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Backing Ukraine's territorial integrity, UN Assembly declares Crimea referendum invalid

27 March - In a vote that reaffirmed Ukraine's unity and territorial integrity, the United Nations General Assembly today adopted a measure underscoring that the mid-March referendum in Crimea that led to the peninsula's annexation by Russia "has no validity" and that the parties should "pursue immediately a peaceful resolution of the situation."

By a vote of 100 in favour to 11 against, with 58 abstentions, the 193-member Assembly called on all States, international organizations and specialized agencies not to recognize any alteration of the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol on the basis of the 16 March referendum "and to refrain from any action or dealing that might be interpreted as recognizing any such altered status."

Action in the Assembly follows months of ratcheting tensions in Ukraine triggered by the Government's decision last November not to sign an agreement on broader European integration. The capital, Kiev, erupted in violent demonstrations and street clashes in late January, culminating in the removal by Parliament of President Viktor Yanukovich.

Tensions continued to mount in the Crimea region, where Russian troops and armoured vehicles were deployed in February and a secession referendum was later held, in which, according to the UN, Crimean authorities announced that close to 97 per cent of those who voted did so in favour of the region joining Russia.

Subsequently, Crimea declared its independence, which in turn was recognized by Russia. In the immediate aftermath of those events, President Vladimir Putin signed a treaty to make Crimea part of Russia, while the Government in Kiev committed to never accept Crimea's independence or annexation.

Throughout, the UN has continued to press for a diplomatic solution to the crisis, with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson and other senior officials having visited the region, including Moscow and Crimea, over the past three weeks.



A wide view of the temporary General Assembly. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe (file)

The UN Security Council convened seven sessions on the situation in Ukraine, and at its eighth meeting, Russia, one of the 15-nation body's permanent members, blocked action by voting against a draft resolution that would have urged countries not to recognize the results of the referendum in Crimea.

The non-binding text adopted by the Assembly today contained similar language, underscoring that the referendum held in Crimea has no validity and cannot form the basis for any alteration of the status of Crimea or of the city of Sevastopol. It calls on all States to "desist and refrain" from actions aimed at the partial or total disruption of Ukraine's national unity and territorial integrity, "including any attempts to modify Ukraine's borders through the threat or use of force or other unlawful means."

Finally, the Assembly resolution makes explicit reference to the primacy of the UN Charter's call for the preservation of the unity and territorial integrity of all UN Member States, and also recalls the 1994 Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the 1997 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and Russian, and other bilateral agreements between Ukraine and Russia.

Secretary-General wraps up visit to Greenland with tour of Ilulissat Icefjord



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon tours the UNESCO World Heritage site of Ilulissat Icefjord in Greenland. UN Photo/Mark Garten

27 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon travelled to the Ilulissat Icefjord today as he wrapped up his visit to Greenland, which was aimed at building momentum ahead of the summit he will convene in September on climate change.

Designated a World Heritage site by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the fjord is the mouth of a glacier which has been studied for more than 250 years and has contributed to better understanding of climate change.

Mr. Ban's two-day visit to Greenland provided him with an opportunity to see first-hand the impacts of climate change, where the melting of ice sheets is accelerating.

Yesterday, Mr. Ban visited the town of Uummannaq, which is several hundred kilometres above the Arctic Circle, along with the Premier of Greenland, Aleqa Hammond, and Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt.

The UN chief expressed his deep concern at the fast-moving glaciers and by the fast-melting ice cap which raises the sea level, affecting the entire international community's environmental system.

"It's not only Greenland's people – it's the people of the whole world [who] are threatened because of this rapidly changing climate change," he said on Wednesday at a joint press encounter with the two officials.

"There may be still many studies to make, the nature and the impact of the climate change, but [there is] one, simple plain fact: climate change is happening much, much faster than we might think."

The climate summit planned for 23 September at UN Headquarters in New York comes ahead of a conference scheduled to take place next year in Paris to agree on a global, legal climate change agreement.

