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War-torn Taiz governorate district of Al Qahira, Yemen. Photo: WFP

**5 December** – Yemen remains gripped by uncertainty after the assassination of the former president and a spike in brutal violence in and around its war-ravaged capital, Sana'a, the United Nations envoy for the war-torn country said Tuesday.

“The situation is reaching a new adverse development with the killing of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and a number of GPC [General People's Congress] leaders,” Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, told a closed session of the UN Security Council Tuesday.

“These events will constitute a considerable change to the political dynamics in Yemen,” he added.

Briefing alongside Mr. Cheikh Ahmed was the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, who underscored that the humanitarian situation in the country remains severe, with millions on the cusp of the largest famine in modern times.

Intense fighting – including airstrikes and rocket attacks – have devastated the country and brought incredible hardships on its people. Over 17 million Yemenis (close to two-thirds of the population) is food insecure while a staggering 8.5 million people are on the brink of starvation.

In all, close to 21 million people across Yemen are in need of humanitarian or protection support.



The violence has also devastated basic services in the country, all but destroyed its water and sanitation system, and sparked a deadly cholera outbreak that has claimed thousands of innocent lives – including children.

Making matters much worse is that aid workers are not able to carry out their vital mission to save lives due to the scale of fighting and insecurity.

Overnight, 25 air strikes had targeted the Republican Palace, bridges and civilian infrastructure in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, forcing humanitarian agencies, including the UN, the Red Cross and non-governmental organizations into a lockdown.

Against this backdrop, the top UN relief official in the country, Jamie McGoldrick, had appealed Monday for a “humanitarian pause” today from 10:00 AM to 16:00 PM (Yemen time) to allow desperate civilians reach assistance and safety as well as for aid workers to reach them.

Speaking via telephone, from Sana'a, to journalists at a press briefing in Geneva today on his request for a pause in fighting, Mr. McGoldrick expressed that while he does not expect full compliance by all the parties, he hoped for some respite in the fighting to allow civilians to access supplies and medical care.

The “hallmark of the crisis,” he noted has been the general disregard for international humanitarian law.

The UN and reiterated, time and again, reiterated the obligation of the parties to the conflict to ensure civilians are protected, and health and aid workers, and civilian infrastructure not be subjected to attacks.

## Careless disposal of antibiotics could produce ‘ferocious superbugs,’ UN environment experts warn



Birds scavenging for food amidst the debris at the landfill in Danbury, Connecticut in the United States. UN Photo/Evan Schneider (file photo)

**5 December** – Growing antimicrobial resistance linked to the discharge of drugs and some chemicals into the environment is one of the most worrying health threats today, according to new research from the United Nations that highlights emerging challenges and solutions in environment.

“The warning here is truly frightening: we could be spurring the development of ferocious superbugs through ignorance and carelessness,” said Erik Solheim, chief of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), on Tuesday.

He added that studies have already linked the misuse of antibiotics in humans and agriculture over the last several decades to increasing resistance, but the role of the environment and pollution has received little attention.

As such, the *Frontiers Report*, launched on the second day of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), which is running through 6 December at UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, looks at the environmental dimension of antimicrobial resistance in nanomaterials; marine protected areas; sand and dust storms; off-grid solar solutions; and environmental displacement – finding the role of the environment in the emergence and spread of resistance to antimicrobials particularly concerning.

“This needs priority action right now, or else we run the risk of allowing resistance to occur through the back door, with potentially terrifying consequences,” stressed Mr. Solheim.

Antimicrobial resistance occurs when a microorganism evolves to resist the effects of an antimicrobial agent. Globally about 700,000 people die of resistant infections every year because available antimicrobial drugs have become less effective

at killing the resistant pathogens.

Clear evidence shows that antimicrobial compounds from households, hospitals, pharmaceutical facilities and agricultural run-off released into the environment, combined with direct contact between natural bacterial communities and discharged resistant bacteria, is driving bacterial evolution and the emergence of more resistant strains.

Once consumed, most antibiotic drugs are excreted un-metabolized along with resistant bacteria – up to 80 per cent of consumed antibiotics, according to the report. This is a growing problem, as human antibiotic use this century has increased 36 per cent and livestock antibiotic use predicted to increase 67 per cent by 2030.

Evidence shows that multi-drug resistant bacteria are prevalent in marine waters and sediments close to aquaculture, industrial and municipal discharges.

Solving the problem will mean tackling the use and disposal of antibiotic pharmaceuticals as well as the release of antimicrobial drugs, relevant contaminants and resistant bacteria into the environment, the report says.

### ***Other evolving issues***

The report also considers other emerging issues, such as nanomaterials in which little is understood about their long-term effects. According to UNEP, past lessons reveal that “no evidence of harm” does not equal “evidence of no harm,” meaning that research into nanomaterials is essential.

