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Ban urges maximum restraint amid ‘dangerous escalation of violence’ in Gaza

8 July - With militants in the Gaza Strip stepping up rocket attacks against Israel, and Israeli airstrikes on the enclave intensifying, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today said that he is ‘extremely concerned’ by the escalating violence, and reiterated his call on all actors to exercise maximum restraint and avoid further civilian casualties and overall destabilization.

“The Secretary-General condemns the recent multiple rocket attacks on Israel from Gaza. These indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas must stop,” said a statement issued by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson in New York.

Israeli-Palestinian violence has flared in the wake of the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank in late June and the subsequent kidnapping and killing of a Palestinian teenager from East Jerusalem last week.

“The Secretary-General is extremely concerned at the dangerous escalation of violence, which has already resulted in multiple Palestinian deaths and injuries as a result of Israeli operations against Gaza,” said today’s statement.

Mr. Ban reiterated his call on all actors to exercise maximum restraint and avoid further civilian casualties and overall destabilization, and added: “It is imperative now to restore calm. The unsustainable situation in Gaza will also need to be addressed in its political, security, humanitarian and development dimensions as part of a comprehensive solution.”
On independence anniversary, Ban calls for end to ‘man-made crisis’ in South Sudan

8 July - On the occasion of the third anniversary of South Sudan’s independence, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is calling on the country’s leaders to live up to the expectations of their people, lay down their arms and return immediately to negotiations to end the ongoing crisis.

In a statement issued today by his spokesperson, Mr. Ban recalled the hopes and expectations of the people of South Sudan when their country was established on 9 July 2011, following a UN-supported referendum.

Those hopes were dashed by the conflict that broke out in December 2013, according to the statement, which points out that thousands of South Sudanese have been killed, and atrocities have been committed against civilians.

In mid-December 2013, political infighting between President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar turned into a full-fledged conflict that has since then uprooted some 1.5 million people and placed more than 7 million at risk of hunger and disease.

The conflict also sent nearly 100,000 civilians fleeing to UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) bases around the country, leading the Mission to take the unprecedented decision to open its doors to those seeking protection.

“The South Sudanese people are bearing the brunt of the failure to stop the fighting,” today’s statement noted. “They are living in squalor, their livelihoods have been lost and they are plagued by hunger, disease and insecurity...

“The Secretary-General reminds the leaders of South Sudan that this is a man-made crisis. It is their responsibility and within their power to stop it. He calls on them to live up to the expectations of their people, lay down their arms and return immediately to the negotiation table.”

In the South Sudanese capital, Juba, the outgoing UN envoy told reporters prior to departing the country that the losses brought on by the crisis have been “heart-breaking.”

“The country has now been set back decades,” the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of UNMISS, said on her last day. “The terrible destruction of towns and property is one thing, but the divisions and wounds are deeper than ever. The gulf between communities is abysmal, and the animosity is worse than we have ever seen at any point in South Sudanese history…

“As the people of South Sudan prepare to celebrate the third anniversary of their nation’s independence tomorrow, they see a country that is now at grave risk, not only of fighting, but also of failing.”

Meanwhile, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) are stepping up joint missions to reach desperate people in remote areas of South Sudan where the number of children at risk of death from malnutrition-related causes has increased dramatically and a hunger catastrophe is looming.

An estimated 235,000 children under the age of 5 will require treatment for acute malnutrition this year – twice as many as last year, the agencies said in a joint news release. The situation is most dire in Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile states where data indicates as much as 60 to 75 per cent of the population is severely food-insecure.

“Many people driven from their homes have to walk for days with nothing to eat before they reach towns like the state capital of Bentiu in the hope of finding assistance. Some of them, particularly children, arrive so badly malnourished there is nothing that can be done to save them,” said Jonathan Veitch, UNICEF Representative in South Sudan.

“We must reach the remote populations with essential supplies and services to spare them that perilous journey.”
UN widens its same-sex marriage policy to include all legally-married staff

8 July - The United Nations is changing how it categorizes staff personal status, allowing more same-sex couples access to the same benefits enjoyed by their heterosexual counterparts.

According to a major policy change, in effect since 26 June, the UN will honour the marriage of any same-sex couple wed in a country where same-sex marriages are legal. Previously, a staff member’s personal status was determined by the laws of the country whose passport he or she carried.

