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Conditions in Myanmar not yet suitable for Rohingya refugees to return safely – UN agency

23 January – The necessary safeguards for Rohingyas to return to Myanmar are absent, and there are ongoing restrictions on access for aid agencies, the media and other independent observers, the United Nations warned on Tuesday, two months after Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed on a plan for the refugees’ voluntary return to their homes.

“To ensure the right of refugees to return voluntarily, and in safety and in dignity, we call again on Myanmar to allow the necessary unhindered humanitarian access in Rakhine State and create conditions for a genuine and lasting solution,” Adrian Edwards, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told the regular news briefing in Geneva.

Access would allow for assessment of the actual conditions and the long-term viability of the returns, as well as help address the legitimate safety concerns for any refugees contemplating their return there, he emphasized.

In addition, refugees also need to be properly informed and consulted about such conditions in order for returns to be safe, voluntary and sustainable added the UNHCR spokesperson.

Also vital is the full implementation of the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission [a panel led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan], including the call for peace and security for all communities in Myanmar’s Rakhine state, inter-communal dialogue, freedom of movement, access to livelihoods and achieving solutions for the legal and citizenship status of Muslim communities.

“Turning these recommendations [...] into a reality on the ground is essential to building confidence for returns and



Rohingya refugees wait for a food distribution in Kutupalong camp, Cox’s Bazar Bangladesh. Photo: UNHCR/Andrew McConnell

addressing the tense inter-communal situation that has built up over many years in Rakhine state,” said Mr. Edwards.

“Without this, the risk of dangerous and rushed returns into a situation where violence might reignite is too great to be ignored,” he stressed.

Over 650,000 members of the minority Muslim Rohingya community have taken refuge, and more continue to arrive, in Cox’s Bazar in southern Bangladesh after having been forced to flee their homes in Myanmar’s northern Rakhine province following an outbreak of brutal violence in late-August 2017.

UNHCR remains prepared to work with both governments towards finding a long-term solution to this crisis in the interest of the refugees themselves, of both governments, the host community in Bangladesh and all communities in Rakhine state.

Fresh violence in Central African Republic sparks ‘unprecedented’ levels of displacement – UN



The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) and its partners are registering and assisting new refugee arrivals from Central African Republic in southern Chad villages. Photo: UNHCR/Aristophane Nagargoune

23 January – Surging violence in the Central African Republic (CAR) has put unprecedented numbers of people on the run, the United Nations refugee agency said Tuesday, reporting that hungry, desperate arrivals being registered in neighbouring Chad say their houses have been torched and that armed groups are “killing anyone in their way.”

Overall, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said the violence has pushed displacement to its highest levels since the start of the violence in 2013, moreover, estimates show that almost half the population is now food insecure and some 2.5 million people need humanitarian assistance.

“Data as of the end of December shows that 688,700 people were displaced internally – 60 per cent more than just a year ago,” Adrian Edwards, UNHCR spokesperson told reporters at today’s regular

press briefing in Geneva.

Meanwhile, 542,380 CAR refugees are in neighbouring countries, a 12 per cent increase compared to last year.

“For a country whose population is estimated at around 4.6 million, these two figures combined represent an astonishing level of suffering and people in need,” he added.

Clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian, plunged the country into civil conflict in 2013. Hundreds of thousands of people have been uprooted and have fled to neighbouring Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Chad and the Republic of Congo for safety.

The recent surge in violence, particularly in the country’s north-west, has led over 17,000 Central Africans to flee to Chad since end-December – some ten times more than during the whole of 2017 – making it the biggest refugee influx since 2014.

UNHCR and the authorities are identifying host villages away from the border in Chad to relocate the refugees, and teams are distributing food and basic relief items, including blankets and mosquito nets, provided by the UN World Food Programme (WFP).

The UN refugee agency and its partners are also providing medical assistance to new arrivals, some of whom are affected by malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory infections. In total Chad hosts 77,122 refugees from CAR.

The conflict in CAR's north-west has also displaced some 65,000 Central Africans to the city of Paoua, which has seen its population tripling.

"The newly displaced told UNHCR that armed groups attacked their villages, torching houses, looting food and killing anyone in their way," updated Mr. Edwards.

While local authorities report that some 15,000 houses have been burned and 487 people killed across the northwest, UNHCR fears the number could be higher as some places are still inaccessible.

Describing the situation as "one of the world's most forgotten displacement crises," Mr. Edwards shared humanitarian community estimates that almost half of all Central Africans will face food insecurity in 2018."

