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UN chief appeals for restraint amid more inter-religious strife in Nigeria

8 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today voiced his concern about the situation in the Nigerian city of Jos, where inter-religious violence has once again taken a deadly toll, and called for all sides to exercise maximum restraint.

Speaking to reporters at UN Headquarters, Mr. Ban called the loss of life resulting from the Christian-Muslim clashes, which reportedly number in the hundreds, "appalling."

The central Nigerian city witnessed similar clashes in January, as well as in November 2009, with several hundred people being killed and many more being displaced on both occasions.

"Nigeria's political and religious leaders should work together to address the underlying causes and to achieve a permanent solution to the crisis in Jos," stated the Secretary-General.

Last week, in a statement issued by his spokesperson, Mr. Ban encouraged all Nigerians to continue supporting Acting President Goodluck Jonathan – who was chosen to lead the country while President Umaru Yar'Adua recovers from illness – and the Government in overcoming its current challenges.



Mass graves dug in Jos after the last wave of violence in January 2010

Applauding election turnout, UN envoy to Iraq calls for unity

8 March - The top United Nations envoy to Iraq today praised millions of Iraqis who voted in Sunday's parliamentary elections in a call for political candidates and groups to respect the democratic process as counting got under way around the country.

The route to recovery and stability "appears to be genuinely routed in the wish of the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people that reason prevails over confrontation and violence," Ad Melkert, the Secretary-General's Special Representative, told reporters in New York via video link.

"I congratulate the more than 12 million Iraqis who went to the polls, which is a turnout percentage of 62.3 – higher than many had expected," added Mr. Melkert, who also heads the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI).

Mr. Melkert urged all candidates and parties to unite in accepting the results, setting an example for a culture of democracy which he said would require the commitment of all concerned beyond the election.

"We also have called on all those newly elected ... [to] form the new Government, so political, economic and social progress is not delayed," he said. "At the same time, we must understand that in a system with minority parties some time will be needed to form a majority coalition."

Election workers in 50,000 polling stations across the country have begun tallying the vote to elect Iraq's Council of Representatives, the country's parliament.

Reports of more than 100 violent incidents during the election campaign led to concerns that voters would be deterred from casting ballots.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon also told reporters today at UN Headquarters in New York that he applauded "all those Iraqis who exercised their constitutional right to vote despite the very serious and difficult challenging security situation."

In addition, members of the Security Council welcomed the holding of the elections and congratulated Iraqis for "demonstrating their continued commitment to a peaceful, inclusive and democratic political process."

In a press statement, the 15-member panel described the polls as "another important step in the political process aimed at strengthening Iraq's national unity, sovereignty and independence."

Voters in the northern city of Kirkuk expressed optimism tempered with a desire to see elected politicians deliver results. One male voter said that he hoped the country would be freed of bombs and explosions.

Official preliminary results for the election will be announced in a few days' time by Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC). The UN has an advisory role with the Commission and helps train election officials.

"We really hope and to an extent anticipate that this will be a firm basis for the next stage of Iraq's recovery, reconstruction, growth, stability," Mr. Melkert stressed at a press conference a few hours after polls closed on Sunday. "It will not come overnight, but to have an election day like this is a very solid basis."



Kurdish voter looking for his name on the voters' lists outside the polling centres in Erbil, Iraq

UN officials urge greater support for empowering women on International Day

8 March - Top United Nations officials are marking International Women's Day by calling for greater support to women, particularly in developing countries, so that they can be empowered and contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the eight globally agreed anti-poverty targets with a 2015 deadline.

In his message for the Day, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stressed that "the third Millennium Development Goal – to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment – is central to all the rest. When women are denied the opportunity to better themselves and their societies, we all lose.

"Until women and girls are liberated from poverty and injustice, all our goals – peace, security, sustainable development – stand in jeopardy," he added.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) also joined the call for equal rights and equal opportunities for all, with Director-General Juan Somavia noting that the global economic crisis is threatening recent advances in the field of women and work.

A new report by the agency on women in labour markets shows that a new gender gap may be emerging. "Although women's overall labour force participation is growing, women remain disproportionately represented in poorly paid, insecure, part-time, home-based or informal work and continue to be undervalued when it comes to equal pay for work of equal value," he stated.

Mr. Somavia added that the economic crisis is also an opportunity to shape new gender equality policy responses. "When governments design and implement fiscal stimulus packages, for example, it is important to recognize the labour market disadvantages that women may face.

"Women carry the heaviest burden when it comes to unpaid care work. This may expand as the crisis deepens and further limits women's access to labour markets if policies for sharing care responsibilities with men are not forthcoming," he said.

The UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the UN corporate responsibility initiative known as the Global Compact today launched a new joint initiative called Women's Empowerment Principles, which offers guidance on how to empower women in the workplace.

"The 'multiplier effect' of women's empowerment has been increasingly acknowledged," UNIFEM Executive Director Inés Alberdi told a news conference in New York. "What is powerful and new today is that the corporate community itself reports that gender equality is good for business — advancing innovation, attracting top talent, raising positive consumer and community recognition and improving profits."

Among other elements, the initiative calls for establishing high-level corporate leadership for gender equality, and promoting education, training and professional development for women.

Kandeh K. Yumkella, the Director-General of the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), stated that the key to enhancing opportunities for women in the developing world and lifting them out of poverty is to provide them with skills, know-how, technologies and finance to enable them to engage in productive activities and earn an income.

Speaking in Abuja, Nigeria, where he is attending a high-level conference on the development of agribusiness and agri-industries in Africa, Mr. Yumkella noted that ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women is crucial if developing countries want to achieve the other MDGs.



Number of researchers in developing countries is rising, but women still in minority

UNIDO's efforts focus on achieving four of the eight MDGs, including on promoting gender equality and empowering women.

"If women are able to access credit to invest in business ventures, markets to sell their products, knowledge to expand their businesses, they will be in a better position to contribute to economic growth and development," he stated.

This year's International Women's Day comes on the 15th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 – which remains the most comprehensive global policy framework to achieve the goals of gender equality, development and peace.

World leaders attending the summit in the Chinese capital declared that the full participation by women in all spheres of society, including decision-making and access to power, are fundamental for development and peace.

"We will not see sustainable progress unless we fix failures in health systems and society so that girls and women enjoy equal access to health information and services, education, employment and political positions," said the head of the World Health Organization (WHO).

Margaret Chan added that International Women's Day is a day of celebration and reflection on how to eliminate discrimination against women and girls. "Today we must all join forces to make sure that the health of women and girls is not jeopardized simply because they were born female."

Also marking the Day, General Assembly President Ali Treki called for resolving to guarantee women equal and full rights and opportunities which will enable them to contribute their full potential to the objectives of peace and development.

"Let us work to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination, not only by making sure that there are no existing laws that directly discriminate against women, but also by ensuring that all necessary arrangements are in place that will allow women to actually experience equality in their lives," Dr. Treki added in a statement.

Ban announces appointment of new UN police chief



UN Police Adviser Ann-Marie Orlor

8 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today appointed an experienced female Swedish police officer as the top United Nations police official.

"The UN's top cop is a woman," Mr. Ban told reporters in New York, noting that today's announcement of Ann-Marie Orlor as UN Police Adviser coincides with International Women's Day.

Ms. Orlor, who first came to the UN to serve as Deputy Police Adviser in 2008, has been Acting Police Adviser since last year.

In her native Sweden, she served as the Secretary General of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Amnesty International and was also the Police Commissioner in the town of Västmanland.

On the international stage, she has worked as the Programme Manager for Police and Human Rights with the Council of Europe, where she took part in fact-finding missions and trained police officers in Turkey and several Balkan nations, among others.

The Secretary-General today hailed her work in leading "the global effort to recruit more female police officers for UN peace operations."

At present, there are nearly 13,000 UN Police (UNPOL) – more than 6 per cent of whom are women – from some 100 countries who working in 17 different field missions.

One of her top priorities in her new role as the UN's top police official will be to enhance the participation of female police



officers so that they comprise 20 per cent of all UNPOL in peacekeeping by 2014, Ms. Orler said at a press conference today at UN Headquarters.

She pointed to the role played by the all-female Formed Police Units (FPUs) – comprising police officers trained in dealing with high-risk operations – in Liberia who have helped to “improve the status” of Liberian women police officers.

“As the world has become a global village, there is no doubt that the concept of policing must reflect the same universal values and principles,” Ms. Orler underscored.

Most of the conflicts around the world are a result of challenges to the fundamental social, economic and political rights of all people, she said, stressing that upholding these rights is a top priority.

To adapt to the shifting nature of conflict, “our engagement has also gone through a major evolution,” Ms. Orler noted. “From a passive monitoring role in the early days, we have proactively undertaken executive policing, supported national police in their law and order functions, and help reform, rebuild and restructure the host national police services.”

Each mission has its own unique challenges, said the new Police Adviser, who recently visited Haiti and saw first-hand the efforts of UNPOL to help the impoverished Caribbean nation recover after being struck by a devastating earthquake in January.

The challenges facing the country, she said, are three-fold: dealing with the immediate aftermath of the earthquake; helping the Haitian National Police (HNP) back on its feet to resume providing security; and to boost the country’s justice system.

