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Tragic start to New Year for migrants as hundreds feared dead in Mediterranean – UN

Some of the rescued migrants aboard a Libyan Coast Guard vessel.
Photo: IOM Libya/Eshaebi/2018

10 January – A little more than a week into the New Year, reports reveal that close to 200 migrants or refugees have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean Sea – with up to 100 unaccounted for since Saturday, the United Nations migration agency said Wednesday.

“It’s very distressing that during the first 10 days of 2018 we have seen close to 800 migrants rescued or intercepted off the Libyan coast, with more lives lost at sea,” said Othman Belbeisi, Chief of the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Libya Mission.

“More has to be done to reduce irregular unsafe movements of people along the Central Mediterranean route,” he added.

By contrast, at a time when Mediterranean migrants’ death dropped sharply, IOM recorded only 26 on the Mediterranean Sea lanes in

December.

While January 2017 had witnessed some 254 deaths, this week’s reports suggest that the start of 2018 may be even deadlier.

IOM reported on Tuesday that 81 Mediterranean Sea deaths of migrants or refugees were recorded in the first eight days of the year – five in Western Mediterranean waters off Spain and Morocco, the rest between Italy and Libya.

In the latest, and third deadliest, shipwreck in the Mediterranean since Saturday, the Libyan Coast Guard rescued three rubber boats with 279 migrants – 19 women, 243 men, 13 boys and four girls – in an operation lasting at least 12 hours.



According to survivors, and a press release by Libya's Coast Guard, about 100 people on board remained missing.

IOM was present at the disembarkation point in Tripoli and provided the survivors with food and water.

IOM's Christine Petré reported that the boats departed from the coastal towns of Azzawiyah and Al Khums – with most of the survivors hailing from African countries, including Senegal, Mali and Nigeria. The Libyan Coast Guard reported that eight are from Bangladesh while two are from Pakistan.

The UN migration agency continues to provide support and direct humanitarian assistance to the survivors of this latest tragedy, many of whom now are at Libya's Tajoura detention centre.

Colombia: Reintegrating 14,000 ex-combatants remains a challenge, Security Council told



Jean Arnault, Special Representative and Head of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, briefs the Security Council. UN Photo/Manuel Elias

10 January – Colombia's peace efforts remain challenged by the task of reintegrating 14,000 former rebel combatants, the top United Nations official in the country said Wednesday as he also reported to the Security Council that the UN will 'closely follow' reports of a just-broken ceasefire between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Colombian Government.

“While the building blocks of stabilization are being put in place, we cannot lose sight of the challenges of reintegration,” Jean Arnault, the Secretary-General's Special Representative, told the Security Council, presenting the first quarterly report on the activities of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, which he heads up.

The mission, which started its operations on 26 September 2017, was established to verify the commitments of the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP)

on reintegrating former FARC-EP members into society, and on ensuring security in territories most affected by the decades-long conflict, which was ended with a peace deal between the two sides in November 2016.

Mr. Arnault said that the political reintegration of the former guerrilla organization is on course, noting that the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections this year and local and departmental elections in less than two years will be an opportunity for the new FARC party to gain seats.

“But we continue to view with concern the socioeconomic reintegration of the 14,000 former combatants,” he said, explaining that many of them are still in prison and are extremely frustrated with the reintegration process.

President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón has taken the important step of recognizing the need for access to landownership as a major incentive for reintegration.

For their part, many FARC members have demonstrated on the ground that they are willing and able to engage in agriculture, environmental protection and crop substitution.

These are promising developments, but only that. The next few months must be the opportunity to “turn the corner,” and make a fragile process more durable.

Regarding a temporary ceasefire between the Government and the National Liberation Army (ELN), Mr. Arnault stressed that the clamor for the continued suspension of military action has been unanimous, and reiterated the need to preserve the lower level of violence as seen in the past three months, while also advocating for a clearer and more reliable ceasefire.

“Unfortunately, it was just announced that attacks against pipelines by the ELN have just resumed. We will follow closely developments and keep the Council informed,” Mr. Arnault said.

Meanwhile, UN Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric told reporters in New York that the Secretary-General will be travelling to Bogotá, Colombia, on 13 January to support peace efforts.

