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UN's 'life-saver' fund breaks \$2 billion barrier in backing emergency relief efforts



The earthquake in Haiti on 12 January 2010 topped the list of disasters for last year

19 May - The United Nations-managed fund set up to assist the victims of conflicts and disasters in their immediate aftermath today passed the \$2 billion milestone in the amount of money it has disbursed to humanitarian agencies.

Launched in 2006, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) has since allocated aid to crises and emergencies in at least 82 countries.

The fund was created by UN Member States to ensure that aid is available within hours of a crisis or emergency forming and to also support aid agencies operating in countries where emergencies have been under-funded.

“CERF is a proven life-saver,” said Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as he welcomed the surpassing of the \$2 billion mark. “When people are hit by disaster, there is no time to lose.”

The fund is now the UN's sixth largest source of revenue for humanitarian appeals, and allocates an average of \$400 million each year, drawing on donations from 122 countries as well as the private sector.

Last year alone the fund is credited with helping more than 22 million people in 45 countries, including victims of the devastating earthquake in Haiti, the widespread floods in Pakistan and ongoing tensions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).



More recently, it has disbursed \$10 million to Côte d'Ivoire since it was engulfed by fighting and humanitarian suffering in the wake of disputed presidential election results.

In Zimbabwe, nearly \$5 million has been allocated to previously under-funded UN efforts to tackle acute malnutrition, drought and cholera.

UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos said the fund has enabled UN agencies to react more quickly and comprehensively to crises than in the past.

"There can be no doubt: CERF saves lives," she said, lauding Member States for the \$2.3 billion in commitments so far.

Sixteen countries pledge support for UN initiative to reduce maternal mortality



Goal 5 of the MDGs: improve maternal health

19 May - Sixteen countries have announced concrete commitments aimed at drastically reducing current levels of maternal, newborn and child mortality, the United Nations reported today.

The commitments, largely in the form of specific budgetary increases for maternity and natal care, and promises of increased medical coverage for mothers and children, were announced as part of the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, a \$40 billion programme that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched last year. The new commitments bring to 34 the number of countries making such public pledges, with 27 in Africa.

Mr. Ban welcomed the announcement, saying the commitments build on recent momentum towards tackling women's and children's health problems.

"Political and financial support for action on women's and children's health is reaching new and encouraging heights," he said.

Echoing those remarks, UN Population Fund (UNFPA) Executive Director Babatunde Osotimehin said the world is now "on the verge of a tipping point" in the fight against maternal and child mortality.

The new pledges were announced by Burundi, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), Comoros, Guinea, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Madagascar, Mongolia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Tajikistan, Togo, and Viet Nam.

The commitments, made with the support of THE Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, UNFPA and the World Health Organization (WHO), focus on measures proven effective in preventing deaths, such as increased contraceptive use, attended childbirth, improved access to emergency obstetric care, prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and greater childhood immunizations.

Eight countries promised specific increases in the national budgets for medical care for women and children. Others announced specific goals in increasing the coverage area and numbers for such care. At least 10 countries making new commitments promised to increase the number of midwives.

Every year, 358,000 women in the developing world aged 15-49 die of pregnancy and childbirth-related complications, 2.6 million children are stillborn, and a further 8.1 million die before their fifth birthday, including 3.3 million babies in the first month of life.

UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake and WHO Director-General Margaret Chan said the pledges will also help with efforts to try to attain the social and economic targets known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have a deadline of 2015.

Iraq: UN envoy deplores deadly bomb attacks in northern city

19 May - The top United Nations official in Iraq has strongly condemned this morning's deadly terrorist bombings that targeted police officers in the country's northern city of Kirkuk.

Media reports say at least 27 people were killed and dozens of others were injured as a result of three explosions near a police station in the city. The second explosion was apparently timed to go off as people rushed to the aid of the victims of the first bombing.



Ad Melkert

Ad Melkert, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Iraq and the head of the UN mission to the country (UNAMI), offered his condolences to the families of the victims and the people and Government of Iraq and voiced hope that the wounded will recovery.

In a press statement Mr. Melkert expressed concern at the continuing series of attacks targeting security or Government officials in Iraq.

"He urges all parties concerned to work together to expedite settlement of all pending issues that will show collective determination to promote stability and security throughout Iraq," the statement stressed.

