Primary focus must be to halt spread of Ebola virus in hard-hit West Africa – UN

23 October - As the international community mobilizes on all fronts to combat the unfolding Ebola outbreak, the primary emphasis must continue to be on stopping the transmission of the virus within Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the three hardest-hit countries, United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) experts said today.

Reporting on the outcome of the third meeting of the International Health Regulations Emergency Committee on the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which wrapped up yesterday in Geneva, the experts stressed that focusing on the countries at the epicentre of the outbreak, including through reinforcing high-quality exit screening procedures at airports, “is the most important step for preventing international spread.”

In a news release summing up the meeting, which included States Parties’ presentations and subsequent Committee discussions, the experts noted that specific attention, including through appropriate monitoring and follow-up of their health, should be paid to the needs of health care workers. This would also encourage more health care staff to assist in this outbreak, they added.

The WHO expert Committee also stressed that all countries should strengthen education and communication efforts to combat stigma, disproportionate fear, and inappropriate measures and reactions associated with Ebola. “Such efforts may also encourage self-reporting and early presentation for diagnosis and care,” it adds.

As for most up-to-the-minute statistics on the outbreak, WHO reported that as of 22 October, the number of total cases stands at 9,936 total cases, with 4,877 deaths. Cases continue to increase exponentially in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone and the situation in these countries remains of great concern, warned the agency.

Earlier today at WHO’s headquarters in Geneva, Dr. Keiji Fukuda, the agency’s Assistant Director-General for Health, Security and Environment, and Isabelle Nuttall, WHO Director of Global Capacities, Alert and Response, briefed the press on the Committee’s discussions.
Dr. Fukuda said the key lessons learned to control the outbreak include the importance of leadership, community engagement, bringing in more partners, paying staff on time, and accountability, and stressed that WHO, UN partners and the international community have scaled up their support in these three countries.

Answering a question about when international efforts might catch up to the unfolding outbreak, he said there is an intense effort under way to step-up the response, within and outside the United Nations, including with the establishment of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) and implementation of the so-called “70-70-60 plan” which aims to try to get 70 per cent of the cases isolated and 70 per cent of the deceased safely buried within 60 days (from the beginning of October to 1 December), “by which time we hope to see a bend in the curve.”

“So it’s clear that it remains quite a challenge. We see the numbers still going up. We still see an extensive effort trying to catch up to and get beyond that curve,” Dr. Fukuda said, adding however that reaching the targets by the earliest possible time remains the goal.

As for the outbreak spreading outside the three countries, he said: “We are reasonably confident right now we are not seeing widespread transmission into neighbouring countries. It remains a concern...but right now I think we are not seeing it.”

Among the Committee’s recommendations for hard-hit Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Committee noted that exit screening in those countries remains critical for reducing the exportation of Ebola cases. “States should maintain and reinforce high-quality exit screening of all persons at international airports, seaport, and major land crossings, for unexplained febrile illness consistent with potential Ebola infection.”

The exit screening should consist of, at a minimum, a questionnaire, a temperature measurement and, if fever is discovered, an assessment of the risk that the fever is caused by Ebola virus disease. States should collect data from their exit screening processes, monitor their results, and regularly share these with WHO in a timely fashion. This will increase public confidence and provide important information to other States, said the experts.

As for the wider international community, the Committee reiterated its recommendation that there should be no general ban on international travel or trade. “A general travel ban is likely to cause economic hardship, and could consequently increase the uncontrolled migration of people from affected countries, raising the risk of international spread of Ebola,” said the experts.

Noting that a number of States have recently introduced entry screening measures, WHO encouraged countries implementing such measures to share their experiences and lessons learned. “Entry screening may have a limited effect in reducing international spread when added to exit screening, and its advantages and disadvantages should be carefully considered.”

As for the fact that a number of States without Ebola transmission have decided to or are considering cancelling international meetings and mass gatherings, the experts underscored that although they do not recommend such cancellations, they “recognize that these are complex decisions that must be decided on a case-by-case basis.”

“The Committee encourages States to use a risk-based approach to make these decisions. WHO has issued advice for countries hosting international meetings or mass gatherings, and will continue to provide guidance and support on this issue,” said the news release.
Ahead of World Day, UN hails landmark global polio eradication campaign

23 October - Every day, a thousand or so children are being protected from disability as part of a 26-year global effort to eradicate polio through a worldwide campaign that has immunized millions of previously-unreached children across the globe, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said on the eve of World Polio Day.

Some 10 million people today would otherwise have been paralyzed, while an additional 1.5 million lives have been saved through the routine administration of Vitamin A during polio vaccination drives, UNICEF said in a press release today, which outlined the successes of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative and the challenges that remain.