Mr. Ban has invited leaders of Government, business, finance and civil society to bring bold announcements and actions to address climate change to the summit, which will focus on solutions that demonstrate how early action can result in substantial economic benefits.

"We cannot negotiate with nature. A lot of disasters, natural disasters, have happened," he stated. "We have to take action now. The time is now, and I'm very much committed to working with world leaders."

Following his return to New York, Mr. Ban will travel next week to Brussels, Prague and Kigali.

Recent crisis in Anbar most serious challenge to state-building in Iraq – UN envoy

27 March - The crisis in Iraq's Anbar province, where three months of fighting has displaced over 66,000 families, poses the most serious challenge to the Government's efforts to maintain the stability and security needed to build a democratic State, a United Nations envoy told the Security Council today.

Nickolay Mladenov, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), said in his briefing to the 15-member body that since the crisis began in late December, the Council of Representatives has witnessed boycotts by three of its largest blocs.



Special Representative Nickolay Mladenov briefs the Security Council. UN Photo/JC McIlwaine

This has resulted in the inability of the Council of Representatives – Iraq's legislature – to secure a quorum for the majority of its sessions. It has also brought the entire legislative process to a halt during this critical time ahead of national elections scheduled for 30 April, he noted.

It is from Anbar, which has suffered months of attacks by the attacks being carried out by Al-Qaida-linked militants, that “the most serious threat to the security of the country stems,” said Mr. Mladenov, a Bulgarian national who was appointed to head UNAMI last August. It is also beginning to affect other parts of the country.

“The country's security is strained by well-armed and well-trained terrorist groups with access to substantial financial resources. Their goal is clear – establish a permanent foothold beyond the control of the authorities and consolidate a base for the expansion of their operations. They exploit divisions and weaknesses in Iraqi society and want to ultimately make the country ungovernable.”

The UN is also closely following all attempts to broker a peaceful solution to the Anbar crisis, said the envoy, who has engaged in intensive meetings with leaders from across the spectrum of Iraqi politics.

“In all meetings I have stressed that while the United Nations will support Iraq's fight against terrorism, the challenges facing the people of Iraq cannot be resolved without dialogue, and concessions,” he stated.

“While a security response is necessary to tackle the threat of armed groups and terrorists, a range of strategies are needed to successfully address the conditions that enable terrorist activity,” Mr. Mladenov stated. “The protection and advancement of human rights, equality before the law and the inclusion of those who feel marginalised will become central in any political resolution in the future.”

He reported that amidst the crisis, the UN's primary concern has been to provide life-saving assistance to those displaced by the fighting – over 66,000 families, many of whom remain trapped in areas of active conflict.

“The intensity and nature of the fighting is significantly constraining regular access by the UN and other humanitarian actors to those affected,” the envoy said. “Despite these difficult circumstances, the UN is delivering assistance where it can and has recently accessed areas that were previously unreachable.”

At the same time, Mr. Mladenov stressed that without securing additional funding, the UN will very soon be unable to continue its humanitarian assistance to those fleeing the fighting in Anbar.

As for the upcoming polls, which will be Iraq's third national election under the 2005 Constitution, he said that it is likely to be the country's most contested race to date. On the same day, voters in the Kurdistan Region will also choose their governorate council representatives.

“We are confident that from a technical perspective the two elections can take place on time,” he stated, noting that technical preparations are on track, including the distribution so far of 75 per cent of the new electronic voter registration cards, and

that security arrangements are also expected to be in place.

Mr. Mladenov, who was presenting the Secretary-General's latest report on the activities of UNAMI and the most recent developments in the country, also reiterated that Iraq's future cannot be considered in isolation from the broader challenges that the region is facing.

"As divisions continue to plague Iraqi politics, the ongoing conflict in Syria has added a regional dimension to sectarian tensions and is affording terrorist networks the occasion to forge links across the border and extend their support base.