“Human rights are at the core of the mission of the United Nations,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said yesterday through a spokesperson. He added that he is “proud to stand for greater equality for all staff,” and called “on all members of the UN family to unite in rejecting homophobia.”

Mr. Ban did not consult UN Member States about the policy change.

“The Secretary-General acted on his own authority as the head of the management of the United Nations. This was a managerial decision affecting UN staff,” said the spokesperson.

The UN chief has been an outspoken supporter of decriminalizing consensual same-sex relationships, and tackling violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

“Human rights are for everyone, no matter who you are or whom you love,” he said in an opinion piece in May on LinkedIn. “As Secretary-General of the UN, I believe in and strive to achieve the world promised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a world rooted in tolerance, freedom and equality.”

Same-sex relationships are considered illegal in 76 countries. Meanwhile, same-sex marriages are legal in at least 16 countries with sub-national jurisdictions in at least two others, including the United States. The state of New York, where the UN is headquartered, recognizes same-sex marriage.

“Yet changes in law alone are not enough; they need to be matched by efforts to change social attitudes,” Mr. Ban noted in his op-ed.

“Equality begins at home, and I am all too aware that LGBT colleagues at the UN, and their families, continue to face challenges,” he said. “All staff members are part of the UN family and deserve to be treated equally.”

Emma Watson appointed as UN Women Goodwill Ambassador

8 July - The UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women (UN Women), today announced that it has tapped British actress Emma Watson as Goodwill Ambassador.

“We are thrilled and honoured to work with Emma, whom we believe embodies the values of UN Women” said Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

Playing the leading role of “Hermione Granger” in the Harry Potter saga, Ms. Watson has been involved with the promotion of girls’ education for several years, and previously visited Bangladesh and Zambia as part of her humanitarian efforts.

“The engagement of young people is critical for the advancement of gender equality in the 21st century and I am convinced...
that Emma’s intellect and passion will enable UN Women’s messages to reach the hearts and minds of young people globally” stressed Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka.

The role of the Goodwill Ambassador is to promote the empowerment of young women and to serve as an advocate for UN Women’s ‘HeForShe’ campaign in fostering gender equality. That campaign is a solidarity movement which bring women and men together to fight against gender inequalities faced by women and girls globally.

“Being asked to serve as UN Women’s Goodwill Ambassador is truly humbling. The chance to make a real difference is not an opportunity that everyone is given and is one I have no intention of taking lightly” said Ms. Watson.

“Women’s rights are something so inextricably linked with who I am, so deeply personal and rooted in my life that I can’t imagine an opportunity more exciting” she concluded.

**Promoting message of lasting peace, UN to mark 100 years since start of World War I**

8 July - Commemorating the 100th year anniversary of the beginning of First World War, the United Nations is holding an event at its Headquarters today remembering the devastating catastrophe of the “war to end all wars” and its seminal lessons for promoting building peace and reconciliation.

Organized by the Permanent Missions of France and Germany with the cooperation of the UN Department of Public Information, the event, “Learning from War to Build Peace”, will bring together UN Member States highlighting the importance of reconciliation through diplomacy and dialogue.

World War I, with a total number of casualties, both military and civilian, of an estimated 37 million, harshly revealed the need for just such dialogue - led by an international organization gathering all countries to ensure peace. It first led to the creation of the League of Nations and, ultimately, learning from its flaws, to the United Nations.

Today’s special event, which will begin at 6:30 p.m., will feature an address by UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon and a performance by the Grammy Award-winning Orpheus Chamber Orchestra of pieces by Samuel Barber, Ludwig van Beethoven and Maurice Ravel. The lives of these three composers were all marked by the wars of their times and their music reflects that. The event will also include readings from the diaries and letters of people who lived through the war.

**Suicide attack amidst group of children draws condemnation from UN in Afghanistan**

8 July - The top United Nations official in Afghanistan today condemned a suicide bombing in the central province of Parwan which killed at least 10 children and injured six others, warning that such indiscriminate attacks could amount to international humanitarian law violations.

An explosive-rigged bicycle reportedly detonated in the Qalandarkhail area of Bagram district, as Afghan National Police and international military forces were on foot patrol nearby.

The Taliban has claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed at least 12 civilians and six service personnel, and injured at least eight people.

