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‘Leave no stone unturned’ to halt Ebola’s rapid spread in West Africa, urges UN agency

2 July - Urging health authorities in West African countries affected by the largest Ebola outbreak in history to “leave no stone unturned” in their efforts to contain the spread of the deadly virus, a United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) official today underscored the critical need to engage community, religious and opinion leaders in the region to be at the forefront of the response.

Speaking at the opening session of the two-day Emergency Ministerial meeting in Accra, Ghana, Dr. Luis Gomes Sambo, WHO Regional Director for Africa, reiterated his call for urgent, cross-border, concrete actions to bring an end to the ongoing Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa, which he said is the largest reported outbreak in terms of number of cases, deaths and geographical spread.

As of 1 July, a total of 750 cases and 455 deaths have been reported in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. “The impact of this outbreak has been enormous in terms of loss of human lives and negative socio-economic effects,” said Dr. Sambo, adding that health workers have been disproportionately affected, with over 60 cases and 32 deaths reported amongst this group.

Another disturbing marker for this West African outbreak, he warned, is that the Ebola virus is circulating in both urban and rural communities. “The current trend of this epidemic and the potential of cross-border and international spread constitute a public health matter of grave concern,” he declared.

Urging health ministers of the affected countries to “leave no stone unturned” in their efforts to contain the outbreak, Dr. Sambo said: “Your leadership is critical in ensuring that preventive and containment measures are effectively implemented in your countries. To this end, I would like to stress the need to redeploy human resources and reallocate funds to facilitate operations in affected communities.”
WHO notes that cultural practices and traditional beliefs which are contrary to recommended public health preventive measures are contributing “to a great extent” to the continued spread of the virus in the three affected countries.

One example is traditional funerals involving ritual washing and close contact with the dead person. In addition, the extensive movement of people across borders has facilitated rapid spread of the virus across and within the three countries.

“The current Ebola outbreak has the potential to spread outside the affected countries and beyond the region if urgent and relevant containing measures are not put in place,” said Dr. Sambo, calling for improved communication between the Governments, partners and communities to generate reliable evidence for implementation of effective and relevant actions.

Addressing the delegates, Dr. Sherry Aryeetey, the Minister of Health of Ghana said, “We are here to make a real difference, a difference that will be felt beyond this room for millions of people in dire need for solutions. We have a small window of opportunity to prevent the outbreak of Ebola from spreading further.”

Dr. Sambo said that the meeting is expected to agree on “a single inter-country strategy, which will galvanize key actors, bring together expertise and mobilize resources for accelerated actions to combat the epidemic.”

Health ministers from 11 West African countries, high ranking health officials and international partners are attending the two-day meeting, which aims to agree on the best way to interrupt the transmission of the Ebola virus to reduce the socio-economic impact of the disease and prevent future outbreaks.

The Ebola virus first struck human beings in 1976 in Yambuku, a village in the Democratic Republic of Congo, along the river Ebola. Since then, more than 20 Ebola outbreaks have occurred mainly in East and Central African countries.

In March 2014, Guinea notified WHO about cases of Ebola, which were initially confined to rural Guinea with the epicentre being Gueckedou. What started as a rural outbreak has now spread to Conakry, the capital of Guinea, as well as across borders into Sierra Leone and Liberia.

**Iraq: UN officials voice concern about humanitarian situation, abuse of women, girls**

2 July - Amid reports of deliberate targeting of women and girls in Iraq, senior United Nations officials today voiced deep concern about the deteriorating humanitarian and security situations in the country, where more than 1.2 million people have fled their homes in fear for their lives.

“As the security situation continues to worsen, I am extremely worried about the families urgently in need of water, food, shelter, healthcare, sanitation and protection from violence,” said Valerie Amos, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator.

That includes targeting of women and children, who have reportedly been kidnapped, raped and forcibly married to militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) and other armed groups.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, expressed deep concern yesterday following the reported suicides of some women who had been raped, and of men who had been forced to watch the rape of their wives and daughters.

“UN Women strongly condemns sexual and gender-based violence, and calls on all parties to address such reports and protect the rights of Iraqi women and girls,” she said.

Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka said such targeting is “a grave violation of human rights” and warned against the risk of growing extremism to women’s rights in the region and worldwide.
An estimated 20,000 women and girls in Iraq are at an increased risk of sexual violence as a result of the mounting crisis in the north and west, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) said earlier this week.