UN Middle East envoy urges mutual trust to end 'paralysis' in peace process

19 May - The widespread calls for political change across North Africa and the Middle East will have an impact on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, a senior United Nations official said today, voicing concern that no credible initiative exists to end the impasse in talks aimed at resolving the conflict.

"The Arab-Israeli conflict will not be immune to these dramatic developments. One way or another, change will come to it too. This change must be shaped to positive ends," said Robert Serry, the UN Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, in a briefing to the Security Council.



Robert H. Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process addresses Security Council (file)

He said there is "a genuine lack of trust" between Israel and the Palestinian leadership, which has prevented the resumption of the peace talks that would lead to the two-State solution to the long-standing conflict.

"In the absence of negotiations, and amidst continued Israeli settlement expansion, the Palestinians are preparing to approach the United Nations in September to seek recognition of a Palestinian State," he said.

Mr. Serry stressed that the Israelis and Palestinians themselves, as well as the international community, "must show purpose, rather than paralysis, as we approach a critical period in the search for peace in the Middle East."

"In the absence of an initiative, it is too early to assess whether September will bring a new and more effective paradigm for resolving the conflict through negotiations, or renewed confrontation between the parties in the diplomatic arena or on the ground," he said.

Mr. Serry also briefed the Council on the recent Palestinian reconciliation accord, stressing the Secretary-General's support for unity in the framework of the positions of the Quartet – comprising the UN, European Union, Russia and the United States – and the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Arab Peace Initiative.

He acknowledged Israeli concerns about the Palestinian reconciliation accord, but counselled against reaching a hasty conclusion over the accord's merits or prospects.

“Reunification of Gaza and the West Bank is a vital goal for all interested in peace, and the process should not be undermined in its infancy.

“We must encourage the formation of a non-factional government under President [Mahmoud] Abbas, with an effective prime minister and ministers, who are able to preserve the functioning security apparatus on the ground in the West Bank, adhere to calm out of Gaza, expand the State-building agenda, oversee reconstruction in Gaza, begin the process of re-integration, and prepare for new elections,” said Mr. Serry.

He noted that calm has largely prevailed in Gaza, adding that the de facto authorities there must actively maintain the “encouraging and important calm. “Israel must show maximum restraint and ensure a conducive environment for calm.”

He noted the continuing security cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Israel in the West Bank and stressed that collaboration should continue “under any future government.”

Mr. Serry said that a successful Palestinian State-building agenda must go hand in hand with the unity process, so that “real security and economic improvements” can continue in the West Bank, and be broadened to include Gaza, and to enable elections to be held within a year.

On the blockade of Gaza, Mr. Serry said that measures of liberalization are essential to solidify the modest progress already made and empower those seeking continued calm. “A free flow of both people and construction materials for Gaza remains a central objective of the United Nations,” he said.

Mr. Serry also briefed the Council of the deadly incidents which took place on 14 May between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in Syria, Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory, as Palestinians demonstrated to mark what they call “Nakba Day,” and urged all parties to exercise restraint.

“We further note that the protests involved violations of the Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon and the disengagement line along the occupied Golan Heights, and stress the importance of the governments in the area to ensure respect for these lines,” he said.

On Lebanon, Mr. Serry told the Council that with the exception of the grave incident on 15 May, the overall situation in the area of operation of the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has remained generally stable over the past month. Israeli air violations, however, continued on an almost daily basis.

He also noted that almost four months after his nomination as Lebanon’s Prime Minister-designate, consultations between Najib Mikati and the new parliamentary majority have not led to agreement on the composition of the country’s next government.

He called for continued funding for UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which he said faces an overall deficit of almost \$65 million in its general fund. UNRWA also requires an additional \$6 million for its 2011 Summer Games activities for children in Gaza.

Sudan: UN envoy demands immediate release of staff detained in Darfur

19 May - The head of the joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID) today called for the immediate and unconditional release of two civilian members of staff arrested by Sudanese authorities.

In a meeting with staff, Ibrahim Gambari, the UN-AU Joint Representative and head of UNAMID, said the arrest of the two national staff contravened the Status of Forces Agreement between UNAMID and the Government of Sudan.



