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Ukraine: Ban 'deeply concerned' Crimea vote will worsen complex, tense situation



Spokesperson for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Stéphane Dujarric briefs the press. Credit: UN Photo/Mark Garten (file)

17 March - Leading the United Nations push for parties in Ukraine to resolve the country's ongoing political crisis through peaceful dialogue, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today said he is "deeply concerned and disappointed" that this weekend's Crimea secession referendum will only exacerbate an "already complex and tense situation."

"The Secretary-General continues to closely follow the situation in Ukraine," Mr. Ban's spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, told reporters in New York, adding that since the beginning of the crisis, the UN chief has urged all parties to avoid "hasty steps" that could exacerbate tensions.

"He encourages all parties to work for a solution that is guided by the principles of the United Nations Charter, including respecting Ukraine's unity and sovereignty," said Mr. Dujarric.

The statement comes in the wake of an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council on Saturday, at which the 15-nation body was blocked from adopting a resolution urging the international community to affirm Ukraine's national borders and declare the referendum in Crimea invalid, owing to a "no" vote from Russia, a permanent member. China – who is also a permanent member, along with France, United Kingdom and the United States – abstained in the vote.

Media reports suggest that voters in Crimea overwhelmingly supported leaving Ukraine and joining Russia.

The referendum caps months of political unrest, triggered by the Government's decision last November not to sign an agreement on broader European integration. The Ukrainian capital, Kiev, erupted in violent demonstrations and street clashes in late January, culminating with the removal by Parliament of President Viktor Yanukovich. Tensions mounted in the Crimea region, where additional Russian troops and armoured vehicles were reportedly deployed.

In his statement today, the Secretary-General condemned the violence which occurred over the weekend in eastern Ukraine



and which resulted in injuries and loss of life on all sides.

“The Secretary-General once again urges all parties to refrain from violence and to commit themselves to de-escalation and inclusive national dialogue in the pursuit of a political and diplomatic solution,” said Mr. Dujarric, adding: “A deterioration of the situation will have serious repercussions for the people of Ukraine, the region and beyond.”

The UN chief also urged all parties in Ukraine and those with influence to avoid any steps that could further increase tensions.

“Above all, the Secretary-General urges all concerned to intensify their efforts and engage constructively toward a peaceful solution to this crisis, with the aspirations of all the people of Ukraine foremost in mind,” said Mr. Dujarric, adding that Mr. Ban remains ready to work with all parties to resolve this situation.

‘Do not let spoilers deprive you of your future’, UN envoy tells Afghans ahead of polls

17 March - In a personal appeal to the Afghan people less than three weeks before national elections, a senior United Nations envoy today urged all citizens of the nascent democracy to exercise their right to vote and not allow spoilers to deter the holding of peaceful and credible polls.

“The success of the April 2014 elections will be of critical significance in reinforcing Afghanistan’s institutional and political stability and instilling confidence in the future,” the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ján Kubiš, said in his briefing to the Security Council.

Afghanistan is set to hold presidential and provincial council elections on 5 April, leading to the country’s first democratic transfer of power. It comes amid an ongoing transition process by which Afghanistan is assuming greater responsibility for its own affairs throughout the country.

Mr. Kubiš, who heads the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), urged all eligible Afghan citizens – men and women – to exercise their right to vote on 5 April, stressing that this a universal democratic right, as well as a responsibility in strengthening the country’s democratic processes and representative institutions.

“Do not let spoilers and terrorists deprive you of your choice, of your future,” he stated. “Participation as voters, elections officials, and observers, is a rejection of force, violence, and intimidation as the means by which your proud nation decides your leadership.”

He noted that, at this “delicate juncture” in Afghanistan’s transitions, it is a credible electoral process that can provide much needed stability and predictability through a popular mandate across ethnic lines for wider political, economic and social development agendas, including peace and reconciliation.

“I want to make very clear that even groups such as the Taliban that reject the elections, have obligations to respect a civilian process,” he pointed out, adding that he is gravely disturbed by the Taliban’s recent declaration that it will seek to disrupt the process by force, unleashing a campaign of terror.