The agency also noted since this latest violence erupted three weeks ago in northern Iraq, of the approximately one million people displaced by the crisis, some 250,000 women and girls – including nearly 60,000 pregnant women – are in need of urgent health care.

In total, more than 2.2 million people are now displaced in Iraq, including one million people already seeking refuge in Iraq as a result of the Syrian conflict and previous conflicts.

The bulk of them have fled to the autonomous Kurdish region, where UN agencies are doing their best to support the humanitarian response despite continued finding and ongoing security constraints, Ms. Amos said, adding: “But we have struggled to raise the funds required.”

To that end, she echoed UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s gratitude to the Government of Saudi Arabia, which yesterday donated $500 million towards the humanitarian effort.

More than 2,417 Iraqis were killed last month and another 2,287 were injured in acts of terrorism and violence, according to the UN Assistance Mission in the country (UNAMI) human rights team.

Mr. Ban and senior UN officials have called for the immediate formation of an inclusive Government in the country and for all sides to take immediate steps to protect civilians.

UN officials deplore murder of Palestinian boy in Jerusalem

2 July - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process have both condemned the murder of a Palestinian teenager in Jerusalem, and called on both Israelis and Palestinians to refrain from exacerbating an already tense situation.

Mohammed Abu Khdair, 17, was reportedly seen being forced into a car early on Wednesday. Media reports say his partly burnt body was found in a forest on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The killing comes in the wake of the recent murder of three Israeli teenagers, which had been widely condemned by the UN.

Mr. Ban, in a statement issued by his spokesperson, described the murder of the Palestinian teenager as a “despicable act” and called for the perpetrators to be promptly brought to justice.

“The Secretary-General reiterates his call on all parties to ensure that tensions do not escalate further, leading to more loss of life,” the statement added.

UN Special Coordinator Robert Serry also called for the perpetrators of such “heinous acts” to be brought to justice. “There can be no justification for the deliberate killing of civilians – any civilians,” he said in a statement issued in Jerusalem.

Mr. Serry repeated his call on all sides to do everything they can to not to further exacerbate an already tense atmosphere.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) also strongly condemned the killing of the Palestinian boy, as well as the recent murder of the three Israeli teenagers.

“At the same time, we urge maximum restraint from all parties to prevent the situation from deteriorating further,” UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness said in a statement. “We call for strict compliance with international law by all relevant actors to avoid further loss of life, injuries and suffering.”

Recalling that collective punishment is illegal under international law, UNRWA called on the Israeli authorities to refrain...
from punishing individuals for offences they themselves have not personally committed.

The agency stressed that the human impact on all sides caused by the events of the last three weeks is “grave.” From 13 June to 1 July, seven Palestinians have been killed, including five registered refugees, while almost 200 have been injured.

**Urgent efforts needed to avert further crises in Somalia, Yemen – UN relief officials**

2 July - Urgent action is needed to prevent a worsening of the humanitarian crises in both Somalia and Yemen, senior United Nations relief officials warned today, as they urged donors to help them step up their response as well as to consolidate the recent gains made in both countries.

In Somalia, the widespread food security crisis is set to deteriorate over the second half of the year, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). More than one million people are internally displaced and 875,000 people need urgent life-saving food assistance.

“Failure to act decisively to address humanitarian needs will not only lead to another humanitarian crisis but will also undermine the peace and State-building gains of the last two years, jeopardizing this rare window for Somalia to graduate from failed-State status,” said OCHA’s Director of Operations, John Ging.

“All the signs we saw before 2011’s severe famine are here – reduced humanitarian access, insecurity, increasing food prices, delayed rains and rapidly worsening malnutrition among children. It is vital that we act now to avert another disaster.”

Mr. Ging was part of a group of emergency directors from UN humanitarian agencies and partner organizations that visited Somalia and Yemen last week.

Briefing reporters in New York on the visits, he noted that underfunding was a critical concern for the humanitarian response. For example, the $933 million humanitarian appeal for Somalia is only 25 per cent funded.

Children are among those most in need, Ted Chaiban, Director of Emergency Programmes for the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), told the briefing, pointing out that there are 200,000 children in Somalia who are severely malnourished.

“The protocol, the systems to treat those children are available, as is the access to a significant extent, but the resources are not there. So it’s very important that we do everything to arrest any further deterioration of the situation from a humanitarian standpoint,” he stressed.

