South Sudan: UN says surging violence claimed lives of children, worsened malnutrition among survivors

22 April - Confirming that children were killed in South Sudan during recent brutal attacks on displaced civilians or as a result of being recruited by armed groups, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) warned today that the surging violence is exacerbating an already “very dangerous” malnutrition crisis.

The children were among the dozens of internally displaced persons (IDPs) attacked by gunmen on 17 April while sheltering at a UN site in the central South Sudanese town of Bor, capital of strife-torn Jonglei state, UNICEF spokesman Christophe Boulierac told reporters in Geneva.

“The exact numbers are currently being verified,” he said, adding that up to 23,000 people are currently sheltering at the UN base in Bentiu. Some of the children were killed either in direct attacks or as a result of being caught in the crossfire.

Over the past two months, thousands of people are believed to have been killed by fighting that began in mid-December 2013 as a political dispute between President Salva Kiir and his former deputy president, Riek Machar. Since last Thursday, as fresh violence has swept towns in the northern and central parts of the country, clashes and reprisal attacks have forced thousands of people to seek refuge at the bases of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

“This is fierce, brutal infantry fighting – children must not be instruments of this conflict,” UNICEF's Jonathan Veitch said earlier of the most recent violence. “Those in positions of command and leadership have a duty to keep children out of harm's way and take all necessary measures to prevent children being part of armed groups and forces.”

Meanwhile, UNMISS has strongly condemned the violence, in which hundreds of civilians are thought to have been killed or injured, and which is believed to have been motivated by ethnicity and nationality. The fighting is also linked to a series of attacks in Bentiu town on hundreds of people in who hid in a hospital, mosque and church, and a UN World Food Programme (WFP) compound. The Mission is sheltering some 75,000 civilians throughout the country.
According to a UN spokesperson, the Mission reported today that many dead bodies remain by the side of the main road between Bentiu and Rubkona – and that the Rubkona market has been repeatedly looted.

UNMISS also says that on last Thursday, four rockets were directed at the Mission’s base in Bentiu including two that exploded within the compound and one just outside. Two civilians that had been seeking shelter inside were injured.

Elsewhere in Unity State, the Mission has received reports that after fighting over the weekend, Opposition forces are in control of Mayom town, which is some 70 kilometres east of Bentiu.

As for Jonglei state, the Mission reports that the situation in Bor is tense. Yesterday, UN staff met with community leaders from the protection site to discuss security in light of Thursday’s attack, and explained measures taken, including enhancements to the berm wall.

In Upper Nile State, the Mission also reports artillery explosions in Renk yesterday. Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and Opposition forces clashed in Renk over the weekend, and shells landed close to the base, wounding two UN contractors on Saturday.

“The Mission strongly condemns the fighting close to its premises where it continues to protect tens of thousands of civilians” said the spokesperson, adding that the UN once again reiterates the necessity for all parties to respect the inviolability of UN premises and assets, and to respect the life-saving work done by the United Nations in South Sudan.

In related news, UN Special Rapporteur Chaloka Beyani today warned that the deliberate ethnic targeting is further eroding protection for the displaced civilians.

“The safety and security of the displaced populations must be the absolute priority for the United Nations to safeguard,” stressed the independent expert tasked by the UN Human Rights Council to monitor, report and advise on the human rights of IDPs worldwide.

He urged all parties to the conflict to abstain from violence against IDPs and other civilians, and also called for communities to stop hate speech which are increasingly being heard over the airwaves, some calling on men from one community to commit vengeful sexual violence against women from another community.

This latest spate of killings is also worsening an already precarious food and water situation, making malnutrition increasingly likely for some 50,000 children under five years of age who could die by the end of the year without urgent action.

A quarter of a million children would suffer from acute malnutrition by the end of the year, UNICEF announced today.

UNICEF’s immediate goal is to reach 150,000 children under five years old currently suffering from malnutrition, “partly through rapid response teams that would deliver ready to use therapeutic foods, micronutrients among others,” Mr. Boulierac said.

Access to clean water is also a concern at the UN base in Bentiu, where there are currently only one or two bottles for each person per day. UNICEF staff are attempting to drill boreholes to provide more drinking water to the camps to balance out the “inadequate” water access.