Ms. Orler also detailed the efforts of UNPOL in other areas, such as the war-torn Sudanese region of Darfur, as well as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Timor-Leste.

She said that she looks forward to taking on the role of Police Adviser in a time of numerous challenges, “but also a time of action, opportunities and change,” highlighting the importance in partnerships to use resources most effectively and improve justice systems.

Asia-Pacific has one of world’s largest gender gaps, UN report finds



UNDP Administrator Helen Clark (right) at a road side reception during a field trip to Rajasthan, India

8 March - The countries of Asia and the Pacific have not duplicated their economic success in the realm of gender equality, according to a new United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, which found that discrimination and neglect are threatening the very survival of women in the region.

“Empowering women is vital for achieving development goals overall and for boosting economic growth and sustainable development,” said UNDP Administrator Helen Clark, who unveiled the publication in the Indian capital, New Delhi, today.

The region’s women suffer from some of the lowest rates of political representation, employment and property ownership in the world. Their lack of participation, the 2010

Asia-Pacific Human Development Report found, is also retarding economic growth.

In her address, Miss Clark pointed out that nearly half the adult women in South Asia are illiterate, a greater proportion than in any other region in the world.

Women in South Asia, she said, can also expect to live five fewer years than the world average of just under 71 years. While agricultural jobs account for more than 40 per cent of women’s jobs in East Asia and 65 per cent in South Asia, only 7 per cent of farms in these areas are controlled by women.

The launch of the new report, entitled *Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific*, coincides with International Women's Day.

It found that nearly half of South Asia's countries and over 60 per cent of those in the Pacific have no laws in place against domestic violence.

"Discriminatory laws need to be changed, and the laws will need to be enforced," the UNDP head stressed.

The recommendations made by the publication include the removal of barriers to women's ownership of assets, expanding paid employment and enhancing investment in high-quality education and health.

It called for reforming constitutions and progressively interpreting religious principles to recognize the equal value of all human beings.

The report pointed out that quotas to increase women's political participation, along with sanctions for non-compliance, could be a helpful tool.

"Changes like those recommended in the report require steadfast political leadership," Miss Clark emphasized. "They also require men and boys to help foster attitudes and take actions which empower women."

Secretary-General calls for calm in post-election Togo



Poll worker in Togo's 2010 presidential election in the capital, Lomé

7 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called for calm in Togo, where the provisional results of the 4 March presidential election were announced on Saturday, and for any grievances to be resolved through the proper channels.

"He calls for the same calm and restraint during this period as that which was witnessed on voting day," Mr. Ban's spokesperson said in a statement.

According to media reports, the incumbent Faure Gnassingbé was re-elected in the race against challenger Jean-Pierre Fabre, who is disputing the results, alleging irregularities in the vote count.

"The Secretary-General reiterates his call on all political leaders and their supporters to refrain from any action that could jeopardize the peaceful conclusion of the electoral process," said the statement.

"He further calls upon them to resolve any electoral grievances through legal and institutional channels and appeals for any such complaints to be reviewed and adjudicated in a fair and transparent manner."

Violence which erupted in the West African nation after the sudden death of long-time president Gnassingbé Eyadéma and disputed elections in 2005 left hundreds of people dead and thousands more wounded, and caused tens of thousands to flee to neighbouring Ghana and Benin.

Last week Mr. Ban called the 4 March presidential election a "crucial opportunity" for Togo to continue efforts to consolidate democracy, and urged all segments of society to refrain from moves that could exacerbate tensions before, during or after the poll.

Shelter critical need for post-quake Haiti and Chile, says Ban

8 March - Returning from seeing first-hand the destruction wrought by the earthquake that struck Chile last month, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today stressed the urgent need for shelter, which is also a priority for millions of quake survivors in Haiti.

“Shelter is very important and an urgent one for both Haiti and Chile,” Mr. Ban told reporters at UN Headquarters, following his visit to Chile over the weekend to get a fuller picture of the extent of the damage from the 27 February quake and to better assess how the UN can best help.



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon surveys quake damage in Concepción, Chile

He noted that the Chilean Government, which is spearheading the response to the disaster, has appealed for the urgent provision of shelter, in addition to mobile hospitals, generators and communications equipment.

While in the capital, Santiago, Mr. Ban participated with President-elect Sebastián Piñera in an event with hundreds of young volunteers working with “A Roof for Chile” Foundation. The Catholic Church-based organization builds temporary housing for slum dwellers and seeks to provide them with education, social services and micro-credit, as well as guide them in acquiring permanent housing.

“I was very moved by such volunteer work,” said the Secretary-General, who said he will continue to work hard to ensure that the country receives the assistance that it needs.