“A suicide attack amongst a group of children is beyond horrific,” said the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ján Kubiš.
“I reiterate UNAMA’s [UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan] repeated calls to the Taliban to immediately ban the use of indiscriminate weapons and to cease attacks in civilian populated areas,” added Mr. Kubis, who is also the head of the Mission.

In its 2013 Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, UNAMA noted an increase of 34 per cent in the number of children killed or injured, as compared with the previous year. The Mission’s human rights team documented more than 1,750 child casualties, at least one-third of whom were killed by improvised explosive devices.

Today’s attack comes as the country is awaiting the announcement of a new president. UNAMA noted that preliminary results were announced yesterday from the 14 June run-off vote between candidates Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai.

“The Mission further notes that the results are not final and are subject to change, and that it would be premature for either of the candidates to claim victory,” it said, reiterating also its call for the candidates and their supporters to exercise restraint.

UNAMA urged the electoral institutions – the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC) – to cooperate within the framework of their mandates to conduct additional audits of polling stations in “rigorous, timely and expeditious manner,” in particular those which would provide for the investigation of ballots from more than 7,000 polling stations.

The Mission encouraged the IEC and the IECC “to demonstrate their commitment to the future of the country by taking the responsibility to fully discharge their mandates while demonstrating the utmost impartiality, transparency and responsibility.” It also urged the institutions to consider other measures that would enhance the integrity of the electoral process.

**Latest boat tragedy off Libya coast spotlights rising Mediterranean death toll – UN agency**

8 July - Search and rescue operations are ongoing for survivors following the latest boat accident in the Mediterranean, this one incident off the Libyan coast of Tripoli this past Sunday, according to the United Nations Refugee agency (UNHCR).

Twelve bodies have been found so far by the Libyan coast guard, which informed UNHCR on Monday that the dead in the latest accident included three Syrians – including the mother and her children aged three and six – three Eritrean nationals and six other Africans of as yet undetermined nationalities, UNHCR spokesman Adrian Edwards told a news briefing in Geneva.

The ship was probably carrying more people than its original capacity, which was 200 passengers, he said, adding that search and rescue operations are ongoing and the fate of others who may have been aboard is unknown.

According to UNHCR, about 217 people have drowned off the Libyan coast while trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2014. The number of asylum-seekers and refugees registered in our world today has increased, reaching almost 37,000 individuals. However, not all asylum-seekers are registered.

"Many asylum-seekers live in precarious conditions – such as over-crowded accommodations with little legal access to employment and have been affected and further displaced by the current unrest in Libya" said Mr. Edwards.

Syrians make up the largest group of refugees and asylum seekers, with approximately 18,655 displaced people, followed by the Eritreans, Somalis and Iraqis.

This year, many people have lost their lives on boat journeys near the coasts of countries such as Italy, Turkey and Greece. The number of victims in the Mediterranean so far this year has reached over 500 deaths.
For its part, UNHCR supports any governmental operations to search and rescue those individual trying to cross the Mediterranean.

"UNHCR applauds search and rescue operations by Government authorities but asks that such operations are further strengthened – particularly in areas with high concentrations of boat crossings" said Mr. Edwards.

Finally, he also urged countries worldwide to look towards providing legal alternatives to dangerous sea journeys and to limit punitive or deterrent measures for people seeking safety.

**Escalating violence in Central African Republic threatens aid delivery – UN agency**

8 July - Warning about the deteriorating situation in the Central African Republic (CAR), the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) said today that the violence there was threatening humanitarian assistance and creating major difficulties for relief workers in the field.

Speaking to reporters in Geneva, WFP spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs said the difficulties spawned by deteriorating security are only compounded by drought and lack of precipitation in parts of the country, notably in the northwest, causing yet another decline in agricultural production.

Furthermore, a lack of fuel for airplanes was hampering operations in the CAR. The United Nations air service has had to reduce its destinations to one flight by week, for all destinations. Fuel is expected to soon be brought by truck from Douala. On 6 July, 300 barrels of fuel were received by plane from Nairobi, equivalent to 600,000 litres, to maintain operations. Some 300 barrels are expected to be delivered from Douala.

Despite this, she said that in June, WFP had provided food assistance to 400,000 persons. Also in June, the agency provided school meals to 65,000 children, notably in Bangui, Bouar, Bossangoa, Paoua and Kanga-Bandoro. Nevertheless, the security situation remains volatile and hampers humanitarian aid, said Ms. Byrs.