Security will have a major impact on these polls, the envoy noted. To date, election-related violence has been of a lower order than 2009 and 2010, even as general security incidents have increased. However, it is on the rise.

Meanwhile, he reported that technical preparations for the Afghan-managed and Afghan-led electoral process remain on track. While the UN does not have a formal role in the electoral process, it has been supporting authorities and the independent electoral bodies by advising on election-related matters and providing capacity building and technical support.

“I urge the electoral management bodies to remain committed to full transparency in their decision-making and conduct,



Ján Kubiš, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). UN Photo/Evan Schneider

ensuring clear and timely lines of communication,” said Mr. Kubiš.

“In addition to the electoral authorities, responsibility for peaceful and credible polls largely rests with political leaders, candidates and their supporters. I urge all candidates to guide and shape the actions and attitudes of their supporters with serious public commitment to opposing fraud committed in their name.”

As part of today’s meeting, the Council unanimously adopted a resolution to extend UNAMA’s mandate until 17 March 2015, while recognizing that the renewed mandate “takes full account of the transition process and is in support of Afghanistan’s full assumption of leadership and ownership in the security, governance and development areas...”

Mr. Kubiš renewed the UN’s long-term commitment to a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. “Given the current elements of uncertainty, interlocutors – almost unanimously – stress the continuity and value that UNAMA brings in the exercise of good offices, protection and promotion of human rights, and facilitation of international development coherence,” he noted.

“The Mission’s national footprint continues to be an invaluable asset in undertaking mandated elections, outreach and human rights activities,” he continued, adding that, as other international institutions and countries reduce their presence, the international community is increasingly seeking the UN’s support in understanding and accessing a diverse country.

While the gains made thus far in Afghanistan are fragile, the country is not poised atop “an inevitable post-2014 abyss” as some doomsayers have predicted, he stated, stressing that what is needed in such a period of unpredictability is the smooth and timely transfer of political power.

Ahead of rainy season, UN mission relocates displaced civilians in South Sudan capital



The UN Mission in South Sudan and other agencies are helping to relocate displaced civilians like these at the Tomping camp. Source: UNIFEED

17 March - The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) says it is in the process of relocating civilians displaced amid the recent conflict to better shelter ahead of coming rains.

Some 706,000 people have been displaced since fighting between pro- and anti-Government forces began in mid-December 2013, 77,000 of whom are seeking refuge at UNMISS bases.

The Mission will be providing protection by escorting buses, transporting internally displaced people between its Tomping Compound in the capital, Juba, and the UN House.

“The Mission says that the congestion of sites, compounded by the coming rains, remains a major challenge,” UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric told reporters in New York.

“The Mission is seeking to expand sites in Malakal, Bentiu, Bor and Juba. And it is also creating new areas for civilians to seek safety in Juba and Bor.”

In Bor, in Jonglei state, the Mission notes that civilians have been seen rebuilding their homes and that trading activity in the town has increased and basic foods are available.

Ten days ago, the first major rainstorm of the season caused flooding and destroyed or damaged hundreds of tents in an UNMISS base in Juba. The tents were able to be fixed and there were no reports of injured civilians.

The UN and its partners are working to develop ways to mitigate the risks of flooding and associated health and safety concerns.

Head of UN rights probe on DPR Korea urges accountability for 'unspeakable atrocities'



Michael Kirby, Chair of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea briefs the press. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

17 March - Detailing a raft of “unspeakable atrocities” committed in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) “without parallel in the modern world,” the head of a United Nations-mandated probe into the human rights situation there called today on the international community to hold the country to account, including through referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

“The Commission of Inquiry found systematic, widespread and grave human rights violations occurring in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It also found a disturbing array of crimes against humanity,” said Chairman Michael Kirby in Geneva during a dialogue with members of the UN Human Rights Council.