"The situation is further compounded by unresolved constitutional issues that constantly bring to the fore the existing tensions between Iraq's communities. All this makes for a fragile and explosive combination."

Established in 2003, UNAMI is mandated to advise and assist the Government and people of Iraq on a number of fronts including advancing political dialogue and national reconciliation, assisting in the electoral process, facilitating regional dialogue between Iraq and its neighbours, and promoting the protection of human rights and judicial and legal reform.

UN rights council approves inquiry into alleged abuses in Sri Lanka war



Human Rights Council adopts resolution approving inquiry into alleged abuses in Sri Lanka war. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

27 March - The United Nations Human Rights Council today voted to open an international inquiry into alleged war crimes committed by both the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the final stages of a decades-long conflict that ended in 2009.

Adopted by a vote of 23 in favour to 12 against with 12 abstentions, the Geneva-based Council requested the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to undertake a "comprehensive investigation" into alleged serious violations and abuses of human rights and related crimes by both parties, and to establish the facts and circumstances of such alleged violations "with a view to avoiding impunity and ensuring accountability."

The Sri Lankan Government declared victory over the rebel LTTE in May 2009, after a conflict that had raged on and off for nearly three decades and killed thousands of people. The final months of the conflict had generated concerns about alleged violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

By its action today, the Council reiterated its call on the Government to implement the constructive recommendations made in the report of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission.

It also called on the Government to release publicly the results of its investigations into alleged violations by security forces, including the attack on unarmed protesters in Weliveriya in August 2013, and the report of 2013, by the court of inquiry of the Sri Lanka Army.

In her address to the Council yesterday, High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay stressed the need to ensure justice and accountability, including through the establishment of an independent and credible investigation, saying: "This is essential to advance the right to truth for all in Sri Lanka and create further opportunities for justice, accountability and redress."

She noted that in recent years, the Government has established various mechanisms with the task to investigate past violations. "But none have had the independence to be effective or inspire confidence among victims and witnesses," she stated.

At the same time, new evidence continues to emerge, and witnesses are willing to come forward to testify before international mechanisms in which they have confidence and which can guarantee their protection, the High Commissioner added.

“This shows that an international inquiry is not only warranted, but also possible, and can play a positive role in eliciting new information and establishing the truth where domestic inquiry mechanisms have failed.”

The Council has in the past called on the Sri Lankan Government to take credible steps to ensure accountability for alleged serious violations committed during the final months of the conflict.

Impartial justice key to reconciliation in Côte d’Ivoire ahead of polls – UN expert

27 March - The United Nations independent expert tasked with assessing the human rights situation in Côte d’Ivoire, expressed concern over unresolved issues in the national reconciliation process as the country prepares for presidential elections next year, and stressed that “impartial justice for all” is the key to stability and recovery from the unrest after the disputed 2010 disputed.

“The 2015 presidential election has to be the ultimate test and proof that Côte d’Ivoire has recovered from this crisis,” stated Special Rapporteur Doudou Diène as he presented his latest report to the Human Rights Council.

Drawing attention to some key lingering problems that need to be resolved so that the upcoming presidential election can be “credible and consensual,” Mr. Diène cited an “impartiality and equity of justice” and a “fully participating democratic process” as the main priorities.

The human rights expert warned that – for the time being – among the people charged with committing crimes, only partisans of former president Laurent Gbagbo are being tried or imprisoned. “All that have committed violent crimes whatever their political, ethnic or tribal or religious background should be tried,” Mr. Diène underscored.

With former President Gbagbo currently facing trial at The Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC), the Special Rapporteur further called for the trial of the country’s former first lady, Simone Gbagbo, to be expedited.

He also urged for an overhaul of the country’s independent electoral commission ahead of the 2015 elections. “Everybody agrees that it has to be reformed because it does not reflect the reality of the political landscape of Côte d’Ivoire,” Mr. Diène noted.