Another area it highlighted was in securing Marine Protected Areas as one excellent option for maintaining or restoring the ocean’s and coastal ecosystems health, and a potential driver for economic benefits derived from them.

The Frontiers Report also noted that sand and dust storms, which impoverish arid landscapes soils, and can cause economic losses, indicted that strategies promoting sustainable land and water management must be integrated with measures addressing climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Pointing out that nearly one billion people live without electricity, the report emphasized the importance of bridging the off-grid energy gap as a possible key to achieving the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for universal access to affordable, reliable energy services.

Finally, in an era of unprecedented mobility, the report points out that migration produces environmental changes that include pollution, deforestation and biodiversity loss, saying that unless we deal with long-term environmental vulnerability and build resilience, environmental displacement will become a new normal.

## UN rights chief calls for probe into attacks against Rohingya, says genocide 'cannot be ruled out'

**5 December** – The United Nations human rights chief on Tuesday called for an international criminal probe into the perpetrators of the widespread and brutal attacks that have driven more than 600,000 Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar since August, noting that “elements of genocide” against the minority could not be ruled out.

Rohingyas have faced decades of statelessness, policies of dehumanizing discrimination and segregation, and the horrific violence and abuse, along with the forced displacement and systematic destruction of villages, homes, property and livelihoods, said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

“Given all of this, can anyone rule out that elements of genocide may be present?” he told the Human Rights Council in Geneva in a special session convened in response to the ongoing exodus of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

“Ultimately, this is a legal determination only a competent court can make. But the concerns are extremely serious, and clearly call for access to be immediately granted for further verification,” he added.

The High Commissioner urged the Council to consider making a recommendation to the UN General Assembly that it establish a new impartial and independent mechanism, complementary to the work of the fact-finding mission into the latest wave of violence and abuses, to assist individual criminal investigations of those responsible.

By 2 December, an estimated 626,000 refugees – or more than half the estimated number of Rohingya living in Rakhine state – had fled to Bangladesh since October 2016, and particularly since August 2017. The Myanmar Government has said its latest campaign in northern Rakhine was in response to attacks by insurgents.

The High Commissioner reported that his Office (OHCHR) had sent three teams to Bangladesh this year to monitor the situation and interview refugees. He said witnesses reported acts of appalling barbarity committed against the Rohingya, including deliberately burning people to death inside their homes; murders of children and adults; indiscriminate shooting of fleeing civilians; widespread rapes of women and girls; and the burning and destruction of houses, schools, markets and mosques.

Mr. Zeid said he had reported to both the Human Rights Council and the UN Security Council about the persistent allegations of serious human rights violations by security forces. Yet, he added, prosecutions for alleged acts of violence against them, including sexual violence – whether committed by security forces or civilians – appeared to be extremely rare.

Refusal by international as well as local actors to even name the Rohingyas as Rohingyas – to recognize them as a community and respect their right to self-identification – is yet another humiliation, and it creates a shameful paradox: they are denied a name, while being targeted for being who they are,” he added.

“The world cannot countenance a hasty window-dressing of these shocking atrocities, bundling people back to conditions of severe discrimination and latent violence which seem certain to lead in the future to further suffering, and more movements of people,” Mr. Zeid said.



A Rohingya refugee holds an infant in his arms as he stands alongside children and women on a makeshift raft after they crossed the Naf River, which demarcates the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh. UNICEF/Brown

## Donors make initial pledges of \$857 million to fund UN refugee agency's work in 2018



A young South Sudanese refugee looks out of a truck before being transported to the Imvepi settlement at the Imvepi Reception Centre, Arua District, in northern Uganda. Photo: UNHCR/David Azia

**5 December** – Donor governments on Tuesday pledged an initial \$857 million to fund the United Nations refugee agency's work to help some 67 million displaced or stateless people worldwide in 2018.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said that while the pledges made at an annual meeting in Geneva represent only 11 per cent of its total 2018 funding needs of over \$7.5 billion, they indicate the anticipated funding levels next year.

However, the gap between the funds received and the needs of refugees and other displaced people will likely continue growing, with new crises and worsening displacement running at record levels.

“Refugee crises grow. Refugee needs grow as well,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi.

This means that UNHCR has to prioritize, sometimes mercilessly, he explained.

“This can mean some (refugees) will be left to fend for themselves during the harsh winter months and others won't get the assistance they need to reintegrate upon return,” he warned.

UNHCR's work globally is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions from governments, intergovernmental institutions and, increasingly, from individuals, corporations and foundations.

The agency's work includes operations in some of the biggest emergencies around the world such as those in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

Mr. Grandi thanked the countries and communities hosting refugees because they are some of the largest donors in terms of space, resources, and the socio-economic and political cost of hosting refugees.