The Council set up the Commission of Inquiry in March 2013 with a one-year mandate to investigate several alleged human rights violations, including those concerning the right to food and those associated with prison camps; torture and inhuman treatment; arbitrary detention; discrimination; freedom of expression, movement and religion; the right to life; and enforced disappearances, including abductions of nationals to other countries.

The result was an unprecedented 400-page set of linked reports and supporting documents — initially released on 17 February — culled from first-hand testimony from victims and witnesses, revealing, according to the Commission, crimes that “arose from policies established at the highest level of the State.”

In the today’s discussion with the Council, Mr. Kirby said the scale, duration and nature of the atrocities committed in the DPRK revealed a totalitarian State carrying out crimes that were being ignored by the rest of the world. “What is important now is how the international community will act on the report.”

“A compelling report and wide media coverage are good, but woefully insufficient,” he said, urging UN Member States and the wider international community, to accept their responsibility to protect and implement all the recommendations contained in the report, especially those related to accountability, including referral of the situation of the DPRK to the ICC.

As for the country in question, Mr. Kirby and the Commission challenged the DPRK to respect the human rights of its citizens. The country was also urged to immediately and unconditionally implement all of the recommendations of the report. “The Commission also urges all countries, including China, to respect the principle of non-refoulement,” he added, referring to protecting refugees from being returned to places where their lives or freedoms could be threatened.

Mr. Kirby said that the Commission’s findings had been characterized by Pyongyang as “sheer lies and fabrications” deliberately cooked up, and that the three-member body itself had been accused of politicizing human rights.

“The Commission did not ask anyone to blindly believe what it said,” he declared, underscoring that testimonies from hundreds of witnesses who spoke to the Commission of extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortion and other sexual violence could be read in the report.

“Their testimony is not only in these documents, but also on the internet — but these were denied to the ordinary people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It should be asked why this regime forbade such access,” said Mr. Kirby, who asked: “If letting victims raise their voices was politicizing human rights, how could these victims then be helped?”

All efforts to initiate dialogue and offer cooperation had been spurned by the DPRK, he said. However, the Commission obtained first-hand testimony through public hearings with about 80 witnesses in Seoul, Tokyo, London and Washington D.C., and more than 240 confidential interviews with victims and other witnesses, including in Bangkok. Eighty formal submissions were also received from different entities.

Along with its chairman, Mr. Kirby, a retired judge from Australia, the Commission comprises Sonja Biserko, founder and president of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, and Marzuki Darusman, former Attorney General of

Indonesia and the current UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in DPRK.

UN expert urges long-term, rights-based approach to water crisis in Jordan



Aerial view of Jordan, between Amman and Aqaba. Credit: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

17 March - As Jordan struggles with severe water shortage issues – ongoing drought, population growth and now waves of refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict – the country is at a critical moment, said a United Nations independent expert today, emphasizing its need to take a holistic, long-term approach to its water and sanitation strategies.

“The existing emergency measures to the water scarcity problem are not sufficient or sustainable,” said UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque, wrapping a six-day visit to Jordan.

“There must be a link between current emergency needs with a long-term, comprehensive development strategy that ensures access to water and sanitation for all people in Jordan,”

she insisted.

Jordan is one of the three most water-scarce countries in the world. The severe shortage of water has been exacerbated by drought, depletion of groundwater reserves, population growth, inflow of migrant workers and climate change. This, combined with several waves of refugees resulting from conflicts in the region – the latest from Syria – has increased these pressures.

Despite these difficulties, considerable progress has been made: 98 percent of households are connected to the water network and 68 percent are connected to the sewerage network, with 98 percent of the collected wastewater being treated.

Still, said Ms. De Albuquerque, the current systems lack sustainability and affordability. She called on the Jordanian Government to make water for human consumption the highest priority over other uses and to “explicitly recognize the human rights to water and sanitation in the law”.