The agency is calling for $38 million to meet nutrition needs in the country. That is in addition to a $1.3 billion appeal which is now just 38 per cent funded, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).
On Mother Earth Day, UN urges protecting planet from ‘heavy hand of humankind’

22 April - On International Mother Earth Day, the United Nations is urging greater efforts to promote sustainable development and use of renewable energy sources, with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appealing for worldwide changes in attitude and practice to curb the negative impact of human activity on the planet.

“From tropical deforestation to depleted ocean fisheries, from growing freshwater shortages to the rapid decline of biodiversity and increasingly polluted skies and seas in many parts of the world, we see the heavy hand of humankind,” said the UN chief.

As a part of the Organization’s efforts to drive home the importance of respecting and protecting the planet towards ensuring ‘the future we want’, the General Assembly is convening an interactive dialogue on “Harmony with Nature” to commemorate the International Day, marked annually on 22 April.

Following a high-level segment this morning, Member States, UN agencies and independent stakeholders will discuss in a series of roundtables ways to promote a balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

In his message on the Day, which gives an opportunity to reflect on humankind’s relationship with the planet, Mr. Ban said: “The air we breathe, the water we drink and the soil that grows our food are part of a delicate global ecosystem that is increasingly under pressure from human activities.”

As such, and with a growing population, everyone must recognize that consumption of the planet’s resources is unsustainable. “We need a global transformation of attitude and practice. It is especially urgent to address how we generate the energy that drives our progress,” said the Secretary-General, emphasizing that burning fossil fuels is the principal cause of climate change, which increasingly threatens prosperity and stability in all regions.

“That is why world leaders have pledged to reach a global legal climate agreement in 2015.

He said that action on climate change presents multiple opportunities to “reset our relationship” with Mother Earth and improve human well-being, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable. Sustainable energy for all can increase health, wealth and opportunity for billions of people, as can climate-smart agriculture, more efficient cities, and better managed and protected forests.

To generate ambitious action on the ground and raise momentum for a new climate treaty in 2015, Mr. Ban is convening a climate summit in New York on 23 September this year. He is inviting Heads of State and Government along with private sector and civil society leaders to showcase initiatives and forge alliances that can help launch a sustainable future.

“But, they need support and encouragement, for change is never easy. So today, on International Mother Earth Day, I appeal to all people everywhere to raise their voices. Speak out on behalf of this planet, our only home,” said the Secretary-General.

General Assembly President John Ashe meanwhile called on the UN family to promote sustainable development and the use of renewable energy sources throughout cities and communities.

“As we look to promote the post-2015 development agenda, I call on Member States, civil society and other stakeholders to answer the call put forth in the 2009 UN resolution by the General Assembly to invest more in sustainable technology and to promote our ecosystems through global environmental public policies,” he said.

As the world confronted today’s unique sustainable development challenges, stakeholders’ understanding of the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations must be rooted in the most up-to-date scientific information.
“Our global strategy must promote sound environmental ethics, and continually emphasize humanity’s interconnectedness with nature,” said Mr. Ashe, looking forward to the Assembly’s discussions on the issue throughout the day.

In his remarks to the Assembly dialogue, Mr. Ashe said the history of civilization is the story of the sometimes complex relationship of human beings with nature and the planet.

“From the time man sought dominance and control over the environment, the quality of our lives as human beings has changed radically.

While that change was largely positive, modern patterns of consumption and production have caused such overexploitation of natural resources that there is disequilibrium in the delicate balances of earth's ecosystems,” he said.

The evidence is that the current global population is using vast quantities of natural resources at so rapid a rate that we are consuming 50 per cent more resources than the planet can provide.

“Consequently, today’s lifestyles have ushered in what scientists are now calling the Anthropocene Era,” said Mr. Ashe, explaining that this essentially this means man’s lifestyles, actions, technologies and practices can and are irrevocably and adversely impacting nature, putting the survival of many species under threat.

“We cannot and must not ignore the cries of our planet to restore a more harmonious relationship with nature. Nor must we lose the opportunity to work harmoniously with each other for the common good,” he said, encouraging delegations to consider the relevant information on the UN Harmony with Nature website as they consider ways to further build a knowledge network on sustainable development, the efforts of which will serve to produce a balanced paradigm for the planet and for people.

Myanmar: UNICEF warns children of Kachin face growing threats due to recent fighting

22 April - Recent fighting between Government forces and Kachin rebels in Myanmar, and the resulting displacement of thousands of people, has significantly increased the risks to young people, including possible recruitment, limited access to basic services and the threat of landmines, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) warned today.