Meanwhile, Mia Farrow, renowned actress, activist and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, has just completed her fourth visit to the CAR, where she saw the impact of extreme violence and met people with stories of inspiring courage.

"In 2007, I made the first of what would now be four visits to the Central African Republic. I must have left a part of my heart here," said Farrow, speaking from Bangui. “The courage and resilience of defenseless people facing shocking and unacceptable levels of violence is unforgettable and profoundly inspiring.”

According to UNICEF, in the town of Boda, more than four hours’ drive from the capital, she met with internally displaced Muslim families trapped in an enclave surrounded by armed groups hostile to them, who spoke of living in constant fear of attacks. At the only school still functioning in town, some 400 children were crammed into three classrooms. Parents were volunteering to teach after most of the school’s teachers fled for their lives.

In Bangui, Ms. Farrow spoke to a health worker who, for security reasons, was no longer able to get to her job at the main hospital and was instead volunteering to treat women and children in a health centre in her community.

More than 2.3 million children are suffering the consequences of the crisis rocking the country, says UNICEF. Children have been directly targeted. On average, at least one child has been maimed or killed in clashes every day in the past six months.

Malnutrition rates are high and the number of children associated with armed groups could be as high as 10,000, according to the Ministry of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration. One in three children who were enrolled in the last school year did not go back to school this year.
“We need the support of the international community to help provide security so that schools can be rebuilt and children can safely return to them,” Ms. Farrow said.

‘Time is not on our side’, says Ban, hailing new report on curbing carbon emissions

8 July - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, introducing a new United Nations-backed report outlining pathways major industrial economies can use to cut their carbon emissions by mid-century, called today for broad cooperation and “bold” action or the world will face dangerous and irreversible climate disruption.

“We know that we are not on track, and time is not on our side,” Mr. Ban warned during a Headquarters press conference to launch the Deep Decarbonization Pathway Project report, produced by leading research institutes in 15 countries, is the first global cooperative program to identify practical pathways to a low-carbon economy by 2050.

The report compiled by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, established by the UN chief in 2012, emphasizes three key pillars: energy efficiency, low-carbon electricity and fuel switching. It also outlines steps countries can take to meet internationally agreed target of limiting the increase in global mean surface temperature to less than 2 degrees Celsius.

“I expect countries to adopt different combinations according to their needs, resources and priorities. But all countries need to embark on the same journey,” said the Secretary-General, stressing that deep decarbonisation is feasible, but requires global commitment to advancing key low-carbon energy technologies.

He highlighted the importance of leaders from Governments, business, finance and civil society to come together at his climate summit in September and the Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change held three months later in Lima, Peru.

“By seeing what is possible, others can take inspiration and follow suit,” he said, adding that, media participation in getting the word out is critical, as is conducting workshops and roundtables around the world following the climate summit to foster discussions in every city and country.

“People need to understand why decarbonisation is necessary. They need to know it is possible. And they need to see that cutting emissions can benefit economics and people’s well-being,” he said.

The Project does exactly that by listening to feedback and continuing to refine its pathways, Mr. Ban said, calling it exactly the kind of problem-solving needed to tackle climate change and achieve sustainable development.

Also speaking at the press conference was Jeffrey Sachs, the Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and Laurence Tubiana, the French Ambassador for climate change.

Mr. Sachs said the report shows there is a path to climate safety and keeping global warming below 2 degrees Celsius limit “which researchers and scientists say we must respect.” What is concerning about the report is that “we are way off track and to get on track would require major cooperative efforts that are not currently in place,” he continued.

A “business as usual” path would be “an absolutely reckless and unforgivable gamble” to the planet and all people, he said. While there is an overarching responsibility for UN Member States, what each country will choose to do is different and based on history, structure, political attitudes and resources.

Ms. Tubiana called the report a “transformational milestone” for coordinated global action. “No country can afford to diverge,” she said, stressing the need for international cooperation, policy, economic signals, and sharing technology and research.

Cities must be organized to respond, she continued, emphasizing the need for a viable balance between energy conservation
and energy efficiency. It would also be important to compare national progress between countries, as this will help them better understand relative experiences.