The annual number of polio cases has fallen from 350,000 in 1988, to 416 in 2013, and 243 so far this year – an extraordinary drop of more than 99 percent. All but three countries where polio was firmly entrenched – Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan – have eliminated the virus within their borders. And multiple outbreaks have been contained over the past 26 years.

“In 1988 polio was a leading cause of childhood disability,” said UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake in a press release. “In country after country since then, a generation of children has grown up without the spectre of polio.”

“The success of the eradication effort – reaching some of the most disadvantaged communities in some of the most dangerous circumstances – proves that it is possible to reach all children,” Mr. Lake added. “Our most ambitious and audacious goals for children can be met. And if they can be, they must be.”

Speaking to reporters at UN Headquarters today, Peter Crowley, Principal Adviser, Health and Polio Team Leader, of UNICEF said, “We now have an entire generation of children that has grown up without the fear – and some cases, without even knowledge – of polio,” as a result of the 26-year long international eradication campaign.

“We are almost there,” he said, explaining that nearly all cases of polio have been wiped out, even with its recent emergence in countries such as Syria and Iraq.

While UNICEF marked the successes, it was not ignoring the remaining challenges. “Eradication is not easy; it has only been accomplished once before and that was with smallpox,” explained Mr. Crowley, stressing that while the number of cases has fallen dramatically, the disease still existed.

Nevertheless, the United Nations believed that the challenges around eradicating polio are not insurmountable. To this end, he noted that is the first year the World Day was being celebrated since the UN World Health Organization (WHO) had declared polio free. This was a significant achievement, because just five years ago, India had been considered the “hardest place to reach people with the virus.”

He was joined by Hamid Jafari, WHO’s Director of Polio Eradication, and Jay Wenger, Director, Polio Eradication at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

According to UNICEF, Nigeria has had only 6 cases this year, down from 49 in 2013. Afghanistan has reduced transmission to very low levels, with most cases linked to Pakistan. With 206 cases already reported this year, Pakistan is now the world’s largest remaining reservoir of polio.

While polio remains endemic in only three countries, it continues to pose a risk to children everywhere, especially in countries which have not made routine immunization a priority, like South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Ukraine. Outbreaks in Syria, Iraq, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Somalia can be traced to Pakistan and Nigeria.
UNICEF procures 1.7 billion doses of oral polio vaccine to reach 500 million children every year. And UNICEF’s social mobilization work helps persuade families to accept the vaccine when it reaches them. Intensive efforts over the past decade have seen acceptance of the polio vaccine at their highest levels ever in countries where polio remains endemic.

“The world has never been closer to this once-in-a-generation opportunity of eradicating polio for good,” Lake said. “Every child deserves to live in a polio-free world.”

**Far greater effort needed to eradicate extreme poverty in world’s poorest nations – UN report**

23 October - While the world’s 48 most vulnerable nations continue to make in-roads into poverty reduction, a far greater effort is needed if these countries are to eradicate extreme poverty by 2020, according to a new report launched at the United Nations today.

The study conducted by the UN Office for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS) noted that since the adoption of the 2011 Istanbul Programme of Action on their sustainable development, least developed countries (LDCs) have seen incremental economic and social gains.

This is mainly because of an increase in public spending and stronger investment and activity in mining, construction, manufacturing and service sectors.

The report however cautions that despite the uptick, the LDCs continue to be among the most vulnerable to external shocks, such as economic crises, climate-related events, natural disasters and health-related threats.

The recent outbreak of Ebola, which is concentrated in 3 least developed countries (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone), highlights the importance of comprehensively addressing structural vulnerability, requiring joint efforts by such vulnerable countries and their development partners.

It also underscores that deepening inequality threatens to exacerbate existing poverty with implications for political and social stability in these countries.

The study identifies four main determinants of the reduction of extreme poverty in the LDCs: gender inequality, institutional frameworks, infrastructure development and service delivery, and external factors.

The authors encourage leadership at the national level to implement policies that improve service delivery, address gender inequality and enable the poor to acquire investment assets that can improve their future income. Women and girls are especially in need of better access to economic opportunities through vocational and managerial skills training.

At a Headquarters press briefing today launching the report, Gyan Chandra Acharya, High Representative and head of UN-OHRLLS said the survey noted that since the 2011 Istanbul conference, progress of LDC’s on many of the goals and targets has been “mixed.”

While some countries had seen improvements in human and social development – in particular in education, health and youth development – others remained mired in extreme poverty. During the same period, official development assistance (ODA) from partner countries had “volatile.”

Given extreme vulnerability and high-levels of poverty within these countries, the UN was recommending that their needs remain of particular concern, he said, adding: “There is still a long way for these countries to go, even to catch up with other developing countries, not to mention [developed nations].”