"In 2017, against needs we estimated at \$209.2 million for the CAR situation, only 12 per cent was funded – barely more than a dollar for every 10 required. In 2018, UNHCR's financial requirements for the CAR situation amount to \$176.1 million," he concluded.

Amid growing insecurity, time to reassess UN peacekeeping presence in Mali, Security Council told



Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, addresses the Security Council on the situation in Mali. Photo: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

23 January – Against the backdrop of worsening security in Mali's central regions and with presidential elections just six months away, a senior United Nations official on Tuesday said it is time to reexamine the configuration of the UN peacekeeping presence in the West African country to reflect the changing circumstances on the ground.

"Looking forward, central Mali is likely to command sustained attention and to become an increasingly prominent feature in peace and reconciliation efforts," said Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, briefing the Security Council, and noting that Mopti region has the highest number of terrorist attacks documented.

Describing the situation as "a race against time," with growing insecurity claiming hundreds of civilian lives in the north and centre of Mali, Mr. Lacroix said the human rights and humanitarian situation is worsening as well, with aid workers estimating that 4.1 million Malians, or 22 per cent of the population, possibly facing food insecurity in 2018 – a proportion that could reach 30 to 40 per cent of inhabitants in the north and centre.

The goal now must be to create conditions conducive for elections and, going forward, the peace process, he said.

The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established by Security Council resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013, following an uprising by armed groups earlier that year. The Mission supports the transitional authorities of Mali in the stabilization of the country and implementation of the transitional roadmap.

"Five years after the Mission's establishment and two years and a half after the signature of the peace agreement, we believe the time has come to reassess the assumptions that underpin MINUSMA's presence, review its key mandated tasks against achievements on the ground and reexamine the Mission's layout through a comprehensive strategic review," he said.

Recalling the Council's request to develop a mission-wide strategic plan for a phased implementation of mission mandate and a transition plan that would hand over relevant tasks to the UN Country Team, Mr. Lacroix said that "it would be important that these two plans be informed by the findings of the strategic review to be conducted in the next weeks."

In the meantime, MINUSMA continues to focus on core mandated tasks with notable achievements in its good offices and 'protection of civilians' efforts, he added.



He said that despite persisting capability gaps, including for crucial assets such as helicopters, MINUSMA has pursued its efforts to project the robust posture mandated by the Council, noting that since the beginning of the year, peacekeepers repelled three attacks against advance positions in Kidal region and one ambush in Mopti region, while three improvised devices exploded against Mission vehicles.

While these attacks resulted in only minor injuries to two peacekeepers, the review on peacekeepers fatalities recently conducted by General Santos Cruz highlighted the need to further enhance efforts, such as ensuring that all peacekeepers receive the training and equipment necessary to operate in such hostile conditions.

“We are currently working with MINUSMA to take all necessary measures to implement the recommendations of the report,” Mr. Lacroix said.

The peacekeeping chief noted that Prime Minister Maiga convened a Cabinet meeting dedicated to addressing insecurity in the central region while the national coordination body of the integrated plan for security for the region is now operational.

Turning to the operationalisation of the G5 Sahel joint force, comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, to combat terrorism and transnational organized crime in the restive region, he welcomed the launch of its second operation, as well as the establishment by the G5 Sahel Secretariat of a coordination cell to provide political oversight to the operations of the joint force.

Meanwhile, consultations for the conclusion of the technical agreement between the G5 Sahel, the UN and the European Union (EU) are progressing, Mr. Lacroix said, noting that the UN is working closely with the EU and the African Union on a joint resource mobilization strategy, ahead of the donors conference of 23 February in Brussels.

Development partners are also stepping up their efforts. Since October 2017, the Peace Building Fund launched four projects focused on Mopti and Sýgou regions for a total of \$8 million. These projects aim at enhancing the participation of women and youth in reconciliation efforts and prevent inter-community conflicts, including by restoring traditional conflict mediation mechanisms.

However, most of these initiatives remain in the inception phase and are yet to produce significant changes on the ground, he said, stressing that the upcoming presidential elections will mark the beginning of a new chapter in the stabilization of Mali.

Record 22.2 million people need humanitarian assistance in Yemen – UN aid chief

23 January – The top United Nations relief official has expressed his deep concern about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Yemen, noting that a record 22.2 million people are now in need of assistance – 3.4 million more than last year.

“I remain deeply concerned by the humanitarian situation in Yemen, which has continued to deteriorate because of on-going conflict, collapsing basic services and economic decline,” said Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, in a statement issued overnight by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Mr. Lowcock, also the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, encouraged all donors to contribute to the recently launched 2018 Yemen Humanitarian Response plan, which requires \$2.96 billion to provide life-saving assistance and protection to more than 13 million people across the country this year.