**UN agency dismayed as Thailand deports Laotian refugee at risk of mistreatment**

8 July - The United Nations refugee agency today spoke out against the deportation of a Laotian man from Thailand back to his homeland, where he could face harsh treatment amounting to persecution.

According to information confirmed this week by the Thai authorities, the deportation of the former Lao Hmong leader took place on 13 June, the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told reporters in Geneva.

The agency is “dismayed” by Thailand’s action, Adrian Edwards said, noting that deportation goes against the principle of non-refoulement – or no forced return – enshrined in international customary law.

“This principle is binding on all States and precludes them from sending a refugee to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened,” said Mr. Edwards.

UNHCR had urged the Thai Government not to send the man back since his detention in March 2013. Given his high profile, the agency has serious concerns over the risks to him now that he has been returned to Laos.

“UNHCR appeals to the Thai authorities to uphold their responsibilities under international law and ensure full respect for the rights of people in need of international protection,” Mr. Edwards stated.

The agency noted that Thailand continues to generously host more than 128,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, the vast majority of them living in nine temporary shelters/camps along the border with Myanmar.

**West Africa: UN envoy cites region’s daunting challenges, Boko Haram threat to Nigeria**

8 July - While countries in West Africa are trying to promote development and consolidate democracy, they continue to face daunting challenges such as transnational organized crime and growing terrorist activities, the top United Nations official in the region told the Security Council today, while also warning of the increasing threat the Boko Haram crisis poses to Nigeria.

Said Djinnit, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for West Africa, added that the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA), which he heads, has been trying to sensitize regional leaders to the need for “decisive concerted efforts” to fight these threats to regional security and stability.

Of great concern, he said as he presented the Secretary-General’s latest report on developments in the region, is the potential for recruitment of unemployed youth by organised criminal networks in the region.

“It is essential that West African countries close ranks and establish effective strategic and operational cooperation mechanisms to address this threat which runs the risk of destabilising the whole Sahara-Sahel region from the Atlantic to the Indian oceans,” he stated. “Their efforts should be strongly backed by the rest of the international community and the United Nations.”
Next year will be a crucial one on the democratic front, Mr. Djinnit noted, pointing out that no less than five crucial elections will be organized in 2015, including in Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger and Nigeria.

These polls, he added, will be held often in “highly polarised societies and within a context of deep political divides and controversies related to ongoing or potential initiatives to amend constitutional provisions related to presidential term limits.”

UNOWA will continue to work closely with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and other stakeholders to assist in efforts to prevent political differences from developing into violent crises and in providing electoral assistance towards consolidating democracy in the region, the envoy said.

“Indeed, in view of the prevailing fragility in the region, every effort should be made to ensure that democracy and stability are pursued with equal commitment, as they are mutually reinforcing.”

In addition to these challenges, the West African region is also currently struggling to respond to a deadly pandemic caused by the Ebola virus. The outbreak identified in February in the south-eastern region of Guinea has rapidly spread to Liberia and Sierra Leone.

“While significant progress in efforts to contain the outbreak of the disease has been recorded, a relapse has been noted in the last few weeks, with the risk of further spread within the region,” Mr. Djinnit reported.

According to the UN World Health Organization (WHO), there have been at least 759 infections and 467 deaths related to the disease since February.

“It is important that the international community pays due attention and support to this epidemic which is adding to many other challenges to stability in the region,” the envoy stressed.

In the context of the growing insecurity in the Sahel, Mr. Djinnit said the situation in Nigeria remains of “great concern.” Despite efforts by the Nigerian Government, the school girls abducted by the insurgent group Boko Haram from Chibok in April remain in captivity.

While efforts to obtain their safe release are ongoing, he said the level of violence against civilians in Nigeria continues to escalate, resulting in significant displacement in the north of the country.

“It is disheartening to note that within the last two weeks at least 18 attacks attributed to Boko Haram have been conducted, resulting in the tragic deaths of innocent civilians and displacement of peoples. The Boko Haram crisis is now affecting security in the sub-region,” he stated.

“With the growing insecurity in the northeast of the country, coupled with increasing political tensions and divisions in the lead up to the 2015 general elections, Nigeria is at a crossroads,” said Mr. Djinnit. “It is therefore critical, in my view, that the Council members continue to lend their support to efforts and initiatives aimed at preserving stability in the country.