An estimated 1,000 children are among those forced to leave their temporary homes amid the fighting between the Myanmar National Army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in areas of southern Kachin state, UNICEF noted in a news release.

“The fighting and the associated displacement of families has increased the health risks that children face, including by reducing their access to safe, reliable water and sanitation facilities,” said Bertrand Bainvel, UNICEF Representative to Myanmar.

In addition, Kachin and northern Shan are already among the most heavily mined areas in Myanmar, the agency noted. Landmines left behind or placed intentionally continue to cause harm to vulnerable populations, including children, as well as hamper humanitarian aid delivery.

“It is an unfortunate fact that the heightened risk that children face does not disappear even after the fighting stops, because they face a significantly increased risk of falling victim to commonly used landmines and even to possible recruitment into the combatant’s armed forces,” said Mr. Bainvel.

UNICEF is working with other UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations to help threatened children and their families. While support is being mobilised, the agency stressed that improved access to affected populations, particularly children, is needed.

“We must provide urgent help,” said Mr. Bainvel. “But life-saving aid is not enough because children need peace and
stability to grow and develop.”

More than 75,000 people have been displaced since fighting between Government forces and Kachin rebels began almost two years ago. For many of those displaced in the latest hostilities, it is the second or third time that they have been uprooted in the past year.

“For the sake of Myanmar’s children, all parties must immediately commit to do all they can to end the violence, to protect children from exposure to land mines and recruitment into armed forces, and to commit to peace,” Mr. Bainvel stressed.

“This is absolutely essential if children in Kachin are to experience the same hope and improved prospects that are now being experienced by so many other children in Myanmar as a result of the recent reforms.”

**UN-backed summit on food security, ‘blue economy’ urges coordinated action**

22 April - Overfishing, habitat destruction and pollution are atop the agenda of a United Nations-backed summit on the role of oceans in global food security, livelihoods and economic development which opened today in The Hague, the Netherlands.

“Urgent coordinated action is needed to restore the health of the world’s oceans and secure the long-term well-being and food security of a growing global population,” the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said about the key message of the four-day summit, which is co-organized by the World Bank and Member States, including the Dutch host Government.

“Healthy oceans have a central role to play in solving one of the biggest problems of the 21st century – how to feed 9 billion people by 2050,” said Árni M. Mathiesen, FAO Assistant Director-General for Fisheries and Aquaculture.

On average, 17 per cent of global animal protein intake comes from fisheries and aquaculture, and demand for fish protein is expected to double in the next 20 years, FAO reported, yet some 28 per cent of global stocks are already overfished.

More than 500 delegates are expected to attend the event, including ministers and senior representatives from the fishing industry, coastal communities, science and civil society.

They will discuss underlying causes that have led to the overfishing, increased marine pollution and loss of critical habitat, as well as potential solutions.

The participants will also look at balancing the demands for growth with conservation of marine areas, and ensuring that private sector growth does not come at the expense of protecting the livelihoods of local communities.

“Solutions exist that balance the ecological and economic demands on the ocean,” said Juergen Voegele, Director of Agriculture and Environmental Services at the World Bank.

“We have the opportunity to align all our efforts and bring solutions to scale locally. With public-private partnerships and shared approaches we can restore ocean health and provide food and jobs for communities worldwide,” he added.

The summit will also focus on blue growth which emphasizes conservation and sustainable management of aquatic resources and equitable benefits to the coastal communities that rely on them.

The term “blue economy” stems from the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), and refers to food, jobs and opportunities for development provided by ocean and coastal assets.
UNESCO chief denounces killing of journalist in the Philippines

22 April - The head of the United Nations agency tasked with defending press freedom has denounced the killing of journalist Rubylita Garcia and called on authorities in the Philippines to investigate the case.

“It is essential that the authorities of the Philippines do all they can to identify and bring to trial those responsible for this cowardly crime,” said Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

“Murderers cannot be allowed to set limits to journalists’ freedom of expression or on citizens’ rights to information,” she added in a news release.

Ms. Garcia, 52, was a reporter for the Remate newspaper in Bacoor City and host of a talk show on dwAD radio. She was shot dead by two gunmen in her home on 6 April.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet every day around the world, journalists and media workers are under attack, facing intimidation, threats and violence from governments, corporations, criminals or other forces that wish to silence or censor.