In Yemen, Mr. Chaiban noted, the sheer numbers of children suffering from life-threatening or debilitating forms of malnutrition are even greater due to chronic underdevelopment and persistent insecurity.

“One in five Yemeni children is underweight, 58 per cent are stunted. After Afghanistan, Yemen has the second highest level of chronic malnutrition,” he said, adding that other protection concerns include keeping children in school, as well as reducing child marriage and child labour.

Overall, there are 14.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Yemen – or 58 per cent of the population; 10.5 million of them are food insecure; and there are 320,000 registered internally displaced persons. The country is also plagued by ongoing instability, lacks basic social services and is on “the brink of economic collapse,” warned the two officials.

“This is one of the largest humanitarian challenges in terms of scale and scope that we face in the world. It is extremely fragile there at the moment,” said Mr. Ging.
“The humanitarian response is not the solution for Yemen. Yet, the humanitarian component of the international intervention is the one that’s having to pick up the pieces most immediately.”

Adding to the country’s woes, said Mr. Ging, is the “curse of khat,” a drug that is undermining health as well as the economy and development of Yemen. He stressed the need for a plan to address this scourge, noting that 70 per cent of the water resources are estimated to be used for the growing of this drug.

Despite the constraints, he went on to highlight the important humanitarian work that is being carried out in Yemen. One million people are in receipt of food assistance; 300,000 people have received nutritional support; 200,000 have benefited from water and sanitation support; 1.5 million are receiving health care support; and 400,000 vulnerable and conflict-affected people are receiving protection services.

At the same time, he warned that underfunding is jeopardizing the capacity to respond, noting that the $529 million humanitarian appeal for Yemen is only 33 per cent funded.

“Despite the extremely challenging conditions in both Somalia and Yemen, we saw at first hand the excellent, life-saving work that our humanitarian partners are able to do when funding is available, putting their own lives in danger to reach those who need assistance most,” Mr. Ging said.

“I urge donors to help us build on the gains made in both countries. If we fail to act now setbacks are inevitable, which could have repercussions well beyond Somalia and Yemen.”

UN expert panel urges collective action to reduce global food losses, waste

Almost one-third of food produced for human consumption – approximately 1.3 billion tonnes per year – is either lost or wasted globally. Photo: FAO/Giulio Napolitano

2 July - A newly issued United Nations-backed expert panel report takes a close look at where and how food waste occurs and recommends a number of actions that could help reduce the 1.3 billion tonnes of food that are squandered worldwide each year.

Recently, global food losses and waste has become a high visibility issue and according to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), “globally around one-third of food produced is lost or wasted along the food chain, from production to consumption.”

Food loss and waste not only impacts food security and nutrition but also the sustainability of food systems – that ensure sufficient, quality food for this and future generations, says the new report.

“FLW [food loss and waste] are consequences of the way food systems function, technically, culturally and economically,” explains the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in its report, Food Losses and waste in the context of sustainable food systems, which will see its official launch tomorrow at FAO headquarters in Rome.

Adopting a systemic perspective, the report analyzes FLW impacts on the sustainability of food systems, security and nutrition by reviewing the wide range of causes.

“Reducing food losses and waste are essential to improving food security and diminishing the environmental footprint of food systems,” the report affirms.

It also provides action-oriented recommendations for Governments, companies and individuals to tackle the problem, includes numerous examples and proposes a “way forward” for actors to build strategies to reduce FLW in diverse contexts and situations.

According to the report, “all stakeholders should improve communication, coordination and recognition of efforts needed/made at one stage to reduce FLW at another (downstream or upstream).”
The Committee on Food Security (CFS) is the top international and intergovernmental platform for discussions and agenda-setting on issues related to global food security. Its membership includes Governments, UN agencies and other UN bodies, civil society and non-governmental organizations, research institutions, financial institutions and development banks, private sector associations and philanthropic foundations.

The High-Level Panel of Experts is an independent scientific panel that provides the CFS with scientific, knowledge-based analysis and advice on food security and nutrition policy issues.

`Death penalty has no place in 21st century,’ declares UN chief

2 July - The death penalty has no place in the 21st century, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared today, calling on all States take concrete steps towards abolishing or no longer practicing this form of punishment.

“Together, we can finally end this cruel and inhumane practice everywhere around the world,” said Mr. Ban in opening remarks to the special event “Best practices and challenges in implementing a moratorium on the death penalty,” co-organized at UN Headquarters by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Permanent Mission of Italy to the UN.