Mr. Ban, who also visited Haiti in the wake of that country’s 12 January quake, highlighted the ongoing need for shelter there, especially ahead of the upcoming rainy season. “We need at least one million tents, because two million people have been displaced,” he noted.

Briefing the Security Council two weeks ago, UN humanitarian chief John Holmes said much more would have to be done, especially in terms of emergency shelter, other non-food items and sanitation, to assist affected Haitians.

With an estimated 1.2 million Haitians needing emergency shelter materials and waterproof tarpaulins to cover their heads, there was a desperate need not only for plastic sheeting, but also for tents before the rains began in earnest, Mr. Holmes said, calling for a “shelter and sanitation surge” to match the immediate post-earthquake effort to get food aid into the country.

Ban voices concern about lack of progress on key issues in Sri Lanka



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (centre) visiting Menik Farm in Sri Lanka on 23 May 2009

8 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today expressed concerns about the lack of progress on political reconciliation, the treatment of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the setting up of an accountability process in Sri Lanka since the United Nations signed a joint statement with the Government last year in the wake of the end of its civil war with separatist Tamil rebels.

Mr. Ban told reporters that he had “a frank and honest exchange of views” last Thursday about these subjects during a telephone conversation with President Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka, where the runner-up candidate in January’s presidential elections, General Sarath Fonseka, was subsequently arrested for alleged “military offences” and the parliament was dissolved.

The Secretary-General and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay have both voiced concern about the situation in the island nation, and Mr. Ban said last month that the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe will soon head to the island nation for talks with senior Government officials.

Speaking at UN Headquarters, Mr. Ban said today that he was “concerned with the lack of progress of the joint statement,” particularly political reconciliation, the condition of IDPs and the need for an accountability process.

Government forces defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May last year, ending a civil war that had flared on and off for more than two decades. The conflict left hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced.

“I made clear to President Rajapaksa that I intend to move forward on a group of experts which will advise me on setting the broad parameters and standards on the way ahead on establishing accountability concerning Sri Lanka,” Mr. Ban said.

That accountability concerns possible breaches of international humanitarian law or abuses of human rights carried out during the conflict.

Citing recent tensions, Security Council urges restraint by Israelis, Palestinians



6 March - Members of the United Nations Security Council have called for restraint by all sides and an early return to the negotiating table, while voicing their concern at the current “tense” situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem.

“They urged all sides to show restraint and avoid provocative acts,” Ambassador Emmanuel Issoze-Ngondet of Gabon, which holds the rotating Council presidency for March, told reporters after closed-door talks on Friday.

“They stressed that peaceful dialogue was the only way forward and looked forward to an early resumption of negotiations,” he added.

During their meeting in New York on 24 February, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon voiced his regret to Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak about recent developments on the ground, including new demolition orders in East Jerusalem and the inclusion of holy sites in the occupied West Bank on an Israeli heritage list.

According to media reports, Israeli police and Palestinian youths clashed at the Temple Mount site in Jerusalem on Friday, resulting in several injuries on both sides. Clashes have also been reported in the West Bank city of Hebron, following Israel's announcement that it was adding the tombs of the biblical patriarch Abraham in Hebron and the biblical matriarch Rachel in Bethlehem to its list of national heritage sites.

The situation in the Middle East was also among the issues discussed yesterday during a meeting between Mr. Issoze-Ngondet, in his capacity as Council President, and General Assembly President Ali Treki.

“The two Presidents underlined the crucial importance of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East for regional and international peace and security,” Mr. Treki's spokesperson said in a statement.

The discussion, part of regular meetings held by the Assembly President with the heads of the other principal organs of the UN, also touched on the Council's programme of work – including situations ranging from Somalia and Chad to Sudan and Afghanistan – as well as reform of the 15-member Council and the wider UN.

ICC postpones trial of former Congolese leader charged with war crimes



Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo

8 March - The International Criminal Court (ICC) today announced it is pushing back the start date of the trial of a former senior official of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) who has been charged with war crimes.

The trial of Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo was set to commence on 27 April, but will now begin on 5 July. He faces charges for alleged crimes committed in the Central African Republic (CAR) between October 2002 and March 2003, including rape, murder and pillaging.

Under The Hague-based ICC's complementarity principle, it can only intervene if there are no national proceedings against those responsible for the crimes.

Last month, Mr. Bemba's defence team challenged the admissibility of the case against him on the grounds of respecting the complementarity between the ICC's work and that of authorities in the CAR, arguing that he should not be tried before the Court.

It also questioned "the lack of the requisite level of gravity" as well as "an abuse of process in the case against Mr. Bemba," according to a press release issued by the ICC.