“Côte d’Ivoire is on the way of recovering from 10 years of violent crisis, but it is just a process because the crisis has been very deep,” the human rights expert said. “It will take time for Côte d’Ivoire to totally recover but I feel the grounds have been rebuilt and the basis is there for recovery.”

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the 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.



Supporters of former Ivoirian president Laurent Gbagbo at a rally in February 2014 in Koumassi town, south of Abidjan. There are worries over Côte d’Ivoire’s 2015 poll preparations. Photo: IRIN/Alexis Adele

China's Peng Liyuan named UNESCO envoy for advancing education of women, girls

27 March - Peng Liyuan, an internationally renowned musician and First Lady of China, has been named by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a Special Envoy for the Advancement of Girls' and Women's Education.

"The education of girls and women is a basic right, and the best possible investment for human development. To succeed, we need role models, and you are an immense role model for millions of young girls in China and beyond," UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said, addressing Peng Liyuan at a ceremony at the agency's Paris headquarters.

"I encourage you to make the message of girls' and women's education heard. I am convinced you can make a difference, and that you can play a leading role in this struggle that is of prime importance to the whole world," Ms. Bokova added.

Peng Liyuan is named in recognition of "her commitment to empowering girls and women through quality education, her outstanding contribution to fighting inequalities in education, her devoted service to human development and creativity, and her dedication to the ideals and aims of the organization," UNESCO stated in a news release.

"Right now, I am thinking of my father, who was the principal of a night school in a rural area, and with him, the mothers who began writing their first words and then teaching them to their children. In doing so, they were making basic education a possibility," said Peng Liyuan.

"A child's first teacher is its mother," added the First Lady. "Making sure that mothers are educated means we can lift more people out of poverty and build a more inclusive and sustainable society."

Born in Shandong province in 1962, Peng Liyuan is a famous soprano, a professor of music and an opera performer. She is Vice Chairperson of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and Vice Chairperson of the Chinese Musicians' Association.

She is also professor and PhD supervisor at the China Conservatory. Actively involved in public undertakings, she currently serves as the Voluntary Advocate for AIDS and tuberculosis control and prevention for the Chinese National Health and Family Planning Commission.

Also today, President Xi Jinping became the first ever Chinese head of State to visit UNESCO. Ms. Bokova described the visit by Mr. Xi and the First Lady as "historic" and highlighted the many activities jointly conducted by UNESCO and China, which bear witness to "China's clear vision to invest in 'soft power' – in education, the sciences and culture – to write a new chapter of its economic and social development."



UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova (right) nominates Peng Liyuan, a musician of international renown and First Lady of China, as a UNESCO Special Envoy for the Advancement of Girls' and Women's Education. Photo: UNESCO/Fabrice Gentile

Ban increasingly concerned about reported missile launches by DPR Korea

27 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is increasingly concerned about the successive reports of new launches of ballistic missiles by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), according to his spokesperson.

“Such launches are contrary to building trust in the region,” the spokesperson stated yesterday.

“The Secretary-General urges the DPRK to cease its ballistic missile activities and focus, together with other countries concerned, on the dialogue and diplomacy necessary to maintain regional peace and security.”



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. UN Photo (file photo)

DPRK reportedly test fired two medium-range ballistic missiles on Wednesday from a site north of the capital, Pyongyang, into the sea off its eastern coast. Several launches of short-range ballistics have been conducted in recent weeks, according to media reports.

The UN Security Council, which has imposed a series of sanctions on Pyongyang in recent years over its nuclear activities, is scheduled to discuss the matter in a closed-door session later today.

Youths key to strengthening agricultural sector in Africa – UN agency

27 March - Getting more African youths involved in agriculture and investing in the continent's vulnerable small family farmers will be pivotal to improving nutritional and economic well-being in the years to come, a senior United Nations official said today, citing water scarcity and conflict as some of the biggest challenges to achieve food security in the region by 2025.