For 2018, UNHCR appeals to donors to sustain and increase support, through flexible and early contributions, to avoid uncertainty and enable it to channel funds where the needs are greatest without interruption.

## West and Central Africa lagging far behind world in HIV response, warns UNICEF

**5 December** – Four in five children living with HIV in West and Central Africa are still not receiving life-saving antiretroviral therapy and AIDS-related deaths among adolescents aged 15-19 are on the rise, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has warned.

“It is tragic that so many children and adolescents today are not receiving the treatment they need just because they have not been tested,” said Marie-Pierre Poirier, the UNICEF Director for the region, in a news release, Tuesday, calling for improvement of early diagnosis and access to HIV treatment and care for children.

According to UNICEF, West and Central Africa has the lowest paediatric antiretroviral treatment coverage in the world, with only 21 per cent of the 540,000 children (aged 0-14) living with HIV receiving antiretroviral treatment in 2016 – compared to 43 per cent globally.



Boys play football at a UNICEF-supported non-governmental organization which provides services to children living with HIV and AIDS or those affected by it. Kenema, Sierra Leone. Photo: UNICEF/Phelps

A major cause behind this is the limited capacity of the countries to perform the tests needed for early infant diagnosis of HIV.

“Without knowing a child's HIV status, his or her family is less likely to seek the treatment that could prevent the tragedy of a child's death from AIDS-related illnesses,” said UNICEF.

The situation is worse among adolescents: the annual number of new HIV infections among those aged 15-19 years in the region now exceeds that of children aged 0-14 years. These new infections occur mostly through unprotected sexual contact and among adolescent girls.

Equally concerning, according to *Step Up the Pace: Towards an AIDS-free*, a recently released UNICEF report, is that the region has seen a 35 per cent rise in the annual number of AIDS-related deaths among adolescents aged 15-19 years – the only age group in which the number of AIDS-related deaths increased between 2010 and 2016.

With the region's youth population expected to grow significantly within the coming decades, especially in countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Nigeria, the numbers of children and adolescents becoming infected with HIV and dying from AIDS is likely to remain high, unless the HIV response – both prevention and treatment – improves dramatically, the report warns.

To overcome these hurdles, the report calls for key strategies to enable countries accelerate efforts to curb the spread of disease.

In particular, it proposes a differentiated HIV response focusing on unique epidemiological and local contexts in each country and community; integration of HIV services into key social services including health, education and protection; community ownership and local governance of the HIV response including working with families to help reduce stigma, access prevention and treatment; and investment in innovations to remove barriers to diagnostic and biomedical approaches such as point of care diagnostics, HIV self-testing and pre-exposure prophylaxis.

“Leaders of the region have endorsed a Catch-Up plan aiming to triple the number of people on treatment in the region – including children – by the end of 2018, the key issue now is to accelerate implementation,” said Luiz Loures, the Deputy Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

“Countries should urgently put in place more effective strategies for early infant diagnosis of HIV, and start reducing inequity in children's access to treatment.”

## Somalia Partnership Forum stresses job creation and poverty reduction to promote stability

**5 December** – A gathering of senior representatives of the Somali Government, the United Nations and the international community concluded in Mogadishu today with a call for greater investment in the country's economic development to create more job opportunities, rehabilitate essential infrastructure, and improve the living conditions of the Somali people.

For the second consecutive day, the Federal and state-level leaders of the country met with senior representatives of the international community in the so-called Somalia Partnership Forum to assess the various challenges facing Somalia, with today's high-level conference focusing on humanitarian and development issues.

Participants commended the Government of Federal President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmaajo" for its leadership in the country's drought response effort that averted a devastating famine in 2017. But several speakers also warned that the threat of a major humanitarian disaster still loomed over millions of Somalis, and continued support from international partners would be needed for the foreseeable future.

"Unfortunately, we cannot declare victory, and we have to exercise extreme caution because the situation remains the worst we have faced in recent living memory after four failed rainy seasons," said Peter de Clercq, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator and the Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative for Somalia.

"We continue to need deliveries of humanitarian assistance to the tune of \$100 million per month," he explained.

Mr. de Clercq noted that international partners have provided over \$1.2 billion in assistance to support the Federal Government's drought response effort this year, adding that a humanitarian response plan for Somalia in 2018 will seek to raise another \$1.5 billion.

"Without the support of the international community, we could not have averted this famine," Somalia's Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire said in his remarks at the event.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), poverty, marginalization, armed violence, insecurity, political instability, natural disasters and a lack of economic development have driven up humanitarian needs for decades in the east African country.

Also, a lack of access to basic services, especially in the areas of education and livelihoods opportunities, can easily tip residents into the vulnerable category in terms of relief needs, as well as encouraging outward migration in search of employment and increased susceptibility to recruitment by militant groups.