In the announcement made today, the trial chamber said that is "in the interests of justice" to rule on the defence's application prior to the start of the proceedings.

The Office of the Prosecutor and the victims' legal representatives have until 29 March to submit their observations, while authorities in both the CAR and the DRC have a 19 April deadline by which to respond.

The trial chamber said today that it will issue its decision after considering observations as well as oral submissions made at a status conference scheduled to be held 27 April.

The ICC's pre-trial chamber confirmed last summer that Mr. Bemba had the "necessary criminal intent" when in 2002 he ordered his armed group, the Mouvement de libération du Congo (MLC), into the CAR to back up embattled leader Ange-Félix Patassé. It said that MLC fighters committed war crimes and crimes against humanity during that mission, with Mr. Bemba "effectively acting as military commander."

He was transferred to the ICC in July 2008 after being arrested by Belgian police. Last September, the Court decided that Mr. Bemba will remain in custody until the start of his trial, reversing an earlier decision to grant him temporary conditional release.

The situation in the CAR is one of four – along with the Darfur region of Sudan, the DRC and Uganda – currently under investigation by the Prosecutor of the ICC, an independent, permanent court that tries persons accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Missing UN-African Union soldiers make safe return thanks to local Darfurians

7 March - Two peacekeepers who were missing after an attack on an African Union-United Nations patrol in Darfur have made a safe return with the assistance of the local population, the joint mission reported today.

They were found suffering from dehydration but were listed as in stable condition after receiving appropriate medical

attention, according to a news release issued by the mission, known as UNAMID.

The two were part of a patrol, which included UNAMID police and military observers, that was ambushed on Friday by unidentified armed men while on its way to Jebel Marra, the scene of recent clashes.

The members of the patrol and their vehicles, including three armoured personnel carriers (APCs), were seized and taken to an unknown location. The peacekeepers were released early Saturday morning along with the APCs, but all other vehicles and equipment were kept by the attackers.

“Two UNAMID soldiers were able to evade capture at the time of the ambush and escaped, trekking over long distances at night in the desert, attempting to return to their team site,” the mission said.

“They encountered locals who helped them find their way to a place from where they could contact their comrades.”

The two soldiers were then able to make contact with the UNAMID team site in Kass in South Darfur earlier today and provide information about their location, following which a search and rescue patrol was dispatched to retrieve them.

UNAMID expressed its gratitude to the local population “for the solidarity and assistance extended to its peacekeepers,” and reiterated its commitment to finding a lasting solution to the conflict in Darfur, where nearly seven years of fighting has killed at least 300,000 people and driven 2.7 million others from their homes.

UN and partners kick off massive anti-polio drive in West and Central Africa



A child receiving a polio vaccination

6 March - United Nations agencies and their partners today launched a polio immunization campaign targeting 85 million children under the age of five in 19 countries across West and Central Africa.

“From the top leadership to local district administrators in every country, we are each accountable to the African child – to vaccinate every child and achieve high coverage,” said Luis Gomes Sambo, Regional Director for Africa of the World Health Organization (WHO), noting the cross-border cooperation and Africa's determination to curb the disease.

According to WHO, some 400,000 volunteers and health workers will travel door to door – working up to 12 hours per day on foot, bicycles, in cars or boats – to administer two drops of the oral polio vaccine (OPV) to every child in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Sierra Leone. These are the countries considered to have active outbreaks of polio, meaning they had cases within the last six months.

Volunteers will also fan out across Nigeria, where the epidemic first started in 2008, Ghana, Benin, Central African Republic (CAR), Gambia, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau.

The vaccination campaign – funded by the service organization Rotary International – will extend to Niger, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire, although at a later date due to political transitions or elections within those countries.

WHO, working with the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), vaccinated some 6 million children in that country in December 2009, but was unable to curb the disease.

The agency said that previous efforts to halt the 2008 outbreak did not work because not all children were able to be vaccinated. In addition, after years without polio cases, some countries lacked the necessary skills and experience to respond adequately to the outbreak.

New approaches being introduced this year include standardized, independent monitoring of whether children have been reached, better training for vaccinators to carry out the plans fully and appropriate deployment of experienced staff, WHO

said.

“With better coverage that leaves no child unvaccinated, these campaigns can succeed in making West and Central Africa polio-free,” said Gianfranco Rotigliano, Regional Director for West and Central Africa for the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The vaccination campaign will be repeated on 24 April in the same 19 countries.

UN anti-drug chief sounds alarm on possible ‘health disaster’ in developing world



A drug-addict in Kabul

8 March - Failure to harness drugs could unleash a “health disaster” in the developing world, the head of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) warned today, underscoring that poor nations lack the necessary treatment facilities and law enforcement capacities to rein in narcotics.