Ibrahim Gambari

The agreement states that “should the Government consider that any member of UNAMID

has committed a criminal offence, it shall promptly inform the Joint Special Representative and present to him any evidence available to it... the JSR shall conduct any necessary supplementary inquiry and then agree with the Government whether or not criminal proceedings should be instituted.”

Mr. Gambari said he has so far received no such information on the staff being held. All UN staff have functional immunity – protection from charges that might be levelled against them for activities related to their official duties.

Meanwhile, a UNAMID team in Kuma, North Darfur state, yesterday met with the town’s residents following an air strike carried out by Government forces in nearby Sukamir village. No casualties were reported, but the team was prevented from marking the sites of two unexploded ordnance for safe disposal.

In a related development, Mr. Gambari and Sudan’s Police Commissioner for North Darfur, Omar al-Amin, today inaugurated a joint security operation centre in El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur. The initiative will harmonize efforts to improve security local residents and UNAMID staff.

Mr. Gambari expressed hope that such centres will be established elsewhere in Darfur. “We feel that this spirit of cooperation will be transferred to other aspects of our work,” he said.

Elsewhere in Darfur, a team of aid workers today embarked on a field mission to Kuma Garadayat, northwest of El Fasher, in a humanitarian initiative of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and UNAMID.

The team conferred with the village leaders and assessed humanitarian needs, while distributing school items and enough veterinary drugs for more than 5,000 livestock. A Nepalese UNAMID team provided medical assistance to residents.

Arab leaders not doing enough to meet public demands for reform – Ban

19 May - Arab leaders who have faced popular uprisings in their countries this year have been too slow to make the necessary reforms and compromises to meet the demands expressed by the public, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said.

In an interview yesterday with AFP, Mr. Ban said he was troubled that many leaders in North Africa and the Middle East “have come out always too late, too little” to satisfy calls for change.

“If you look at all the situations happening across the Arab world and North Africa, there is one common desire: that is genuine freedom,” he told the news agency. “People have been oppressed under authoritarian rule for the past three or four decades. Now they believe that it is high time for rights to be respected and their aspirations to be heard.”

The Secretary-General urged leaders to listen more closely to the “aspirations and challenges” of their people, saying they should extend greater freedoms.

Mr. Ban said he had told Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on several occasions to carry out reforms and engage in meaningful dialogue with opposition groups and protesters “before it is too late.”

He added that he has also tried to meet with other regional leaders who could influence the decision-making of Mr. Assad.

Turning to Libya, where military forces supporting the regime of Muammar al-Qadhafi have been engaged in fierce fighting with opposition groups since mid-February, Mr. Ban said he was concerned that the humanitarian crisis in that country is only worsening.

He stressed that the immediate goal must be a verifiable ceasefire so that aid can reach people in need, particularly in the



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (file photo)

besieged city of Misrata.

UN to battle locusts and their appetites in Central Asia and Caucasus



Moroccan locust females laying eggs

19 May - The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) today announced a scheme to assist 10 countries across Central Asia and the Caucasus to protect up to 25 million hectares of their cultivated farmland from locusts.

The five-year programme, to be launched with the assistance of a \$1.6 million contribution from the United States, will promote preparedness, early warning and early reaction activities in Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, all of which are at risk of attack by Italian, Moroccan and migratory locusts, FAO reported.

The locusts threaten the food security of some 20 million people, the agency said.

The initiative, launched at the requests of the countries involved, also seeks to introduce new techniques for locust control using less environmentally hazardous pesticides, including bio-pesticides.

“As borders are situated across the locust traditional habitats and breeding areas, when a country is facing locust infestations, it is more than likely that at least one neighboring country faces a similar situation,” said Annie Monard, FAO Locust Officer.

The migrant pests, able to fly up to 100 kilometres a day, are extremely opportunistic, adapting quickly to changing weather patterns, including those associated with climate change.

The agency said negotiations are under way with other donor countries, such as the Russia, France and Turkey, which have indicated their willingness to support the programme.

Experienced UN official to head peacebuilding office in Central African Republic

19 May - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today announced the appointment of Margaret Vogt of Nigeria as his Special Representative and head of the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic (BINUCA).

Ms. Vogt, currently Deputy Director of the Africa I Division in the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), and a former deputy special representative in Somalia, will replace Sahle-Work Zewde at BINUCA.

During her career Ms. Vogt has also worked with the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).