“All efforts should be made to address the insurgency and insecurity in Nigeria, which has over the past few decades played a prominent role in the maintenance of regional and global peace and security. The present situation also underscores the paramount need for the Nigerian political class to forge a unified stand in confronting the persisting insecurity.”
Syrian refugee mothers in ‘spiral of hardship’, UN reports

8 July - One in four of all Syrian refugee families in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan are headed by women who, on their own, are struggling to make ends meet and take care of their increasingly traumatized families, the United Nations today reported, calling for more resources to aid these single mothers.

“For hundreds of thousands of women, escaping their ruined homeland was only the first step in a journey of grinding hardship,” said António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, whose office compiled the report, Woman Alone: The Fight for Survival by Syria’s Refugee Women.

“It’s shameful,” Mr. Guterres added. “They are being humiliated for losing everything.”

Forced to take responsibility for their families after their partners were killed, captured or otherwise separated, the women are caught in a “spiral of hardship, isolation and anxiety,” according to the authors. More than 145,000 Syrian refugee families are headed by women in those countries.

“Syrian refugee women are the glue holding together a broken society,” said Angelina Jolie, UNHCR’s Special Envoy. “Their strength is extraordinary, but they are struggling alone. Their voices are an appeal for help and protection which cannot be ignored.”

The report, based on the personal testimony of 135 women interviewed over three months in early 2014, found that 60 per cent of the women expressed feeling insecure, and one in three said they were too scared or overwhelmed to even leave their home.

Nuha came to Cairo with her husband, but he was shot and killed while at work. “I don’t want to leave the house because of the sadness in my heart,” she told UNHCR. “We left death in Syria only to find it waiting for us here in Egypt.”

Many women complained of regular verbal harassment – by taxi drivers, bus drivers, landlords, and service providers, as well as men in shops, at the market, on public transport and even at aid distributions.

“I was living in dignity, but now no one respects me because I’m not with a man,” said Zahwa, who added that she was even harassed by refugees when collecting food coupons in Jordan.

The harassment includes sexual and gender-based violence, and their children face mounting trauma and distress, according to the report.

The top difficulty reported by the women is financial. As the sole breadwinners, most of the women are struggling to pay rent, and selling anything of value, including their wedding rings.

Only one-fifth of the women have paying jobs, UNHCR found. Twenty per cent of the women reported support from relatives. Others said they relied on charity, such as staying for free in a mosque.

Of the women interviewed, one-quarter received cash assistance from the UNHCR or other aid agency, with the majority of these women entirely dependent on the aid.

This assistance is falling short of what is needed, the UN agency reported, calling “on donors to do more to help Syrian refugee women get back on their feet and earn enough money to live.”

UNHCR also noted legal barriers from visa and other restrictions separating families from their husbands.
There are currently 2.9 million Syrian refugees registered in the region, with numbers growing at a rate of 100,000 people every month, according to UNHCR. If trends continue, the total number of refugees is expected to reach 3.6 million by the end of the year.

**UN rights office ‘deeply disturbed’ over Australia’s handling of Sri Lanka asylum seekers**

8 July - The United Nations human rights office said today that is “deeply disturbed” that Australian authorities on Sunday returned to Sri Lanka 41 people seeking asylum, apparently without adequate screening of their protection claims and needs.

“This is not something that can or should be done hurriedly, remotely and on high seas,” said Ms. Ravina Shamdasana, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

International law requires that every case be individually examined on its own merits along with procedural safeguards and due process guarantees. Any returns, even from the high seas or in the territorial seas of other States, must be carried out in accordance with international law, under which handing back victims to their persecutor and collective expulsions are strictly prohibited.

“It is unclear whether the Australian Government has been given any assurances that the returnees will not face ill treatment upon their return to Sri Lanka, nor is it clear how the Australian Government plans to monitor their treatment,” Ms. Shamdasani said.

She welcomed the High Court of Australia’s issuance of an interim injunction against the return of another 153 other Sri Lankan asylum seekers, reportedly including 37 children. Intercepted by Australian authorities over a week ago, however, those on the vessel have not been able to make contact with family members or refugee organisations.

A full judicial review in light of Australia’s obligations under international law is required in accordance with various UN Conventions, including the principle of non-refoulement – the prohibition on the forced return of a person to a country where his or her life or freedom would be threatened – the Convention against Torture, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.