“This seems to have been forgotten by people in rich countries calling for a loosening of drug controls,” Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa told the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), which kicked off its 53rd session in Vienna today.

The CND is the UN’s central policy-making body in drug-related matters, allowing Member States to analyze the global drug situation and monitor the implementation of the three global drug control pacts, including the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances.

In his address today, Mr. Costa asked, “why condemn the Third World, already ravaged by so many tragedies, to the neo-colonialism of drug dependence?”

He noted that East Africa is witnessing increased heroin use, while cocaine is one the rise in West Africa and synthetic drugs in the Middle East and South-East Asia.

Health is paramount in drug control, the UNODC chief said. While drug addiction is a treatable condition, inequality within and among nations marginalizes the poor who cannot access treatment.

“While rich addicts go to posh clinics, poor addicts are being pushed into the gutters or to jail,” he emphasized.

His agency is working with the UN World Health Organization (WHO) to achieve the goal of universal access to drug treatment and with the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) to halt the spread of the disease through injection drug use.

“We must not only stop the harm caused by drugs. Let’s unleash the capacity of drugs to do good,” Mr. Costa said, reminding participants at the gathering that the preamble of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs recognizes that “the medical use of narcotic drugs continues to be indispensable for the relief of pain and suffering.”

He also highlighted the need to bolster human rights in the fight against drugs, pointing out that millions of people – including children – are sent to jail, not to treatment facilities, when caught taking drugs.

“In some countries, drug treatment amounts to cruel, degrading punishment – the equivalent of torture,” Mr. Costa said, adding that some are even sentenced to death for drug-related offenses.

“As human beings, as well as members of the community of civilized nations, we have a shared responsibility to put an end to this,” he stressed. “People who use drugs, or are behind bars, have not lost their humanity or their human rights.”

The Executive Director also noted the growing security threat posed by drugs, with the Security Council having taken up the

issue of trafficking in recent months. He said it is particularly important that vulnerable regions – including the Balkans, Central and West Asia and East and West Africa – receive stepped-up assistance in their security, justice and development sectors.

The UNODC, he said in his last address to the CND as its head, has made great strides in helping Member States “make drug policy more responsive to the needs of the most seriously affected along the whole chain of the drug industry, from poor farmers that cultivate it, to desperate addicts who consume it, as well as those caught in the crossfire.”

This session of the CND will wrap up on Friday.

UN telecom agency takes step to boost 3G mobile phone services around the world



8 March - Users on so-called third-generation (3G) mobile telephones are set to receive a boost in worldwide compatibility, international roaming capability and greater access to high-speed data services from a new United Nations International Telecommunications Union (ITU) standard announced today.

ITU Secretary-General Hamadoun Touré said these advances will facilitate the agency's efforts to promote broadband access in rural and remote areas around the world.

The standard provides access to a wide range of telecommunication services for existing 3G network users by identifying satellite radio interface specifications for IMT-2000 systems through one or more radio connections.

ITU said that even as the satellite component of IMT-2000 3G services continues to evolve, work is already in progress to develop the satellite radio interfaces for IMT-Advanced, which provides a global platform for the next generations of services that will provide faster data access, unified messaging and broadband multimedia.

In related news, ITU announced it has provided emergency communications aid to support the search and rescue effort in eastern Uganda in the wake of last week's mudslides which completely destroyed villages, left hundreds of people dead or missing, and many more are homeless.

“In Uganda, and around the globe, ITU will always do its best to help those who need emergency telecommunications,” said Mr. Touré.

ITU sent 20 Thuraya satellite terminals to the affected area on 3 March, which will be vital for coordinating the logistics of relief work in the aftermath of a series of devastating mudslides on the slopes of Mount Elgon, which began on 1 March, buried homes under metres of earth and rock following days of heavy rain.

Secretary-General hopes Moscow meeting will spur direct Israeli-Palestinian talks



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon briefs reporters following his trip to Chile

8 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today he hopes the upcoming meeting in the Russian capital of the diplomatic group supporting the Middle East peace process will lead to direct negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Members of the so-called Quartet, comprising the UN, the European Union, the United States and Russia, are slated to meet in Moscow on 19 March.

Mr. Ban, who will be attending the meeting, told reporters at UN Headquarters that the gathering will provide the Quartet with an opportunity “to assess and encourage the earliest possible resumption of the proximity talks which will eventually, I hope, lead to direct

negotiations between the parties.”

The Roadmap peace plan championed by the Quartet calls for two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

The Secretary-General, who is meeting later today with the Vice Prime Minister of Israel, Silvan Shalom, has repeatedly called for the resumption of the Middle East peace process, which has been stalled for many months.