On Saturday, Mr. Guterres will meet with the President, officials of the Government and armed forces, as well as with the leadership of the FARC and the Catholic Church.

On Sunday, the Secretary-General will travel to Meta Department, where his agenda will include a visit to a territorial area for training and reintegration of former FARC combatants.

Asked if the UN chief will meet with the ELN, Mr. Dujarric said “we’re concerned by the incident this morning – an attack on an oil pipeline. We’re obviously following the developments very closely and we’re keeping the Security Council informed.”

Syria: UN rights chief condemns spike in civilian casualties in 'de-escalation' areas



A family flees an active conflict neighbourhood in eastern Ghouta, Syria, using a cart to carry their belongings. Photo: UNICEF/Amer Al Shami

10 January – The United Nations human rights chief on Wednesday condemned an upsurge in civilian casualties in Eastern Ghouta in Syria amid the recent escalation in airstrikes and ground-based attacks by Government forces and their allies, noting that at least 85 civilians have been killed since 31 December.

“The suffering of the people of Syria knows no end,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, noting that residential areas in Eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of the nation’s capital, Damascus, are being hit day and night by strikes from the ground and the air, forcing civilians to hide in basements.

He stressed that all parties are obliged under international law to distinguish between lawful military targets and civilians and civilian objects.

Since 31 December, at least 85 civilians, including 21 women and 30 children, have been killed and at least 183 injured in Eastern Ghouta, where at least 390,000 civilians have been living under siege for four years, according to information gathered by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

On 9 January, airstrikes and ground-based strikes hit a residential area in opposition-controlled Hamourya, reportedly killing at least 13 civilians. The previous day, two airstrikes and simultaneous ground-based strikes on a residential area near a market in the opposition-held town of Duma reportedly killed 12 civilians.

Armed opposition groups also continue to fire rockets into residential areas in Government-controlled Damascus. On 4 January, a rocket fired into Old Damascus hit the vicinity of a bakery, reportedly killing a woman and injuring 13 other civilians.

The High Commissioner also noted that the failure to evacuate urgent medical cases from Eastern Ghouta runs contrary to its international humanitarian law obligations to collect, care for, and take measures to evacuate the sick and wounded.

In Idlib, ground attacks and airstrikes have escalated as a rapidly-moving Government offensive gains momentum, jeopardizing the safety of hundreds of thousands of civilians, said Mr. Zeid, noting that an explosion on 7 January reportedly killed 28 civilians.

Both Eastern Ghouta and Idlib are considered “de-escalation areas” brokered in May by Iran, Russia and Turkey under the Astana process, with the stated aim to put a prompt end to violence and improve the humanitarian situation.

“I repeat my call for the parties to ensure strict adherence to international law including by ensuring the protection of civilians from the effects of hostilities and to allow unhindered access by humanitarian agencies to provide badly needed aid,” said Mr. Zeid.

Darfur: Displacement slows but returns remain difficult, warns UN peacekeeping chief

10 January – Despite some recent voluntary returns among those displaced in Sudan's Darfur region, lack of security, services and sustainable livelihoods in return areas have become major impediments to returns, the top United Nations peacekeeping official told the Security Council Wednesday.

“Thus far, the humanitarian indicators illustrate a continuing emergency situation,” said Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, briefing the Security Council.

Across the region, there are some 2.7 million displaced persons, of whom 2.1 million are in need of assistance, and 1.6 million living in a range of camps and settlements.

In his briefing, Mr. Lacroix also informed the 15-member Council that without major incidents overall, the disarmament campaign in the region has been received with mixed reactions and scepticism, especially by the internally displaced persons, while local authorities and tribal leaders consider that it has increased the security among the communities.

In that context, the African Union UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) is engaging the authorities on reported concerns over non-respect for the rule of law and violations of human rights associated with the campaign, while monitoring its conduct in the camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs).

“In the meantime, progress towards achieving a negotiated political settlement to the conflict remains elusive,” added the UN peacekeeping chief.

Mr. Lacroix went on to inform the Security Council that the first phase UNAMID reconfiguration had finished and 11 team sites had been closed and handed over to the Darfur state governments.

