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Rohingya children trapped in 'appalling' conditions in Myanmar's Rakhine state – UNICEF

9 January – While the eyes of the world are on Myanmar's northern Rakhine and Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, more than 60,000 Rohingya children remain nearly forgotten, trapped in appalling camps in central Rakhine where the shelters teeter on stilts above garbage and excrement, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported Tuesday.

“Partners have identified about 20 children separated from their families during the violence but estimate the total number to be at least 100 – most of whom are in parts of northern Rakhine state that they still cannot access,” Marixie Mercado, UNICEF spokesperson told journalists in Geneva today during a briefing on her visit to Myanmar from 6 December 2017 through 3 January.

She painted a harrowing picture of the situation in Rakhine, noting that prior to 25 August, when the most recent outbreak of violence occurred, UNICEF had been treating 4,800 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition; these children are no longer receiving this life-saving treatment.

“All 12 of the outpatient therapeutic treatment centres run by our partners are closed because they were either looted, destroyed or staff can't access them,” she underscored.

Ms. Mercado called the inability of UN agencies to access vulnerable Rohingya children who remain in northern Myanmar “troubling,” saying that while “the eyes of the world” are focused on the 655,000 refugees who have fled across the border into Bangladesh, 60,000 Rohingya children remain “almost forgotten,” trapped in squalid camps in central Rakhine.

“The Rohingya children who do remain in rural areas are almost totally isolated. We hear of high levels of toxic fear in children from both Rohingya and Rakhine communities,” she said.



Children collect clean and safe water from a tap stand in Kyein Ni Pyin camp, home to almost 6,000 Rohingya displaced by violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state in 2012. Photo: UNICEF/Thame

She stressed that UNICEF stood ready to work with the Myanmar Government and Rakhine state authorities to provide humanitarian relief to all children – regardless of ethnicity, religion, or status – but needed unlimited access.

The spokesperson described two of the worst camps that she visited, in Pauktaw Township – reachable only by a four-to-five-hour boat ride.

“The first thing you notice when you reach the camps is the stomach-churning stench. Parts of the camps are literally cesspools. Shelters teeter on stilts above garbage and excrement,” she recounted. “Children walk barefoot through the muck. One camp manager reported four deaths among children ages 3-10 within the first 18 days of December.”

Ms. Mercado also pointed to “an acute level of fear between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities,” recalling a story that parents in one Rohingya village said they hadn’t had their children vaccinated against Japanese Encephalitis because the government vaccinators were accompanied by security officers – while Government workers said they dared not go to Rohingya communities without security.

“Rohingya children need a political solution to the issue of legal identity and citizenship. In the interim they need to be recognized first and foremost as children, she said, stressing that the Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees rights to health, education and opportunities to learn and grow to all children, irrespective of their ethnicity or status or the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Ms. Mercado said that the Annan Commission [a report led by the former UN Secretary-General on the situation in Rakhine state] has provided a roadmap for a durable political solution so all children’s rights can be protected in a sustainable, open and fair manner in the longer term.

“UNICEF stands ready to support this crucial work. And we call on the global community, especially regional organizations and countries, to leverage their influence so children have better lives today and a future they can look forward to,” she said.

Brinkmanship, lack of compromise will only deepen DR Congo political crisis, Security Council told

9 January – Political brinkmanship and a refusal to compromise will only result in further delays in preparations for elections and deepening of the political crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which has been gripped by a recent spate of violent protests, the United Nations peacekeeping chief told the Security Council Tuesday.

In a briefing to the Council, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, said that despite significant progress in preparations for elections, the implementation of the 31 December 2016 political agreement remains only partial.

That agreement – facilitated by *Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo* (CENCO) mediators – allowed President Joseph Kabila to stay in power beyond the end of his term and stipulated that peaceful, credible and inclusive elections would be organized in the DRC by the end of December 2017.



Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, briefs the Security Council on the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

The polls were reportedly pushed back to December 2018, sparking violent protests late last month.

Today, Mr. Lacroix condemned the violent repression of the demonstrations by Congolese National Security Forces, and called on national authorities to carry out the necessary investigations to bring to justice alleged perpetrators of human rights

violations.

“Given the stakes, it is essential that all players in the Congolese political class renounce any act that may lead to situations of violence,” he said, urging political actors to play a constructive role in the implementation of the electoral calendar, warning that any refusal to compromise would only deepen the political crisis.

Mr. Lacroix also deemed it imperative for the DRC's partners to provide sufficient political, logistical and financial support for the conduct of credible elections, noting in particular that any delay would not only risk fueling political tensions but would also aggravate an already fragile security situation.

In this context, he told the Council that in recent months, armed groups in eastern DRC have launched repeated attacks on positions of the Congolese Army, with a severe impact on the civilian population.

Turning to his recent visit to Semuliki, where an attack on a base of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) by suspected members of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed 15 Tanzanian peacekeepers and wounded 43 others. He noted that the Secretary-General had appointed former Assistant Secretary-General Dmitry Titov to lead a special investigation into the circumstances surrounding the incident.

Meanwhile, Mr. Lacroix announced that preparations were under way to ensure the deployment next month of a third rapid deployment battalion. He said members of such units were training in jungle combat to enable them to evolve more effectively in the asymmetrical environment in which they operate.

He went on to stress that the asymmetrical nature of the threats posed by ADF rebels and other armed groups called for strengthening regional cooperation, as well as information gathering and analysis, but also to interrupt the political and economic support systems enjoyed by the group. In addition to targeted military operations, he called for strengthening cooperation between MONUSCO and the national Congolese security forces, known by the French acronym, FARDC.