Margaret Vogt, Special Representative and Head of the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic

The UN withdrew its peacekeeping operation from the Central African Republic (CAR) and Chad last year at the end of its mandate, and has since concentrated on civilian peacebuilding efforts, including promoting reconciliation, supporting the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, electoral assistance, reforming the security sector and helping efforts to restore State authority throughout the country.

The Security Council has extended the mandate of BINUCA until 31 December.

Côte d'Ivoire: UN peacekeepers receive arms collected in

Abidjan after political crisis



19 May - The United Nations peacekeeping mission in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) today announced that it has received crates of weapons and ammunition collected by French Licorne forces during patrols in the country's commercial capital, Abidjan, in the days after the end of the post-election crisis in the West African country.

Sophie Da Camara, the Director of UNOCI's Division of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), stressed the importance of the registration of the weapons to identify their model, serial number and date of manufacture, according to a UNOCI press release issued today.

"The DDR division, with the help of the Force, will collect and safeguard the weapons and ammunition, while the embargo unit will, in turn, identify the source of the weapons to ensure that they are not [acquired in contravention of the weapons embargo] and that they have not entered in Côte d'Ivoire illegally," she said.

According to Jérôme Millot, the Joint Post Commander of the Force Licorne, more than 100 weapons of various models and boxes of ammunition of different calibres were collected during patrols in the suburbs of Abidjan.

The refusal by former president Laurent Gbagbo to stand down after he lost the UN-certified run-off poll in November plunged the West African country into four months of violence, with his troops pitted against forces loyal to Alassane Ouattara, the internationally recognized President. Mr. Gbagbo surrendered last month and was taken into custody.

UNESCO condemns murder of magazine editor in Dagestan, Russia



19 May - The head of the United Nations agency charged with promoting press freedom today deplored the murder in Dagestan, Russia, of the editor of an Avar-language magazine.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), citing information from the non-governmental organization (NGO) Reporters Without Borders, said the editor Yakhya Magomedov was shot four times as he left the home of his brother, a police officer, near the northern city of Khasavyurt.

Mr. Magomedov was the editor of Avar-language version of As-Salam, which is also published in Russian and six Caucasian languages and distributed by volunteers. The magazine covers Islamic beliefs and practices.

"The news of Yakhya Magomedov's killing is troubling," said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. "The death of a journalist in violent and unexplained circumstances is always a setback for freedom of expression and freedom of the press. I deplore this killing and call on the authorities to investigate this murder and bring those responsible for it to justice."

Migrants underwrite development through their remittances – Ban



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addresses the General Assembly (file photo)

19 May - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today underlined the role of migrants in accelerating development through remitting funds regularly to their countries of origin, noting that their economic contributions to host societies are often overlooked.

“Let us not forget, entire communities subsist almost entirely on remittances,” Mr. Ban told the General Assembly’s thematic debate on Migration and Development.

“Across the developing world, remittances make it possible for families to get health care... send their children to school... and start up small businesses. Remittances underwrite development. They are a source for stability and social cohesion,” said the Secretary-General.

He observed that without the support of relatives working abroad, many more people might seek to migrate.

Mr. Ban said that migrants do not always fit into the stereotype of an unskilled group of people with low levels of education doing the so-called “3D” jobs – tasks that are considered “dirty, dangerous and difficult.”

“To the contrary, in many countries they are the best and the brightest: doctors, nurses, engineers and other highly educated professionals. These are a welcome addition to any society,” said Mr. Ban. “It is easy to see the negatives but it is much more difficult to appreciate the positives. And yet those positives ultimately overshadow the negatives,” he added.

Nearly two thirds of the world’s 214 million migrants live in wealthy countries, sending homes more than \$300 billion in remittances every year, an amount that dwarfs international aid flows, the Secretary-General noted, reiterating his call to governments to keep their countries’ borders open and not to restrict migration unduly.

He condemned what he described as a growing business in human trafficking, especially the trade in women and children for sex.

“The global economic crisis has compounded all these problems. Increasingly, we see extremist politicians targeting migrants and migration to deflect attention from national problems. This creates more discrimination... more fear... and more problems,” said Mr. Ban. “We have to fight these trends with reason and common sense.”

He stressed the importance of the Global Forum on Migration and Development and called for better and more regular funding of the body, noting that a country was urgently required to volunteer to chair the Forum next year.