He also updated them on the Mission's ongoing work on state-specific stabilization plans in cooperation with the Darfur state governments and the UN country team.

Concluding his briefing, Mr. Lacroix urged the Security Council to consider a new mission concept with adjusted priorities in the context of the renewal of UNAMID mandate in June.

He also called for prioritizing the consolidation of peacebuilding efforts in Darfur in order to safeguard the achievements and to avoid a relapse into conflict.



Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, briefs the Security Council on the reports of the Secretary-General on the African Union-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Taking on environmental health risks, UN agencies aim to protect 'foundations for life' on Earth

10 January – Two United Nations agencies are teaming up in a major new initiative taking on the herculean task of combatting environmental health risks, which claim an estimated 12.6 million lives a year.

The partnership, announced Wednesday, between the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), includes specific action to address air pollution, climate change and antimicrobial resistance as well as improve coordination on waste and chemicals management, water quality, and food and nutrition issues.

“Our health is directly related to the health of the environment we live in. Together, air, water and chemical hazards kill some 12.6 million people a year. This cannot and must not continue,” said Tedros Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of WHO, in a news release announcing the undertaking.



Piles of garbage being burned in the streets of Cairo, Egypt. Photo: IRIN/Amr Emam

“There is an urgent need for [us] to work more closely together to address the critical threats to environmental sustainability and climate – which are the foundations for life on this planet. This new agreement recognizes that sober reality,” added Erik Solheim, the Executive Director of UNEP.

The new collaboration has a particular focus on the developing world as the worst impacts of environmental pollution and the related deaths occur in developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The initiative also includes joint management of the *BreatheLife* advocacy campaign to reduce air pollution for multiple climate, environment and health benefits.

The two UN agencies have been cooperating in a range of health and environment areas.

This latest partnership, is however, the most significant formal agreement on joint action across the breadth of environment and health issues in over 15 years, the agencies added.

UN regional forum for Latin America and Caribbean marks 70th anniversary



Wide view of the high-level seminar in commemoration of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean's (ECLAC) 70th anniversary, in Santiago, Chile. Photo: Carlos Vera/ECLAC.

10 January – The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) celebrated its 70th anniversary on Wednesday with a high-level seminar at its headquarters in Santiago, Chile, reaffirming its commitment to working for the dignity and well-being of all the region's inhabitants.

“This new anniversary gives us the opportunity to revitalize our mission and reaffirm our commitment to the values that underpin our daily work,” ECLAC Executive Secretary Alicia Bárcena told the seminar.

“Now is the time to grow to be more equal, and be more equal to grow. We must break with the culture of privileges, which is manifested in tax evasion and avoidance as well as in illicit capital flows. Equality strengthens democracy and helps in the provision of

public goods,” she added.

ECLAC is one of the five regional commissions of the United Nations. It was founded with the purpose of contributing to the economic development of Latin America, coordinating actions directed towards this end, and reinforcing economic ties among countries and with other nations of the world.

The former Executive Secretaries of ECLAC Enrique Iglesias (1972-1985), Gert Rosenthal (1988-1997), José Antonio Ocampo (1998-2003) and José Luis Machinea (2003-2008) also spoke at the seminar.

Mr. Iglesias recalled the difficult years during the 1970s that ECLAC's leadership had to face, above all in its relationship with the host country, when even the organization's very existence was threatened.

“ECLAC was the first institution created to think about development problems in their comprehensiveness, based on direct knowledge of the realities in the countries that it serves,” he said.

“Moving toward the future, ECLAC must prepare itself for a new world dominated by technological transformations, climate change and growing unsatisfied social demands, while also continuing to fight for greater equality, which has been the central theme of this institution throughout its history,” he added.

Meanwhile, Mr. Rosenthal stressed the need for the organization to adapt to new times and realities. “ECLAC must 'accommodate itself' to these changes and it has the tools to do so,” he emphasized.

For his part, Mr. Ocampo reviewed the importance of the Commission's contributions in five specific areas: the fiscal compact and macroeconomic management vis-à-vis capital movements; productive development in open economies, which emphasized the relevance of integration and technological development; social development, which placed rights-based social policies as the top priority; the reincorporation of issues related to environmental sustainability in all its main reports; and participation in international debates.