Last month UN political chief B. Lynn Pascoe told the Security Council that international consensus on what it takes to reach a sustainable agreement is strong, and that an active Quartet will be vital to support the process.

“We continue to stress the importance of doing everything possible to ensure that negotiations lead in a clear time frame to an agreement resolving all final status issues,” he stated, while also expressing his hope that both sides will agree to the proposal from US envoy George Mitchell to begin indirect talks with US mediation.

Mr. Ban also announced today that he plans to participate in the summit meeting of the League of Arab States, which will be held in Sirte, Libya, on 27 March.

“There I will engage in bilateral or group meetings with the Arab leaders, so that both Arab leaders, and the United Nations, and all concerned parties can promote this peace process,” he stated.

UN dispatches relief aid to Uganda for victims of deadly mudslide disaster



Mudslides in Uganda washed away houses and crops

8 March - United Nations aid agencies are continuing emergency relief efforts for thousands of victims of last week’s devastating mudslides in eastern Uganda, which has left at least 83 dead and authorities still unable to account for more than 300 others.

One week after the disaster, attention is turning to the relocation of residents to safer areas amid continuing rains and a heightened fear of more landslides following days of rainfall unlatched a torrent of mud and debris to bury three whole villages close to Mount Elgon.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have provided 1,000 pieces of plastic sheeting, 6,110 blankets and 10 hydraform machines to construct huts and other community structures.

While as many as 20,000 households may have been affected by the disaster and 5,000 people are expected to be relocated from the villages in Bududa district, flooding has submerged thousands of acres of crops, roads, schools and housing in Butaleja district at the foot of Mt. Elgon.

The UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) is expected to supply 10 kilograms of seeds per household, targeting 1,000 households in Bududa, and another 10 kilograms of seeds per household targeting the 20,000 people whose crops were destroyed in Butaleja.

The likelihood of water-borne disease outbreaks remains high in Butaleja, where floods have either submerged or cut off health facilities and other critical infrastructure, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

OCHA reported that while the Government continues to lead the emergency relief response, as well as the search and rescue operation, the UN dispatched two teams last week – comprising representatives from FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF and others – to assess the situation in both districts.

In addition, the UN International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has dispatched 20 Thuraya satellite terminals, which will be vital for coordinating the logistics of relief work.

“I learnt with deep sorrow the loss of life resulting from a massive landslide that swept the slopes of Mt. Elgon in eastern Uganda,” said ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau Director Sami Al Basheer Al Morshid.

“This equipment has been dispatched with much urgency to assist in search and rescue operations and coordinating logistics on the ground,” added Mr. Al Morshid.

Since last October, the Great Lakes nation has been experiencing heavy rains – expected to last another month – that are believed to be tied to the El Niño weather phenomenon.

Darfur: two peacekeepers missing after ambush on UN-African Union patrol

6 March - A search is underway for two peacekeepers missing after an ambush on a joint African Union-United Nations patrol in an area of Darfur that has been the scene of recent clashes.

The patrol, which included police and military observers from the mission, known as UNAMID, was headed to the Jebel Marra region on Friday when it was ambushed by unidentified armed men.



UNAMID peacekeepers on patrol

“UNAMID strongly condemns this unprovoked attack on its peacekeepers who were carrying out an important security and humanitarian mission for the benefit of the people of Jebel Marra,” the mission stated in a news release.

The attack occurred “although the mission had received assurances by belligerents that the UNAMID patrol could carry out its task,” it added.

The peacekeepers and their vehicles, including three armoured personnel carriers (APCs), were seized and taken to an unknown location. The peacekeepers were released early Saturday morning along with the APCs, but all other vehicles and equipment were kept by the attackers.

In addition, “two peacekeepers are still unaccounted for and listed as missing,” UNAMID stated, noting that the mission is doing everything that it can to ensure the safe and swift return of its missing personnel and of its vehicles and equipment.

UN officials have repeatedly called on all parties to the conflict in Darfur – where nearly seven years of fighting has killed at least 300,000 people and driven 2.7 million others from their homes – to exercise restraint and refrain from any action that could thwart ongoing peace efforts.

In February a cessation of hostilities agreement was signed in Doha, Qatar, between the Government and the rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), in a bid to help end the conflict. All other armed movements operating in Darfur have also been urged to join the peace process without delay.

Chad: UN boosts efforts to tackle food insecurity



8 March - United Nations agencies are ramping up efforts to assist around 2 million Chadians who will require food aid this year because of poor rainfall and lean harvests, the world body said today.