In his keynote address, President Farmaajo said his Government intends to reduce poverty by two per cent each year and had created jobs for thousands of Somali youth since taking office earlier this year with assistance from the international community.

"We must still do more to retain our young people," he added. "That is a must, not only to grow our country but also for preventing radicalization. We are fully aware that socio-economic improvements to the quality of our people's lives... will undoubtedly help bring about political stability."

President Farmaajo also reiterated his long-standing call for debt relief that would provide Somalia with access to loans from international financial institutions to pay for urgently needed infrastructure improvements.



A mother waits with her children to receive food at an Internally Displaced Persons camp at Doolow, Gedo region, Somalia (June 2017). UN Photo/Ilyas Ahmed

“If we are not able to build roads required by our small businesses to bring their produce to market, it would be difficult to meet our stated goal of reducing poverty,” the President said.

A communiqué issued at the end of the meeting welcomed the Federal Government’s pledge to hold one-person, one-vote elections in 2021. The document also stated that the next Somalia Partnership Forum would be held in the middle of 2018.

## Caring for the planet starts with ‘the ground we walk on;’ UN says on World Soil Day



Women of the Batwa community tilling the soil with hoes in preparation for planting potatoes, in Gashikanwa, Burundi. Photo: FAO/Giulio Napolitano

**5 December** – Soil is a major carbon storage system, essential for sustainable agriculture and climate change mitigation, the United Nations agriculture agency said Tuesday, launching on World Soil Day a comprehensive global map showing the amount of carbon stocks contained in soil.

“Soil is the foundation of agriculture, it is where food begins,” said Maria Helena Semedo, Deputy Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

“Maintaining the soil’s important functions and ecosystem services to support food production and increase resilience to a changing climate calls for sustainable soil management practices,” she added.

Soil organic matter, with carbon as its main component, is crucial to soil health and fertility, water infiltration and retention as well as food production.

The world’s soils act as the largest terrestrial carbon sink, reducing greenhouse gases. Intensifying its role could significantly offset the rapid rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

In an historic decision on agriculture, the 2017 UN Climate Change Conference in Bonn (COP23) recognized the need for improved soil carbon, soil health and soil fertility.

The Global Soil Organic Carbon Map, the most comprehensive to date, illustrates the amount of organic carbon stock in the first 30 cm of soil – revealing natural areas with high carbon storage that require conservation along with regions where further sequestration would be possible.

This information can prove a powerful tool to guide decision-making on practices aimed to preserve and increase the current soil carbon stocks – helping win the fight against climate change.

The map shows that globally the first 30 cm of soil contains around 680 billion tons of carbon – almost double the amount present in our atmosphere.

The degradation of one third of the world’s soils has already prompted an enormous release of carbon into the atmosphere. Restoring these soils can remove up to 63 billion tons of carbon, significantly reducing the effects of climate change.

FAO’s Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils supported the map’s development, including by putting together the national carbon maps of more than 100 countries, making a concrete contribution towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15, Life on Earth.

The next step is for countries to monitor their national soil information systems for organic carbon levels to make evidence-based decisions on how to manage and monitor their soils.

## Young students getting better at reading, finds international study

**5 December** – Reading literacy levels are on the rise across the globe, giving young students a set of strong skills to serve them in their futures as well as contributing to the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular those related to inclusive and quality education.

According to the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), launched Tuesday by the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement at the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) headquarters, in Paris, 96 per cent of fourth graders from over 60 education systems achieved above the international benchmark.

“An early start in reading literacy has lasting benefits, with students who had attended pre-primary school for three years or more reporting higher average scores,” said UNESCO in a news release announcing the findings.

It also highlighted the impact of supportive home environments – with parents engaging their children in early literacy activities – and safe and well-resourced learning environments with qualified teachers associated with higher achievement scores.

Furthermore, the report also showed that female students outperformed their male counterparts in 48 countries and dependent territories by an average of 19 points.

This year's PIRLS was extended to include an assessment of online reading – called ePIRLS. The findings from this section concluded that good readers also have an advantage in digital literacy skills, with half of students deemed good to excellent readers reaching the PIRLS high international benchmark.

Also today, UNESCO and the International Association launched a guidance booklet on how large-scale assessments, such as PIRLS, can help in measuring progress towards the achievement of the education-related SDG (Goal 4).

SDG 4 targets analysed in the booklet include target 4.1 on primary education, 4.2 on early childhood development, 4.4 on skills for work, 4.5 on gender equality and inclusion, 4.a on effective learning environments and 4.c on teachers.



A female student of Hai Tokyo School on the outskirts of Juba, South Sudan participates in an English reading exercise. UNESCO/Mark Hofer (2011)