“ECLAC is today the principal research center in the entire UN system. No other organization compares to it, above all in terms of the quality of its analyses,” said Mr. Ocampo, who held high-level posts in other international institutions over the course of his professional career.

Mr. Machinea recalled that Raúl Prebisch, a renowned Argentine economist who was ECLAC's main inspiration and its second Executive Secretary (1950-1963), had an extraordinary vocation for development issues.

“He knew how to maintain his intellectual autonomy, was the first person to defend the application of counter-cyclical policies and constantly sought to have analysis and action interact,” Mr. Machinea said.

“Moving toward the future, Latin America and the Caribbean will need integration more than ever and to continue fomenting a productive transformation with equality,” he said.

“The main risk currently is the global uncertainty in which we live: there are threats of a new financial crisis which, on top of protectionist trends and xenophobia, could have grave consequences. In the region we must save during the good years and insist on counter-cyclical policies that allow us to better confront future difficulties,” he added.

The commemoration of ECLAC's 70 years in existence will continue throughout 2018 with different events to be held both in Santiago as well as at the institution's other headquarters.



At UN, universities spotlight hands-on approach to integrating refugees



'Together' summit at UN Headquarters in New York on combating the plight of refugees. UN News/Elizabeth

10 January – At a special summit at United Nations Headquarters in New York, universities, led by De Montfort University (DMU), spotlighted ideas for practical ways they can use the skills, experience and voluntary power on their campuses to support those in need in their local areas.

“Migration has become a scary word in some parts of the world. Some people use it to evoke apocalyptic scenarios,” Maher Nasser, the Director of the Outreach Division in the UN Department of Public Information told the gathering, pointing out that when well-managed, migration brings wealth and opportunities, especially when it is an individual's choice as opposed to a necessity.

Selected by the UN, De Montfort University (DMU) in the United Kingdom, held the summit on Tuesday, which featured panel discussions on refugees' challenges within local communities and universities. Partners at the event were expected to sign an action charter which would set out what will be done by universities on their own campuses to address the refugee crisis.

“The Together campaign fits perfectly with De Montfort's belief in the important role of universities as a force for public good,” said Professor Dominic Shellard, De Montfort University Vice-Chancellor, explaining that DMU defines itself by its diversity and being welcoming and open to all.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an unprecedented 65.6 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide – including 22.5 million refugees.

Calling it a daunting number, Mark Charlton, DMU Head of Public Engagement told *UN News*: “It is a challenge for universities to really humanize the work they are doing and move away from the conversation about statistics.”

“If you're talking about one person, or a family of people, it hits home a little more,” he added, “let's talk about people's lives.

Inspired by Pope Francis' appeal that every parish host one refugee family, Diya Abdo, associate professor of English at Guilford College, in Greensboro, North Carolina,

founded the 'Every Campus a Refuge' initiative, which calls on colleges and universities worldwide to host on their campuses one refugee family and assist in their resettlement.

To date, Guilford College has hosted over 32 refugees, including 18 children, from Africa and the Middle East, providing them with English instructions along with cultural, social, academic and career services.

“It's a wonderful place-based education for our students, [...] they learn what it's like to be an immigrant in Greensboro, to be a refugee,” Ms. Abdo says passionately.

UN News also spoke with a young woman who was herself once a refugee.

ZamZam Yusef's mother paid strangers to take her 7-year-old daughter out of Somalia to Sweden. “Treated quite badly” by her so-called foster parents, at age 13 she shared her plight at a youth centre where an aunt in the UK was tracked down and contacted.

She, as it turned out, Ms. Yusef was the most fortunate of her siblings. Her older brother died while migrating through

Greece and her sister was held in Libya for two years against her will. Fortunately, she was one of 160 people airlifted to Rome on Christmas eve.

Ms. Yusef is determined to remain optimistic, and encourages everyone to get involved in the community, by “volunteering, even making a cup of tea for an elderly person or helping refugees fill out forms.”

Launched in September 2016, 'Together' is a UN campaign that promotes respect safety and dignity for refugees and migrants.