Last November the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) had reported that Chad was one of 31 countries worldwide that are facing critical food insecurity due to a number of factors including prolonged drought, ongoing high food prices and conflict.

In its Crop Prospects and Food Situation report at the time, the agency stated that cereal production was set to decline in West Africa compared to previous years because below average rainfall forced farmers to re-plant crops in many parts of the region and led to livestock losses in several countries, among them Chad.

As part of its assistance efforts, FAO, in coordination with the Government, has put in place a project to distribute 615 tonnes of animal food. It is also planning another project to distribute seeds for 33,000 vulnerable households.

Meanwhile, the World Food Programme (WFP) has begun a scheme to provide 47,000 tons of food for 750,000 people affected by drought in the regions of Kanem, Bahr-el-Ghazal, Guera, Batha, Lac and Hadjer Lamis.

According to WFP, these regions are among the most food insecure in the country due to cyclic exposure to weather hazards, a situation further exacerbated by last year's poor agricultural production.

A joint assessment carried out in December 2009 by FAO, WFP and the Government found estimated that 80,000 tons of cereals are required to cover the needs of the affected population across Chad.

The UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) has also been involved in alleviating the plight of the hungry in Chad by allocating \$3,751,801 to the country so far this year, most of which is focused on the health and nutrition sectors.

Lack of funding hampers UN efforts to support drought-stricken Syrians

8 March - A huge shortfall in funding for life-saving emergency assistance to a drought-stricken region of Syria has forced the humanitarian arm of the United Nations to review its response plan for the population suffering under the three-year dry spell, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) warned today.

The ongoing drought in north-eastern Syria has devastated the livelihoods of more than 1 million people, driving hundreds of thousands to urban areas where they face extremely difficult living conditions, according to OCHA.

To date, UN assistance has centred on providing a food aid and agricultural packages to farmers and herders in a bid to keep them on their land and re-start agricultural work, particularly with the promise of rainfall during the winter months.

However, with the \$43.6 million drought response plan – prepared to complement Government efforts already in place – receiving less than 30 per cent of its funding by the end of February, the UN country team's efforts to assist those in need have been severely restricted.

In January, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Catherine Bragg met in Cairo, Egypt, with representatives of the League of Arab States. She encouraged the group to take a "proactive role in promoting international humanitarian



Up to 60 percent of Syria's land and over one million people are affected by drought

coordination and funding for the various humanitarian appeals and response plans in the region.”

As well as the Syrian drought response plan, there are appeals for Afghanistan (\$871 million), the occupied Palestinian territory (\$664 million) and Yemen (\$177 million), and a humanitarian action plan for Iraq (\$193 million).

UN stands with Chilean people, Ban says on visit to quake-damaged city

6 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Saturday expressed the solidarity of the United Nations with the people of Chile as they seek to recover from last week's devastating earthquake, as he visited one of the areas hit hardest by the disaster.

“The United Nations stands with the Chilean people in the difficult challenge ahead of overcoming this natural disaster,” Mr. Ban told reporters during a visit to Concepción.

“I am convinced that with your bravery and strong determination, you will rise back on your feet again to build a better future.”



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon surveys earthquake damage in Concepción, Chile

Concepción, Chile's second largest city, is located over 300 miles south of the capital, Santiago, and was among the areas that suffered the most from the 8.8-magnitude quake that struck on 27 February, killing several hundred people and affecting around 2 million.

“Words fail to describe my feelings after what I have seen,” the Secretary-General, who was accompanied by Chilean Government officials and UN colleagues on the ground, told survivors.

Among the sites Mr. Ban visited was what has been called the “zero zone,” in the downtown area of Concepción, where a new, 15-floor building collapsed on its side during the quake, trapping over 100 residents. About 40 people survived and one remains missing.

He said that, having a fuller picture of the extent of the damage and destruction caused by the earthquake, he will report to the General Assembly and will discuss with the international community how best the UN can help mobilize humanitarian assistance and assist with reconstruction.

Following his stop in Concepción, Mr. Ban flew over the coastal city of Talcahuano on his way back to Santiago. The port and naval base in Talcahuano were severely damaged by the tsunami that followed the earthquake.

Yesterday, after meeting with President Michelle Bachelet, the Secretary-General announced the release of up to \$10 million in UN funds to support the relief and recovery effort in Chile.

He also announced the creation of a joint working group between UN agencies and the Chilean Government to define the priority areas in which to allocate the funds, particularly in health, emergency shelters, education and water and sanitation.

The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) – headquartered in Santiago – and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), along with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), will coordinate the working group with the Chilean authorities.

The Secretary-General wraps up his two-day visit today after meeting with the heads of the 15 UN agencies operating in Chile.