The special event is being held, according to a concept note on the proceedings, “in the spirit” of the aims of the annual resolution of the UN General Assembly on “Moratorium on the use of the death penalty” first adopted in 2007. That broad and inclusive text does not impose the abolition of the death penalty but rather proposes a moratorium on executions – de jure or de facto – with a view to abolishing the death penalty in the future.

At today’s event, which was moderated by Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Šimonovic, Mr. Ban noted that the Assembly will soon take up the resolution again. The efforts generated by the text have won a progressively broader margin of support from Member States, representing a variety of legal systems, traditions, cultures and religious backgrounds.

“[Yet], I remain very concerned, however, about shortcomings with respect to international human rights standards in countries that still apply the death penalty,” he said, adding that he is particularly troubled by the application of the death penalty for offences that do not meet the threshold under international human rights law of ‘most serious crimes,’ including drug-related offences, consensual sexual acts and apostasy.

The UN chief went on to express concern about legislation in 14 States that permits the death penalty on children as well as the new phenomenon of sentencing large groups of individuals to death in mass trials.

Against such a backdrop, he said that over the past two years, OHCHR has convened a series of important global panel events on the death penalty, focusing on wrongful convictions, deterrence and public opinion, and discrimination. Specifically, discriminatory practices in the imposition of the death penalty further reinforce the calls for its universal abolition.

Looking ahead to the next session of the General Assembly, he therefore called on all States to take action in three critical areas: ratify the Second Optional Protocol of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming at the abolition of the death penalty; support the resolution on the moratorium on the use of the death penalty; and take concrete steps towards abolishing or no longer practicing this form of punishment.
Fresh fighting sends more than 75,000 Pakistanis fleeing into Afghanistan – UN agency

2 July - The ongoing Pakistani military offensive against militants in the North Waziristan tribal region has forced more than 75,000 people to flee their homes in the past two weeks, seeking shelter in neighbouring Afghanistan, the United Nations refugee agency said today.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO) and other partners are working to coordinate relief efforts and deliver assistance, providing tents and other basic relief items to the most vulnerable.

“However, sanitation, clean drinking water and medical care are in short supply, and although local communities have generously welcomed the displaced, already scarce resources are now reaching capacity,” said UNHCR.

The agency stressed that humanitarian assistance is urgently needed to support the host communities in both Khost and Paktika provinces in sustaining the level of assistance they have been providing to displaced families.

UNHCR’s Country Representative in Afghanistan, Bo Schack, and UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan, Mark Bowden, visited the eastern province of Khost today along with Afghan Government officials to see first-hand the situation of thousands of Pakistanis who have arrived after fleeing the fighting in their homeland.

Since the cross-border movement began in mid-June, a number of UN agencies and their humanitarian partners have provided food and non-food items, vaccinated thousands of children against polio and measles and pre-positioned life-saving medicines for 10,000 patients, among a range of other relief activities.

“The agencies operating on the ground in Khost and Paktika provinces are launching an appeal to donors to support urgent and life-saving interventions,” said UNHCR.

“Overall, agencies will be requesting approximately $20 million for six months to deliver emergency and life-saving assistance to 10,000 families in Khost and 3,000 families in Paktika.”

In addition to those who have fled across the border, the Pakistani Government estimates that the latest fighting has left some 470,000 people internally displaced.

Ban announces review of probes related to UN-African Union Darfur peacekeepers

2 July - Concerned by recent allegations against the United Nations-African Union peacekeeping force in Sudan’s Darfur region, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called for a review of related investigations and reviews over the last two years to determine what, if any, corrective action needs to be taken.

A statement from his spokesperson said Mr. Ban has instructed the UN Secretariat to review the reports of all investigations and inquiries related to the hybrid operations, known as UNAMID, undertaken since mid-2012 to ensure that the recommendations have been implemented and that any relevant issues have been fully addressed. The review is to be completed within one month.

“The Secretary-General remains committed to improving UNAMID’s performance and is determined to take all necessary steps to correct any wrongdoing,” the spokesperson said.
UNAMID has undergone several investigations and reviews, according to the spokesperson, which have sought to address both strategic issues and specific incidents related to its performance.