“The region's economic growth rate is above the global average and most of the world's fastest-growing economies are in Africa,” noted José Graziano da Silva Director-General of the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) today during the agency's 28th Regional Conference for Africa, in Tunis.



Africa's youth is key to strengthening agricultural economy. Photo: FAO/Giampiero Diana

“The challenge is to translate this growth into social inclusion. Agriculture, rural development and youth can make this happen,” he told the gathering of African ministers of agriculture.

In a news release, FAO stressed that with Africa being the world's youngest continent – half of its population is under 25 – the rejuvenation of the agricultural sector is high on the conference's agenda.

“Every year, 11 million people enter [Africa's] labour market. But salaries are low in the rural sector, informality is high, agriculture is not considered as attractive by many of the region's youth, and social protection is not always available for rural families in critical situations,” explained Mr. da Silva.

FAO notes that though some African countries have shown impressive growth in the past decade, this has not translated into widespread employment or income for young people. The agency is calling for greater public and private investment in agribusiness, agro-industry and market-related services to attract and retain young workers, fuel job creation, and spur new development in the agricultural sector.

Drawing attention to the fact that the African Year of Agriculture and Food Security was being observed alongside the

International Year of Family Farming, Mr. da Silva called on African countries to "use this opportunity to put small farmers, fishers, pastoralists, forest collectors and traditional and indigenous communities at the centre of our agenda."

Emphasizing that some 90 per cent of rural African households are engaged in farming-related activities, he said in his address that "to achieve food security we need to combine the sustainable increase of production and social protection to provide a cushion for the most vulnerable."

Mr. da Silva also applauded the establishment of the FAO-housed Africa Solidarity Trust Fund, which is backed by the African Union, fully financed by African countries, and was developed in line with the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP).

Later in the week, the Director-General is expected to sign agreements releasing the first packages of funding to six countries – Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mali, Niger and South Sudan – for programmes and action plans supported under the Trust Fund. FAO has also supported countries in developing proposals for other sources of funding, including the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP), which has provided 15 African countries with a combined total of more than \$560 million.

Of the 60 developing countries worldwide that have met a hunger-reduction target outlined by the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG), 14 are on the African continent: Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Djibouti, Libya, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, South Africa, Togo and Tunisia.

To further this progress, FAO has implemented three regional initiatives, each responding to priorities identified by Member States: support to the renewed efforts to end hunger by 2025, promotion of a sustainable intensification of agricultural production and commercialization, and resilience-building in the drylands of Africa with a special focus in the Sahel, Horn of Africa and flood-prone countries.

Darfur: UN-AU officials voice concern at escalating violence, constraints on aid delivery

27 March - United Nations and African Union officials today voiced deep concern at increasing violence affecting civilians in Sudan's Darfur region and the growing constraints on the international community's ability to help those affected.

Over the last month, a wave of violence has been under way in Darfur, affecting tens of thousands of people, according to a joint statement issued by Joseph Mutaboba, deputy head of the joint UN-AU peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID), and Ali Al-Za'tari, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan.

They noted that since the beginning of 2014, more than 215,000 people in Darfur have been displaced from their homes.

"Many people in Darfur have no choice but to flee their homes in fear," they stated. "It is particularly troubling that, in the face of this violence, the UN and the humanitarian community at large are being increasingly constrained from helping the majority of those affected."

Due to the access restrictions and security constraints placed on humanitarian agencies, even monitoring the numbers of people who have been displaced from their homes is increasingly challenging, they said.

"Enormous amounts of humanitarian need are being generated by this violence, but our ability to assess the condition of people who have been affected by the conflict and deliver to them the aid that they need has been severely hampered.

"We call upon the Government of Sudan and all actors and parties involved in the conflict and the international community to take robust measures to ensure the protection of civilians and unimpeded access of aid workers in Darfur."



