commissioner called on Israel to immediately open an independent and impartial investigation into this incident, and into all others that have resulted in injury or death, with a view to holding the perpetrators accountable for any crimes committed,” it read.

Mr. Zeid also “unequivocally condemned” all attacks against civilians, including the indiscriminate shelling of Israeli civilian areas by armed Palestinian groups operating out of Gaza.



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

Two years on, Iran nuclear accord at a 'critical crossroads,' UN Security Council told



The Buzher nuclear power plant in Iran. Photo: IAEA/Paolo Contri

19 December – The United Nations political chief told the Security Council Tuesday that the UN Secretariat is not yet in a position to confirm whether the ballistic missiles launched at the Saudi cities of Yanbu and Riyadh were Iranian Qiam-1 missiles, as assessed by Saudi authorities.

“Almost two years after Implementation Day of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), we are at a critical crossroads,” Under-Secretary-General Jeffrey Feltman said.

On 20 July 2015, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2231 (2015) endorsing the JCPOA. The action plan, between the Council’s five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States), plus Germany,

the European Union (EU) and Iran, set out rigorous mechanisms for monitoring limits on Iran’s nuclear programme, while paving the way for lifting UN sanctions against the country.

Mr. Feltman recalled that since January 2016 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had reported to the Council nine times that Iran is adhering to its nuclear-related obligations. At the same time, in October 2017 the President of the United States decided not to certify to Congress that Iran was complying with the agreement.

“This decision has regrettably created considerable uncertainty about the future of the JCPOA,” he said, noting that the UN the Secretary-General is reassured that the US, during the recent 7th meeting of the Joint Commission, together with other participants, expressed its continued adherence to its commitments.

“Today’s meeting is an important opportunity to reflect carefully on what has been achieved and the challenges that lay ahead,” Mr. Feltman continued, presenting the main findings of the UN Secretary-General’s fourth report on the implementation of the provisions contained in annex B to resolution 2231.

Regarding the supply, sale or transfer to Iran of nuclear-related items undertaken in violation of the provisions of resolution 2231, Mr. Feltman said that the Secretary-General has again not received any report of such flows.

As for the implementation of ballistic missile-related provisions, Mr. Feltman said the report contained preliminary observations indicating that the two missiles launched at the Saudi cities of Yanbu and Riyadh had similar features which suggested a common origin, and are consistent with missiles of the Scud family and had features known to be consistent with the Qiam-1 missile.

One of the missiles bore castings similar to that of an Iranian entity on the list maintained pursuant to resolution 2231, he added.

In terms of restrictions on arms-related transfers, the Secretariat is confident that close to 900 of the assault rifles seized by the United States in March 2016 are identical to those seized by France also in the same month, which the Secretariat had assessed were of Iranian origin and shipped from Iran, Mr. Feltman said.

The Secretariat is also confident that half of the 200 rocket propelled grenade launchers had characteristics similar to Iranian-produced RPG launchers.

Further, the Secretariat had received information on an unmanned surface vessel (USV) laden with explosives allegedly used against the Saudi-led coalition and had the opportunity to examine parts of its guidance and detonation systems, which included a computer terminal with a dual English/Farsi keyboard and characteristics similar to those of Iranian-produced

terminals.

The Secretariat was also requested to examine two unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), reportedly recovered in Yemen after Implementation Day. One of the UAVs – which Saudi authorities ascertain was similar to that of the Iranian-made Ababil-II – is similar to other drones reportedly seized in Yemen brought to our attention by the United Arab Emirates, Mr. Feltman said.

Ukraine: UN agencies stepping up aid to most vulnerable as temperatures plummet



Dinu Lipcanu (centre, wearing baseball cap) Head of UNHCR's Mariupol field office in Ukraine, visits local residents whose houses have been damaged by artillery shelling in Avdiivka, Donetsk. Photo: UNHCR/Markiian Lyseiko

19 December – As temperatures plummet across Ukraine, the United Nations refugee and migration agencies said Tuesday that they are stepping up assistance to the most vulnerable people affected by the conflict in the country's east.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is increasing distributions of aid to the displaced.

“Winter brings additional hardship to the population,” UNHCR spokesperson Andrej Mahecic said at a press briefing in Geneva, noting that temperatures can plummet to minus 10 degrees Celsius, or 14 Fahrenheit, in December and minus 20 C, or minus 4 F, in January.

“Most live in poorly insulated homes and a smaller number in collective centers, and are unable to cover the rising utility costs,” he said.

The aid comprises clothes, warm jackets and boots, coal for heating and cash grants to cover winter expenses. Recipients include some 15,300 people, who are mainly single parents, elderly, families with many children, and people with disabilities or chronic illnesses.