“The current system creates injustices,” noted the Special Rapporteur. “I met a 64 year-old man, Sulaiman Ali who has been living with his wife in his own house in a suburb of Amman for over 20 years. His house is still not connected to the water network despite his repeated applications to the water authority. He is forced to devote almost 50 percent of his monthly income to paying water tankers and sludge collection,” Ms. de Albuquerque said.

The Special Rapporteur suggested the implementation of “a new tariff system that requires better-off households to pay higher tariffs, while poorer households would be guaranteed a lower, subsidized price”. Such a system, she said, should aim at balancing water savings and adequate provision.

Noting the “generosity and real hospitality” with which the Jordanian Government and the Jordanian people are accommodating successive waves of refugees in their country, the expert urged both the Government and the international community “to further work together to shift from the current emergency stance to a proper medium and longer-term response in order to ensure the sustainable provision of water and sanitation not only to refugees but to the wider Jordanian population.”

The Special Rapporteur will present a formal report on this mission to an upcoming session of the UN Human Rights Council in September, which will include the final findings and recommendations to the Government of Jordan.

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

At Dubai forum, UNESCO chief calls for scaling up efforts to educate girls worldwide



A little girl walks to school in Western Mongolia at the foot of the Altai Mountains, is several kilometres long and in freezing temperatures. Photo: UNICEF/NYHQ2010-0432 Andrew Cullent

17 March - The head of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) today called on Governments, the private sector and civil society to scale up efforts to provide quality education for girls, stressing the transformative benefits this has for all of society.

Speaking at the second annual Global Education and Skills Forum, held in Dubai, UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova pointed out that there were 31 million girls out of school in 2011, of whom 55 per cent are expected to never enrol, and that women still represent two-thirds of the world's 774 million illiterate adults.

"This is a waste of talent and human ingenuity that no society can afford," Ms. Bokova stated in a news release.

"Girls education is a development multiplier and one of the most powerful transformational forces we have to build peace and social inclusion," she added. "Educated girls have healthier families, earn more income and contribute to national growth. Everyone benefits."

Ms. Bokova warned that "a generation of young women will be left behind" unless there is a concerted global push now, and at all levels of society, to change the status quo.

At a session devoted to New Partnerships for Girls' and Women's Education, the Director-General encouraged business leaders present to join UNESCO's Global Partnership for Girls' Education.

Launched in 2011 by Ms. Bokova, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and former United States Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, the initiative targets the weakest links in education – the transition to secondary education and literacy.

The Partnership has brought together several Governments, private sector leaders and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide girls and women in underprivileged urban and rural areas in Africa and Asia with education and learning opportunities.

Some 20,000 learners and hundreds of teachers and ministry officials have benefitted from projects implemented in seven countries – Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, and Tanzania – including awareness-raising and capacity-building activities, academic support, access to learning opportunities, guidance and counselling, as well as access to, training on and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

"We have seen that we can produce results," said Ms. Bokova. "But to make a real difference, we must scale up our efforts exponentially. Our actions must measure up to our ambitions. This requires greater engagement from all sectors."

Over the next two years, UNESCO will seek to increase the number and diversity of its partners in girls' education; expand the geographic coverage of its activities; increase the amount of resources invested; and promote innovative approaches and encourage South-South and North-South-South cooperation.

More than 1,000 representatives of Government, NGOs, business leaders and academia are attending the Forum, which is organized by UNESCO, the Ministry of Education of the United Arab Emirates, GEMS Education, the Varkey GEMS Foundation and Dubai Cares, in support of the Secretary General's Global Education First Initiative.

UN Security Council action on Crimea referendum blocked



Security Council meeting on the situation in Ukraine. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

15 March - Owing to the negative vote of one of its permanent members, the United Nations Security Council today failed to adopt a draft resolution which urged countries not to recognize the results of this weekend's referendum in Crimea.

Thirteen of the Council's 15 members voted in favour of the draft text, Russia voted against, and China abstained. A veto by any of the Council's five permanent members – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – means a resolution cannot be adopted.