UNAMID troops escort World Food Programme (WFP) trucks during a trip from El Fasher to Shangil Tobaya, North Darfur on 10 February 2014. Photo: UNAMID/Albert Gonzalez Farran

Earlier this month, both Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay voiced deep concern about the recent escalation of violence in Darfur and its impact on civilians in the region, and urged an immediate halt to hostilities.

UN officials have repeatedly called on all sides to join negotiations aimed at achieving a permanent ceasefire and comprehensive peace for the people of the strife-torn region, which has witnessed fighting since 2003 between rebel groups and Government forces and their allies, militiamen known as the Janjaweed.

To move the peace process forward, the AU-UN Joint Special Representative for Darfur, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, attended a gathering of Zaghawa leaders yesterday in neighbouring Chad that was designed to build consensus in getting the Darfur armed movements to join the peace process.

Mr. Chambas emphasized the need for all the parties in Darfur to commit to dialogue without preconditions and to resolve differences through political not military means. "There is imperative need to recognize that after 10 years of fighting and attendant bloodshed in Darfur, nobody has emerged victorious," he said. "The lesson from this is very clear and simple – parties have to unconditionally find each other across the negotiation table and talk, and reach agreements."

He added that the ongoing attacks on villages and camps for the internally displaced are "an ugly blemish" on efforts to spur dialogue, and that regardless of who is ultimately responsible for the violence, "it must now stop."

The Joint Special Representative and head of UNAMID also highlighted the need to facilitate delivery of humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations. "Darfur has been experiencing one of the worst man-made humanitarian crises in the world," he said.

"Without enabling the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the multitudes of Darfuris who need it, our sincerity to finding a durable solution to the conflict is bound to flounder."

On path to global eradication, UN health agency certifies 11 Asian nations free of polio



The last case of polio in India was reported on 13 January 2011. Photo: WHO-SEARO/Anuradha Sarup

27 March - The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) today certified as polio-free 11 countries in Asia that together are home to a quarter of the global population.

Bangladesh, Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste constitute WHO's South-east Asia Region.

This is the fourth of six WHO regions to be certified, marking an important step towards global eradication of polio – a highly infectious virus that attacks the nervous system and can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours. With this step, 80 per cent of the world's population now lives in certified polio-free regions, the health agency stated in a news

release.

"This is a momentous victory for the millions of health workers who have worked with Governments, non-governmental organizations, civil society and international partners to eradicate polio from the region," said Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director for the WHO South-east Asia Region.

Before a region can be certified polio-free, several conditions must be satisfied, such as at least three years of zero confirmed cases due to indigenous wild poliovirus; excellent laboratory-based surveillance for poliovirus; demonstrated capacity to detect, report, and respond to imported cases of poliomyelitis; and assurance of safe containment of polioviruses in laboratories.

WHO noted that polio eradication programmes, through their networks and knowledge in reaching the 'unreached,' have strengthened the delivery of health services to the most vulnerable communities.



“Thanks to polio eradication, we now know where these children are who were difficult to reach with vaccine,” said Dr. Khetrapal Singh. “Now the polio programme has successfully reached them with polio drops in every round, there is no excuse not to go back with other critical health services, from how to have a safe birth, to where to get access to tuberculosis treatment and how to prevent HIV infection.”

Through the effort to eradicate polio, health personnel and community workers have been trained and provided with critical equipment to improve vaccination and health services for other childhood diseases. Comprehensive global laboratory and communication networks have been built and are being used for other diseases, including most recently to respond to avian influenza.

While celebrating the historic achievement, Dr. Khetrapal Singh also sounded a word of caution to maintain high vigilance against importation of polio. “Until polio is globally eradicated, all countries are at risk and the region’s polio-free status remains fragile,” she said, adding that a sensitive surveillance system, able to quickly detect and identify any importation and guide a programmatic response, is critical.