UNICEF representative in Yemen Meritzell Relaño checks on a boy suffering from malnutrition at Al-Sabeen Hospital, Sana'a, Yemen. Credit: UNICEF

He welcomed the nearly \$1 billion pledge by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as well as an additional \$500 million in commitment from regional donors.

He also noted the importance of keeping all of Yemen's ports, including Hudaydah and Saleef, open to humanitarian assistance and commercial imports of food, fuel and medicines. Over 70 per cent of people in need of assistance live in proximity to those two Red Sea ports.

Since the decision to re-open Hudaydah and Saleef last month, the United Nations and its partners have successfully delivered large volumes of food, medicines and fuel to people in need, he said.

“Yemenis have suffered for too long,” Mr. Lowcock said, calling on all parties to cease hostilities and engage meaningfully with the UN to achieve a lasting political settlement.

On Monday, UN Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric told the press that the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, intends not to continue in his position beyond his current contract ending in February 2018.

Since the uprisings in Yemen began in early 2011, the United Nations has been actively engaged in mediation efforts to help Yemenis to find a peaceful solution to the conflict and enable the resumption of a peaceful, orderly and inclusive political transition.

DR Congo: UN rights office urges probe into use of force against protestors, UN personnel



A group of people gather in Kinshasa during demonstrations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) on 19 and 20 December 2016. Photo: MONUSCO

23 January – At least six people died and 68 were wounded during weekend demonstrations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) capital, Kinshasa, the United Nations human rights office reported Tuesday, urging the Government to investigate all incidents where security forces may have used excessive force against protestors and UN personnel.

“The rights to freedom of religion, expression and peaceful assembly must be fully respected, in line with the DRC’s obligations under international law. The authorities must also ensure that UN human rights personnel are able to carry out their essential monitoring work,” Ravina Shamdasani, Spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), told reporters in Geneva.

Kinshasa, with 68 people wounded, 121 people arrested and the firing of tear gas into churches in various parts of the African country.

A UN rights officer trying to conduct human rights monitoring of the demonstrations was kicked and punched by security forces in Kinshasa, while military police also fired tear gas towards at least three UN patrols.

“Violent dispersal of protestors will not resolve the political tensions but will only serve to heighten them,” she said, calling on the authorities to work constructively with political opponents, religious leaders and civil society to ensure that the right of all Congolese to participate in the public affairs of their country is upheld.

Throughout the country, Internet and SMS [text message] services have been suspended since midnight on Saturday, 20 January night, following a similar 48-hour suspension around the 31 December protests.

Tear gas was fired into and around churches in Kinshasa, Goma, Kisangani, Lubumbashi and Bukavu, while heavy

deployments of national police and armed forces, were reported in Mbandaka, Beni, Mbuji-Mayi and Butembo, particularly around places of worship.

Sunday's events followed the killing of nine people and the injuring of at least 98 others during the 31 December 2017 protests.

"Those held responsible for the killings and injuries must be brought to justice without delay," Ms. Shamdasani said.

The protests have been taking place in the vicinity of churches.

The political agreement at the heart of the demonstrations – 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.

At least seven killed at a religious gathering in northern Ethiopia – UN rights office



Ravina Shamsadani, Spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Photo: UN Multimedia

23 January – The United Nations human rights arm on Tuesday voiced deep concern over the deaths of at least seven people celebrating a religious festival in Ethiopia as security forces reportedly tried to stop them from shouting anti-Government chants.

Speaking to the media at the regular news briefing in Geneva, Ravina Shamsadani, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said that the event was "all the more regrettable" as it occurred just two weeks after the country's ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, officially announced its intention to undertake reforms.

According to OHCHR, the incident occurred in Woldiya City in Amhara regional state on Saturday as security forces reportedly tried to stop a group of people, who were celebrating the Ethiopian Orthodox festival of Epiphany, from chanting anti-Government songs and allegedly opened fire on them.

In addition to the those killed, a number of individuals were also injured. The deaths and injured have been confirmed by the regional government.

Afterwards, protesters reportedly blocked roads and destroyed a number of properties.

"We call on the authorities to ensure that the security forces take all feasible measures to prevent the use of force," said Ms. Shamdasani, noting that the Office been informed that the President of Amhara regional state said, in his terms, that a "careful examination" of the incident will be undertaken.

"We urge for this to be a prompt, independent, impartial and effective investigation to ensure those responsible for any violations are held accountable," she added.

OHCHR also called on the Government to undertake legal and policy reforms as well as implement guidance and training programmes to ensure that the conduct of law enforcement officials is in line with international standards.