As Syria war grinds on, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are becoming poorer, more vulnerable – UN



This young Syrian refugee, shown here talking with a neighbour, fled Homs and now lives with her three sons in a dark, damp one-room garage originally intended to be a shop, in an alleyway with other similar shelters, in Ghazieh, Saida, Lebanon (file). Photo: UNHCR/Sebastian Rich

9 January – More than half the war-weary Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living in extreme poverty and borrowing money for food and to pay rent has become commonplace, the United Nations reported Tuesday.

This news came with a warning that more of these refugees find themselves dependent on international aid amid an uncertain outlook for humanitarian funding in 2018.

“Seven years into the crisis, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are finding it increasingly more difficult to make ends meet [and] are more vulnerable than ever, William Spindler, spokesperson of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told reporters at the regular press briefing in Geneva.

He was briefing on the annual Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR), carried out by UNHCR, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), which showed that 58 per cent of households are currently living in extreme poverty – on less than \$2.87 per person per day.

“And the number of households living below the overall poverty line – less than \$3.84 per day – has also continued to rise,” Mr. Spindler explained, noting that 76 per cent of refugee households live below that level.

Borrowing money for food, to cover health expenses and pay rent continues to be extremely common, with almost nine out

of 10 refugees saying they are in debt.

While food insecurity remains critically high, other vulnerabilities continue to grow, such as obtaining legal residency – leaving refugees exposed to an increased risk of arrest and hindering access to work, school or health care.

“Overall,” Mr. Spindler said, 74 per cent of surveyed Syrian refugees aged 15 and above do not have legal residency in Lebanon.”

Self-reliance opportunities remain extremely limited in an economy affected by the Syrian conflict and insufficient external funding.

“In 2017, only 36 per cent of the total funding needed to provide adequate humanitarian support in Lebanon was received, as of the beginning of December,” underscored Mr. Spindler, noting that under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, \$2.7 billion is required to meet needs in 2018.

“It is more vital than ever that donors stay the course amid deepening poverty and growing vulnerabilities,” the spokesperson emphasized.

UN chief welcomes progress on inter-Korean talks as vital to reducing tensions in region



Secretary-General António Guterres. UN Photo/Violaine Martín

9 January – Welcoming the progress made during Tuesday's high-level inter-Korean talks in the small border village of Panmunjom, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres spotlighted, among others, the agreement to reopen military channels as critical to reducing tensions in the region.

“The Secretary-General [has welcomed] particularly the agreement to work to ease military tensions, hold military-to-military talks, and reopen the inter-Korean military hotline,” said a statement from UN Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric, who added that the re-establishment and strengthening of such channels is critical to lowering the risk of miscalculation or misunderstanding and to reduce tensions in the region.

Mr. Guterres also welcomed the decision of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to send a delegation to the Olympic Winter Games, which will be held from 9 to 25 February in PyeongChang, Republic of Korea.

“As the United Nations General Assembly has recognized, the holding of the Olympic Games can foster an atmosphere of peace, tolerance and understanding among nations. This is particularly relevant on the Korean Peninsula and beyond,” the statement said.

The Secretary-General seized the opportunity to acknowledge other efforts that have contributed to reducing tensions. “He hopes such engagement and efforts will contribute to the resumption of sincere dialogue leading to sustainable peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula,” the Spokesman concluded.

UN refugee agency urges Israel to halt forced relocation of African asylum seekers



Somali and Eritrean refugees wash at a reception centre at the port of Augusta, Sicily. They had been rescued at sea by the Spanish Coast Guard after setting out from Libya. (file) Photo: UNHCR/Fabio Bucciarelli

9 January – The United Nations refugee agency on Tuesday appealed to the Israeli Government to not forcibly send Eritrean and Sudanese refugees or asylum seekers to sub-Saharan Africa.

This appeal came after some 80 cases were identified in which people relocated by Israel risked their lives by taking dangerous onward journeys to Europe.

“Feeling they had no other choice, they travelled many hundreds of kilometres through conflict zones in South Sudan, Sudan and Libya after being relocated by Israel,” the spokesperson of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), William Spindler, told reporters in Geneva.

He said that along the way, “they suffered abuse, torture and extortion before risking their lives once again by crossing the Mediterranean to

Italy.”

UNHCR staff interviewed them in Rome between November 2015 and December 2017 in reception centres and informal settlements. All were adult males, some with family members still in Israel, who had entered via the Sinai.

“In every case,” he explained, “they reported torture, mistreatment and extortion before reaching Israel,” adding that some said that others travelling with them had died *en route* to Libya.

The majority maintained that they had been transferred from Israel to a country in Africa and provided with \$3,500 dollars.

“However, the situation on arrival was different to what most had expected – and with little further support provided beyond accommodation on the first night. They reported feeling unsafe, as they were known to have money,” he said.

UNHCR is seriously concerned over Israel's plans announced on 1 January to forcibly relocate Eritreans and Sudanese to countries in Africa or have them face indefinite detention.

Official statements that the plans may eventually target families and those with pending asylum claims, or that asylum seekers might be taken to the airport in handcuffs, are particularly alarming.

“At a time when UNHCR and partners in the international community are engaged in emergency evacuations from Libya, forced relocation to countries that do not offer effective protection and the onward movement of these people to Libya and Europe is particularly worrisome,” Mr. Spindler underscored.

There are some 27,000 Eritreans and 7,700 Sudanese in Israel, however since 2009, when Israel took over refugee status determination from UNHCR, only 10 Eritreans and one Sudanese have been recognized as refugees.

While 200 Sudanese from Darfur were granted humanitarian status in Israel along with an announcement that 300 more will follow, Israel has not received any Eritreans or Sudanese since May 2016.

“UNHCR stands ready to work with Israel to find alternative solutions for the protection needs of asylum seekers, in line with international standards,” concluded Mr. Spindler.