In his special report to the UN Security Council on 25 February, Mr. Ban wrote that “there is a strong need and much potential for UNAMID to improve across the full spectrum of its work if the key challenges to mandate implementation are addressed.”

The statement issued today said the report provides an overview of the strategic and managerial challenges faced by the Mission, and the UN work being done to address them.

The recent allegations against the Mission, which Mr. Ban calls “serious,” cover a wide range of issues, including inaccurate reporting of the facts on the ground in Darfur, specific instances of failure to protect civilians and accusations of mismanagement in the Mission, according to the statement.

In June, during her briefing to the Security Council, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Fatou Bensouda drew the Council’s attention to allegations that UNAMID’s report had been subject to manipulation, with the intentional effect of covering up crimes committed by the Sudanese Government.

Those allegations call for “thorough, independent and public enquiry,” Ms. Bensouda said, noting that while the responsibility for this manipulation may lie with a handful of individuals, it impugns the credibility of the Mission as a whole and deprives advocates of peace and justice of an essential tool for evaluating the ever evolving situation in Darfur.

UNAMID, formally established in 2007, has been mandated to protect civilians, contribute to humanitarian assistance, monitor and verify implementation of agreements, contribute to the promotion of human rights and the rule of law, and assist in the political reconciliation following the 2003 civil war between the Government of Sudan and militias and other armed rebel groups.

**Sri Lanka must do more to rein in hate speech, faith-based violence – UN rights experts**

2 July - Aiming to stem the tide of violent attacks and recrimination against Sri Lanka’s Muslim and Christian communities, a group of United Nations human rights experts called today on the Government to adopt urgent measures to stop the promotion of racial and faith-based hatred and end “the atmosphere of impunity” fuelling hate speech and violence by Buddhist extremists.

Among other incidents, the UN independent experts – respectively monitoring freedom of religion, minority issues and summary executions – expressed serious concern about violence against Muslim and Christian communities by Buddhist groups with extremist views, and urged the Sri Lankan authorities to bring perpetrators of such violence to justice.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), more than 350 violent attacks against Muslims and over 150 attacks against Christians have been reported in Sri Lanka in the last two years. Muslim and Christian communities are reportedly subjected to hate speech, discrimination, attacks and acts of violence throughout Sri Lanka frequently.

On 15 June, a local group promoting extremist Sinhalese nationalist views, Bodu Bala Sena (The Buddhist Power Force, or “BBS”), staged a large protest rally in Aluthgama that resulted in inter-communal violence, during which four people died and about 80 were injured. Homes and shops owned by Muslims, as well as mosques, were vandalized and some set ablaze.

“This violence is fuelled by the atmosphere of impunity in Sri Lanka,” the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, said. “Impunity and inadequate response from the police and judicial authorities aimed at protecting the lives, physical security, the property and places of worship of these communities may encourage further attacks and a risk of spiralling violence.”
Against such a backdrop, he urged Sri Lanka to guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief of members of minority religious communities and stop any advocacy of racial and religious hatred.

“The Government must end the violence and put in place urgent protective measures to ensure the personal security of all individuals belonging to religious minority communities living in the country,” the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Rita Izsák, added.

“The full range of rights of religious minorities must be guaranteed in law and protected in practice,” she noted, welcoming the President’s announcement of the appointment of a high-level panel to investigate those incidents.

For his part, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Christof Heyns, called on the Sri Lankan authorities “to take urgent and firm measures to bring the perpetrators of killings to justice, and ensure the immediate adoption of robust protective measures.”

Continuing, he said that showing determination to ensure accountability in such cases must be a key element of the Government’s efforts to prevent the attacks and guarantee the safety of the members of religious minority communities.

OHCHR said that alongside BBS, other groups promoting extremist views in Sri Lanka, such as the Sinhala Ravaya and the Hela Bodu Powura, purport to be the protectors of Sinhala Buddhism, which they claim is being threatened by Muslim and Christian religious minorities.

These extremist groups reportedly proclaim the racial superiority of Sinhala Buddhists and spread fear among local population, for example, through allegations that Buddha statues are being bulldozed by religious minorities, or that evangelical Christians are forcibly converting youths and sick patients in their hospital beds, or that Muslims are smuggling drugs and birth control pills in order to destroy Sinhalese people and prevent their reproduction.

“These statements contribute to spread a climate of fear among Sinhala Buddhists, who constitute the majority population in Sri Lanka, and resentment towards minorities,” the UN human rights experts said.