The resolution would have reaffirmed Ukraine's “sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity” and declared that Sunday's referendum which could lead to Crimea's break with Ukraine and union with Russia, “can have no validity”.

Speaking ahead of the vote, Russian Permanent Representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, said it was “no secret” that Russia was planning to vote against the draft. He added that Moscow would respect the decision of the Crimeans but could not accept the basic assumption of the draft resolution which aimed “to declare illegal the planned March 16 referendum where residents of the Republic of Crimea should decide on their future”.

Liu Jieyi, Permanent Representative of China to the UN, said after the vote that Beijing sought a “balanced” solution to the conflict within a framework of law and order. He called for the creation of a coordination group, a support package for Ukraine, and also called on countries to refrain from action which could further escalate the conflict.

Deep disappointment and incredulity was expressed by several Council members, who noted that this was the seventh time the body was convening to discuss the situation in Ukraine.

United States Permanent Representative Samantha Power, whose country sponsored the resolution, said the text was aimed at finding a principled and peaceful solution, and upheld UN principles on the sovereignty of its Member States.

Russia has the power to veto a Security Council resolution, “but it does not have the power to veto the truth,” she said.

United Kingdom's Mark Lyall Grant said the result of today's vote highlighted Russia's isolation over Crimea within the Council and from the international community.

Meanwhile, Gérard Araud of France quipped that Russia “vetoed the UN Charter” with its “no” vote.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said that “emotions have been hardened” over the forthcoming referendum.

Addressing journalists Friday at the UN Headquarters in New York, Mr. Ban cautioned against “hasty measures and decisions which may impact the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine” and stressed that any actions should be in accordance with provisions of the UN Charter.

UN officials, including Mr. Ban, have been appealing to all parties to calm the situation and to engage in direct and constructive dialogue to forge a peaceful way forward in Ukraine, which has been witnessing unrest for several months.

Tensions heightened last week as lawmakers in Crimea, where additional Russian troops and armoured vehicles have recently been deployed, voted to join Russia and to hold a referendum on 16 March to validate the decision.

Three years on, UN's top humanitarian officials urge end to Syrian conflict

15 March - With nearly 13 million Syrians uprooted from their homes, senior United Nations officials warn that without a political solution to the conflict, which today enters its fourth year, Syria and its people face years more of destruction and continued brutality.

“Children, women and men are being used as pawns by parties to the conflict in their battle for territorial advantage,” said the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Valerie Amos.

An entire generation of children has been traumatized and brutalized. Hospitals and school playgrounds have been attacked, and residential neighbourhoods are flattened by barrel bombs, she noted.

“Our collective voice should be raised in protest at the flagrant violations of international humanitarian and human rights law,” added Ms. Amos, who is also the UN Emergency Coordinator. “The international community needs to show the courage and determination to do all that is necessary to reach a political solution.”

The comments echo Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who earlier this week said the international community cannot afford to lose focus or turn away from war-torn Syria, and called for renewed political efforts to end what is now the biggest humanitarian and security crisis in the world.

Syria is also already the world's leading country of forced displacement with 9.3 million people unable to find a safe home in their country, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). In the absence of visible progress towards a political solution, the UN agency predicts that the region could become the largest refugee population in the world.

“It is unconscionable that a humanitarian catastrophe of this scale is unfolding before our eyes with no meaningful progress to stop the bloodshed,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres said in a statement.

Well over 100,000 people have been killed since opposition protesters first sought to oust the Government of President Bashar al-Assad in March 2011. In addition, there are currently more than 2.4 million refugees registered in the region: some 932,000 in Lebanon; 574,000 in Jordan; some 613,000 in Turkey; 223,000 in Iraq; and about 134,000 in Egypt, according to UNHCR figures.

In Lebanon, for example, there are nearly 230 registered Syrian refugees for every 1,000 Lebanese, making this the highest per capita concentration of refugees of any country in recent history.

“Imagine the crushing social and economic consequences of this crisis on Lebanon and other countries in the region,” Mr. Guterres said.