Looking ahead to the 2013 United Nations High-level Dialogue on Migration, Mr. Ban said the gathering will be an important opportunity to improve global cooperation.

UN expert lauds UK limits on vulture funds that prey on poor nations' debt



Cephas Lumina, UN expert on foreign debt and human rights

19 May - A United Nations human rights expert today welcomed the United Kingdom's decision to limit lawsuits from so-called vulture funds that prey on the debts of the world's poorest nations, and asked that the initiative be extended to cover the country's overseas territories and dependencies.

The United Kingdom on Monday adopted legislation to make permanent a temporary Debt Relief Act that limits lawsuits by funds which acquire defaulted sovereign debt at discounted prices and then seek repayment of the debt's full value through litigation, seizure of assets or political pressure.

Cephas Lumina, the Independent Expert on foreign debt and human rights, welcomed the initiative that he said would "further limit the ability of unscrupulous creditors... to use UK courts to recover extortionate amounts from poor countries engaged in international debt relief efforts."

"However, the Act has not yet been extended to cover all UK overseas territories and dependencies, and vulture funds are still allowed to operate in UK territories like Jersey, where such unscrupulous funds are currently suing the Democratic Republic of Congo for \$100 million."

Vulture fund activity, he said, "erodes the gains from international debt relief efforts at the expense of both the citizens of distressed debtor countries and the taxpayers of countries that have supported international debt relief efforts."

Dr. Lumina called upon the international community to "follow the example of the UK and enact legislation to prevent vulture fund activity within their jurisdiction as a clear indication of their commitment to find a durable solution to the debt problem."

He added: "The enactment of similar legislation in other countries will ensure that the billions of dollars committed to debt relief for the world's poorest countries will not be diverted to satisfy the greed of unscrupulous companies."

In a previous analysis, Dr. Lumina said that "debt relief provides heavily indebted poor countries fiscal space to increase spending on basic social services such as health and education, thus promoting the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)."

The funds often target governments that have received international debt relief. The World Bank reported in 2008 that 54 lawsuits had been instituted by commercial creditors against 12 so-called heavily indebted poor countries over the previous decade.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called for greater investment reform and international cooperation to ensure that vulnerable countries are not burdened by "onerous conditions or burdensome external debt."

Dr. Lumina, who serves in an unpaid and independent capacity, reports to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

UN urges governments to recommit to protecting refugees and stateless people

19 May - As the 60th anniversary of the landmark global pact on the status of refugees approaches, the United Nations refugee agency is urging States to make new commitments to protecting the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees and find ways of addressing displacement as a result of non-traditional causes.

This year the UN is marking the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as well as the 50th Anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.



A group of refugees from Côte d'Ivoire waiting to be registered in eastern Liberia

Erika Feller, Assistant High Commissioner on Protection in the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told reporters in New York today that new causes of displacement are emerging, including some driven by climate change, even as governments increasingly ignore the conventions obliging them to protect the rights of refugees, asylum-seekers and those considered stateless.

She said States should come together to consider “what level of protection is due to people displaced by other factors.”

Detention of refugees is on the rise due to fear of terrorism and trans-national crime, Ms. Feller said. “In many cases criminals have more rights than refugees,” she said, adding that governments were spending money to trample the rights of refugees by confining them in detention facilities.

UNHCR was created in December 1950 by the General Assembly. Its original purpose was to address the post-World War II refugee situation in Europe, but its work quickly expanded.

Ms. Feller highlighted the problem of statelessness, noting that stateless people remained “underappreciated” and denied the right to education, travel and even decent burial because they lack identity. “They live in the legal shadow in States where they live,” Ms. Fuller said.

UNHCR will use the forthcoming anniversary to advocate for the strengthening of the international legal framework for dealing with the world’s statelessness and displaced, including lobbying States for increased accession to the key refugee and statelessness conventions.

According to UNHCR, only 65 of the 192 UN Member States are currently State parties to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, while just 37 have acceded to or ratified the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

The marking of the 60th anniversary of the 1951 convention will culminate in early December when a ministerial conference will be held to review the conventions and invite States to make new commitments to the protection of refugees and devise an action plan to implement those obligations, according to Ms. Feller.

“Refugee protection is not a thing of the past; it is a huge challenge for the future,” she said.