Most have been displaced from their homes in eastern Ukraine by the conflict in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, which is now well into its fourth year. Near the line of contact between the Government and the non-Government controlled areas, houses are frequently damaged by shelling.

In some villages, gas pipes have been damaged by shelling and, as a result, coal and firewood represent the sole means of heating homes. UNHCR staff report that people are often forced to make a choice between buying food and medicines, or fuel to heat their dwellings.

In the non-Government controlled areas, where 40 per cent of the households need heating fuel and nearly 90 per cent need winter clothes and insulation, UNHCR is providing 9,000 tonnes of coal to 3,000 households and more than 7,500 pieces of winter clothing.

In Government-controlled areas, UNHCR provides unconditional cash grants to 1,000 households, and winter jackets to more than 4,700 children.

Dire humanitarian situation on Europe's doorstep

For its part, the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) has started distributing coal to people in need.

“Some 3.4 million men, women and children are locked in a dire humanitarian situation right on Europe's doorstep,” said Thomas Weiss, IOM Ukraine Chief of Mission, during his recent visit to the field.

About 3,800 vulnerable low-income households in non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk will each receive three tons of high quality anthracite coal, which should be sufficient to cover their heating needs for the entire winter.

The planned assistance in these areas also includes the rehabilitation of the heating systems in up to 20 social and medical institutions, as well as the distribution of 200 cast-iron stoves to families located in least accessible areas, where wood is the only available heating fuel.

In parallel, IOM will in a few weeks transfer a first round of multipurpose cash to 4,000 vulnerable individuals in the government-controlled area, living close to the contact line in both Luhansk and Donetsk regions.

Families told IOM that they used 31 per cent of the funds they received to cover their medical expenses, and spent 23 per cent of the funds on fuel, winter clothing, as well as paying their bills for heating.

DR Congo: UN officials hail landmark convictions, life sentences in Kavumu child rape cases



Women sit together outside a dormitory at the Heal Africa Transit Center for victims of sexual violence. Photo: Aubrey Graham/IRIN

19 December – The United Nations envoys dealing with sexual violence in conflict and the head of the Organization’s peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have welcomed the conviction of 11 Congolese militia fighters for raping dozens of children – including an 18-month-old toddler – in the vast country’s restive east.

The Special Representatives of the UN Secretary-General, respectively on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, and for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, jointly welcomed the decision by military justice authorities in the DRC on the conviction of a provincial parliamentarian and members of the ‘Army of Jesus’ militia for the crimes against humanity of rape for dozens of children between 2013 and 2016 in Kavumu, which is located in DRC’s South Kivu Province.

The South Kivu Military Court on Wednesday, 13 December, sentenced Frederic Batumike, a South Kivu provincial Member of Parliament, and 11 other persons to life in prison for the kidnapping and rapes of 38 children.

In addition to life sentences for crimes against humanity for rape and murder, the Court also awarded reparations to the victims.

“The child survivors of sexual violence in Kavumu, their families, and community have shown tremendous bravery throughout the trial process,” Special Representative Patten said this past Friday. “I commend their courage and I hope today’s judgment delivers a measure of justice for their suffering.”

She noted further that the “judgment and life sentences rendered by military justice authorities is a significant step forward in ending impunity for sexual violence in the DRC.”

The envoys also commended civil society actors for their role. “The case demonstrates that when there is political will, well-trained Government officials, civil society involvement, and an engaged press, there can be justice for sexual violence,” said Ms. Gamba.

Ms. Patten added that: “I am pleased that the UN Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence in Conflict could be deployed to assist national authorities in the military justice system appropriately to ensure that the Kavumu case was prioritized in accordance with the Joint Communiqué signed by my Office with the Government of the DRC in 2013.”

“The potentially life-changing judgments of reparations that were awarded by the court to the child victims must be paid for justice to be fully delivered and the sentences of the perpetrators must be carried out,” they underscored.

For its part, the UN stabilization mission in the DRC, known by its French acronym, MONUSCO, on Saturday applauded the life sentences handed down by Congolese authorities and called the decision a “a major landmark in the fight against impunity for sexual violence in DRC.”

MONUSCO chief Maman Sidikou said the decision sends a clear signal that “no one is above the law, whatever the rank.”

The statement also noted that the UN provided logistics and security support which has enabled the Congolese judicial authorities to conduct the investigations and organize a fair trial in Kavumu.

Mr. Sidikou called the holding of the trial “the fruit of the collective and continued efforts made by the Personal Representative of the Congolese Head of State in charge of the fight against sexual violence and child recruitment, as well as by the various actors engaged in the fight against impunity.”

He urged Congolese authorities “to pursue their efforts to bring to justice all those who violate human rights, international humanitarian law and commit other serious crimes.”