On 3 May, the international community will mark World Press Freedom Day, an annual observance that aims to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom, assess the state of press freedom throughout the world, defend the media from attacks on their independence, and pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the line of duty.

Somalia: UN envoy condemns murder of second lawmaker in less than 48 hours

22 April - Following the murder earlier today of Somali parliamentarian Abdiaziz Isaaq Mursal – the second lawmaker to be killed in less than 48 hours in Mogadishu – the top United Nations official in the country strongly condemned the incident and pledged the world body’s resolve in standing by the Somali people as they worked to build a stable, peaceful country.

A member of Somalia’s Federal Parliament, Mr. Mursal was shot dead by unknown gunmen, according to a statement issued by the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), which notes that the fresh violence in Mogadishu also included the killing last night of a media worker.

Mr. Mursal is the second parliamentarian to be murdered in the capital in less than 48 hours, following the death of Isaak Mohamed Rino, who was killed early yesterday when an improvised explosive device planted in his vehicle detonated. UNSOM says that the Al-Shabaab militant group has claimed responsibility for both attacks.

“I am appalled to learn of the death of Mr. [Mursal] and I condemn his murder in the strongest terms,” said the Secretary-General’s Special Representative, Nicholas Kay, who added that he was also saddened by the shooting death of Radio Dalsan worker Muhammad Hassan Amar.

“The media must be allowed to carry out their work without fear of attack,” he said.

Mr. Kay went on to say: “I am concerned by the recent attacks we have seen in Mogadishu. We remain resolute in our support for the Somali people and their representatives as they work to realise their hopes and aspirations for a peaceful and stable future.”

“The people responsible for these heinous crimes have nothing to offer the Somali people but violence and insecurity. I call
on the authorities to investigate these attacks and bring the perpetrators to justice as quickly as possible,” said Mr. Kay, who also heads UNSOM.

He offered his sincere condolences to the family and friends of Mr. Mursal and Mr. Amar, as well as to the Federal Parliament of Somalia and the country's media fraternity.

Respect right of persons with disabilities to make their own choices, urges UN panel

22 April - People with disabilities have the same rights as everyone to make decisions about their lives, including the right to take risks and make mistakes, a United Nations committee has stressed in new guidelines.

“Respect for the freedom to make choices should be accorded to all persons with disabilities, no matter how much support they need,” said Theresia Degener from the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

“People with disabilities, including those with psychosocial or cognitive impairments, must be supported in making decisions, and not have decisions made for them, even when it is thought to be in their ‘best interests’,” she stated in a news release.

The Committee noted that while Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities enshrines equal recognition before the law, many such persons are denied legal capacity, often on the basis of mental capacity assessments, and are deprived of fundamental rights such as the right to vote and the right to marry and found a family.

There is a general misunderstanding of States’ obligations under the Convention and a failure to recognize the importance of “supported decision-making,” said the Committee. Instead, “substituted decision-making,” where others make choices on the person’s behalf, remains common – for example under guardianship regimes or through the use of mental health laws that permit forced treatment.

The Committee has issued a detailed reading of Article 12 to clarify States’ obligations, in which it underscores the position that States are obliged to provide persons with disabilities with the broad range of support they may need to make decisions that have legal effect.

“Support in the exercise of legal capacity must respect the rights, will and preferences of persons with disabilities,” stated the 18-member body, which monitors States’ implementation of the Convention.

The panel recognizes that it is not always possible to determine exactly what an individual wants, but in these cases decisions should be made on the “best interpretation of their will and preference,” rather than basing choices on what they regard as the “best interests” of the person.

The Committee also noted that “supported decision-making” is closely tied to accessibility of services, information and communication, set out under Article 9 of the Convention.

In this regard, the Committee details the importance of accessibility in allowing persons with disabilities to enjoy and realise their human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with others.

Persons with disabilities face many barriers, and so “it is important that accessibility is addressed in all its complexity, encompassing the physical environment, transportation, information and communication, and services,” it noted.

Goods, products and services provided to the public, the Committee stressed, must be accessible to all, regardless of whether they are owned and/or provided by a public authority or by a private enterprise.
All new goods, products, facilities, infrastructure, technology and services should be designed to be fully accessible by persons with disabilities. States should also set definite timeframes for and allocate adequate resources towards removing existing barriers. Austerity measures are no excuse for failing to ensure gradual accessibility for persons with disabilities, the Committee added.