Among its other highlights, the report argues, greater access to land, technology and finance are integral to boost growth in the LDCs and reduce inequality. “The effectiveness of all policies, in their formulation and implementation, critically
depends on sound national institutions,” the report notes.

The study further recommends that governments ensure that efforts to increase domestic revenue are designed in ways that curb inequality. In order to increase public resource mobilization, fiscal policies need to promote public investment that is sustainable, it says.

While governments are encouraged to take the lead on national development, the report highlights the importance of development partners in supporting the LDCs. “Actions by LDC development partners on trade, official development assistance (ODA), and other forms of external finance, including foreign direct investment, and technology transfer and acquisition will determine progress in ending poverty to a large degree,” the report says.

It adds that the UN Secretary-General’s proposal for a technology bank and an international investment support centre for the LDCs could play an important role in upgrading productive capacity, and leveraging the growth and poverty eradication effects of technology transfer and foreign direct investment inflows.

The reports concludes by calling for greater attention to be paid to eradicating extreme poverty in the LDCs within the ongoing post-2015 development agenda, especially since most of these countries will miss most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

As winter closes in, UN launches humanitarian appeal for Iraqis in need

23 October - An estimated 2.8 million Iraqis lack food assistance while another 800,000 are in urgent need of emergency shelter, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) warned today as it launched an appeal for greater financial support to bolster its operations on the ground.

In recent months, Iraq has been increasingly riven by conflict, terrorism and a swelling refugee crisis contributing to the Middle Eastern country’s deteriorating humanitarian situation. Neill Wright, OCHA’s acting Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, cautioned that the needs of some 5.2 million affected Iraqis had now become “immense” and urged the international community to step up its efforts through a $2.2 billion appeal envisioned in its updated Strategic Response Plan (SRP).

“This effort requires all of us – the UN, non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector – to work together. All of us have a role to play.”

Iraq has been convulsed by increasing instability over the past several months amid an ongoing offensive by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), unleashing wave after wave of internally displaced persons and refugees.

Just last week, an ISIL offensive against the Iraqi town of Hit prompted an estimated 180,000 people to flee the violence. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), many of those displaced were now sheltering with relatives and friends as well as in schools, mosques and public shelters already overwhelmed by Iraq’s mounting population of displaced persons.

At the same time, the agency warned, tens of thousands of Syrian refugees escaping the ISIL onslaught on the Syrian border town of Kobane were expected to cross into Iraq from Turkey, citing civil unrest, the high cost of living, difficulties with aid, and the desire to join family members already living in the Kurdistan region of Iraq among their reasons for entering the country. They join the estimated 1.8 million citizens internally displaced throughout the country in 2014 alone.

In its latest appeal, OCHA also noted that with the onset of winter, 1.26 million people remain in dire need of some form of
winterisation assistance, such as warm clothes, shoes, health services, and food.

**UN panel pays out over $1 billion in reparations for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait**

**23 October** - The United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC), which settles the damage claims of those who suffered losses in the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, today made $1.06 billion available to the Government of Kuwait.

With today's payment, the total amount in compensation received by the Government of Kuwait now amounts to $47.8 billion, leaving approximately $4.6 billion remaining to be paid.

The Geneva-based UNCC's Governing Council has identified six categories of claims: four are for individuals' claims, one for corporations and one for governments and international organizations, which also includes claims for environmental damage.

This category E claim was submitted by the Government of Kuwait on behalf of the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation and awarded $14.7 billion in 2000 for oil production and sales losses as a result of damages to Kuwait's oil field assets.

Successful claims are paid monies drawn from the UN Compensation Fund, which is financed by a percentage of the proceeds generated by the export sales of Iraqi petroleum and related products.

The Commission was established in 1991 as a subsidiary organ of the UN Security Council. It has received nearly three million claims, including from nearly 100 governments for themselves, their nationals or their corporations for losses and damages incurred as a direct result of Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait from 2 August 1990 to 2 March 1991.

The Government of Kuwait's claim represents the largest award by the Commission.

**Right to online privacy at risk as governments engage in mass surveillance – UN expert**

**23 October** - States must be transparent about the nature of their electronic mass surveillance programmes, an independent United Nations counter-terrorism expert said today as he warned about the impact such measures might have on individuals’ right to privacy.

“States need to squarely confront the fact that mass surveillance programmes effectively do away with the right to online privacy altogether,” Ben Emmerson, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism, told the General Assembly body dealing with cultural, social and humanitarian issues (Third Committee) during the presentation his latest report.