Jordan is among those countries reeling under the refugee presence, estimating the related costs, which include access to water, bread, gas and electricity for the additional people, to be at more than \$1.7 billion so far.

“They need much stronger international support than they have received so far, both financially and in terms of commitments to receive and protect Syrian refugees in other parts of the world, beyond the immediate neighbouring region,” Mr. Guterres said in reference to the governments of the hosting countries.

The High Commissioner also noted that Syrians are becoming a global refugee population as they are arriving in increasing numbers in Europe. Over 84,000 asylum applications have been submitted by Syrians in European countries since 2011, mostly in Germany and Sweden.

Syrian refugees are also seeking safety in North and South America, and in Australia.



Syrian refugees arrive in Lebanon earlier this year after fleeing their homes in western Syria. The number of Syrian refugees has passed 2.563 million. UNHCR/A.McConnell

They are also reports of Syrians facing instances of closed borders and push backs to neighbouring countries. UNHCR has called on countries to ensure access to territory for all Syrians seeking protection and a moratorium on returns to neighbouring countries.

Also today, more than 30 leading film makers, writers, artists, musicians and public figures have appealed to the UN, asking General Assembly President John Ashe and Ambassador Sylvie Lucas of Luxembourg, which holds the Security Council presidency for March, to make clear what they are doing to aid humanitarian access in Syria.

The joint statement, endorsed by UN's Palestinian Refugee Agency (UNRWA) and partnering Hoping Foundation, is signed by director Alfonso Cuarón, actors Emma Thompson and Hugh Grant, musicians Sting and Annie Lennox, amongst others.

The call comes two weeks after the UN was last able to deliver food parcels to the besieged Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk, Damascus, where some 20,000 people are still believed to be trapped.

UN agency launches first-ever database on global land use



Global snapshot of land cover. Source: FAO

17 March - The United Nations agricultural agency today launched a new database which gathers under one roof previously scattered information about land cover – how much land is covered by croplands, trees, forests, or bare soils – crucial to establishing a good global understanding of the physical characteristics of the Earth's surface.

"A strong understanding of our planet's land cover is essential to promoting sustainable land resources management - including agricultural production to feed a growing population - that makes efficient use of increasingly scarce natural resources yet safeguards the environment," said John Latham of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which spearheaded the project.

The Global Land Cover SHARE database (GLC-SHARE) initiative represents a major and historic improvement: up until now, such data was collected by different countries and organizations which identified, measured and recorded information in diverse, uneven ways.

GLC-SHARE pulled together all that data and submitted it to a thorough quality-control, harmonizing process, using internationally accepted definitions and standards, thereby bringing a wealth of country-level information into one consolidated dataset spanning the entire planet.

Applications of the new GLC-share database include monitoring of global land cover trends, evaluating the suitability of land for various uses, assessing the impact of climate change on food production, and land-use planning.

"This update to our understanding of the Earth's land cover comes at a crucial time," Mr. Latham added. "It will be a valuable tool in assessing the sustainability of agriculture, and for supporting evidence based-sustainable rural development and land use policy contributing to reducing poverty, enabling of inclusive and efficient agricultural and food systems and increasing resilience of livelihoods. GLC-SHARE will also help us understand how climate change and climate variability are impacting key natural resources, as well as food production."

FAO's new database reveals the breakdown of eleven global land cover layers: tree-covered areas (27.7 percent), bare soils (15.2 percent), grasslands (13.0 percent), croplands (12.6 percent), snow and glaciers (9.7 percent), shrub-covered areas (9.5 percent), sparse vegetation (7.7 percent), inland water bodies (2.6 percent), herbaceous vegetation (1.3 percent), artificial surfaces (0.6 percent), and mangroves (0.1 percent).

The agency stresses that a surging global population and growing demand for food pose major challenges for agriculture, which in the years to come, will need to produce more food using fewer natural resources while at the same time coping with a changing climate. FAO estimates furthermore that world food production will need to increase by 60 percent by 2050, for the most part, on lands that are already being cultivated.