“Measures that interfere with the right to privacy must be authorized by accessible and precise domestic law that pursues a legitimate aim, is proportionate and necessary,” he continued, adding that he refused to “accept the analogy that sending an email is like sending a post-card” as States’ obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights also extended to the digital world.

Mr. Emmerson has long emphasized the need for transparency and accountability in government intelligence gathering operations. In 2012, for instance, he criticized the United States District Court of Washington, D. C.’s “unjustified maintenance of secrecy” following its decision to refuse freedom of information requests by a British organization on extraordinary renditions.
In his current report on the protection and promotion of human rights while countering terrorism, the Special Rapporteur conceded that the fight against terrorism remained a critical priority and could, in principle, “form the basis of an arguable justification for mass surveillance of the internet.” But, he stressed, bulk access technology remained “indiscriminately corrosive” of online privacy and impinged on “the very essence of the right to privacy.”

Mr. Emmerson called on all Member States involved in mass surveillance to provide a detailed and evidence-based justification for the systematic interference of their citizens’ privacy and emphasized the need for “strong and independent” oversight bodies that are “adequate for a review before these programmes are applied.”

“Individuals must have the right to seek an effective remedy for any alleged violation of their online privacy rights,” he said.

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the UN Human Rights 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.

**Mediterranean, North Atlantic prepares for UN-backed tsunami warning system test**

23 October - Some 20 nations with coastlines on the North Atlantic, and Mediterranean and Black Seas are set to participate in a United Nations-supervised tsunami warning exercise to improve their ability to respond to an alert and enhance regional coordination in the event of a disaster.

In a press statement released today, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – the body coordinating the warning test since its first implementation in 2005 – reported that four tsunami simulations will be carried out between 28 and 30 October in an effort to assess the overall reactivity of countries participating in the Tsunami Early Warning and Mitigation System for the North-eastern Atlantic, the Mediterranean and connected seas (NEAMTWS).

Although tsunamis are not as frequent an occurrence in this area of the globe as they are in the Pacific Ocean, the shores of the Mediterranean and North Atlantic are densely populated prompting concern that tsunami shockwaves could strike and cause widespread damage and fatalities. In 1755, for instance, a tsunami caused by an earthquake in the Azores-Gibraltar Fault Zone destroyed Lisbon, the capital of Portugal.

Another devastating tsunami swept over Messina, Italy in 1908, claiming tens of thousands of lives. And, more recently, in 2003, an earthquake in Algeria set off a tsunami that struck the shores of Spain's Balearic Islands and the southern coast of France.

UNESCO noted that due to the short distances they travel in small bodies of water such as the Mediterranean, tsunami occurrences there strike shores with “great speed.”

According to the UN body, the upcoming exercise, named NEAMWave14, is based on a scenario in which four earthquakes unleash two tsunami events in the Mediterranean, one in the Atlantic Ocean, and one in the Black Sea.

The Kandilli Observatory and Earthquake Research Institute in Turkey, the National Tsunami Alert Centre in France, the National Observatory of Athens in Greece and the Portuguese Sea and Atmosphere Institute, will send out the alerts, kick-starting the exercise, which set to involve a wide range of countries, including Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Malta, Monaco, Morocco, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

“The exercise will be an opportunity to test the efficiency of the communication systems in charge of transmitting tsunami alerts and, in some countries, to ensure that the authorities in charge of public safety are prepared to face such a threat,” UNESCO explained in its press release.
NEAMTWS is one of four regional systems which are coordinated by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) globally. Similar systems already exist for the Pacific and Indian oceans and for the Caribbean.

**UN expert urges Member States to consider justice as pillar of development**

23 October - The pursuit of development must expand beyond economic gains and include claims of justice, non-discrimination and opportunities, an independent United Nations expert told the General Assembly today.

In presenting her latest report to the UN body, Gabriela Knaul, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, cautioned delegates over the current development framework established by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), stating that it was “too limited conceptually to fully account for the human experience of development.”

“I strongly believe that the promotion of justice and the consolidation of the rule of law provide the necessary tools for the fostering of more equitable, inclusive and sustainable development,” Ms. Knaul said.

“When the administration of justice fails, impunity takes over and undermines democracy, the rule of law, people’s trust in State institutions, as well as opportunities for development.”

The Special Rapporteur urged Member States to adopt a human-rights based approach to development, suggesting that they insert “explicit references” to human rights standards and standards related to access to justice in the post-2015 sustainable development goals and targets. By failing to acknowledge the role of the justice system, she continued, the international community would “surely jeopardize the success of the Post-2015 development agenda.”

“Weak judicial systems that fail to guarantee access to justice for all lead to situations in which the most marginalized groups of the population are excluded from the judicial system, compounding the discrimination and vulnerability they are facing,” Ms. Knaul added.