Response to ever-shifting needs in volatile Syria requires sustained donor support – UN relief chief

1 September - Even as aid agencies continue to reach those impacted by the Syria conflict, the needs of the 7.6 million people displaced by the war and the 4 million others who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries are “greater than ever,” and the world’s worst humanitarian crisis looks set to deteriorate even further unless a political solution is found, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator said today.

Thanks to the “generous contributions” by top donors and despite the “difficult and dangerous” conditions inside Syria that have killed 79 aid workers since March 2011, humanitarian agencies continue to stay and deliver to millions of people in need, Stephen O’Brien, who is also the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs told the Fifth Syria Top Donor group in Kuwait City.

Humanitarian agencies have delivered food aid, shelter, cash and vouchers, medical services, clean water supplies, psycho-social support and schooling to millions of people in Syria and in neighbouring countries, Mr. O’Brien said, and UN agencies were also able to “significantly scale up cross-border operations.”

But he also said “as the Syria crisis enters its fifth year, humanitarian needs are greater than ever.”

“One million people have been displaced by violence this year alone, many for the second or third time, and the humanitarian crisis only looks set to worsen if a political solution is not found,” said Mr. O’Brien.

He also noted that “funding shortfalls in Syria can be the difference between life and death.”
“Under-funding could have disastrous results on the civilian population both inside Syria and on Syrians who have crossed borders into neighbouring countries,” the top UN humanitarian official said. “Public services in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, which between them are hosting millions of refugees from Syria, are straining at the seams.”

Aid agencies have received just one third of the funding needed for the Syria Response Plan and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan. For 2015, he told the donors, the combined plans call for $7.42 billion, of which only $2.38 billion has been received, forcing aid agencies to scale back.

Without new funding, Mr. O’Brien warned, the World Food Programme has already scaled back food aid by one fifth, and food vouchers by as much as half for some displaced communities, and will have to further reduce its food aid and cash assistance.

UNICEF will not have the $185 million it needs to build, supply or staff new schools.

“This could jeopardize the education of 1.6 million children inside Syria,” he said, and “the funding gap will continue to deny 225,000 people access to life-saving health care inside Syria.”

“And unless donors come forward, the timely procurement of vital shelter supplies or clothes that Syrians will need to survive the winter months will not be possible,” he said.

Mr. O’Brien also drew attention to the consequences of the Syrian conflict “that will be felt many years after the fighting comes to an end – not only across the region, but also more widely as people flee Syria in search of safety and better opportunities.”

In the latest such report by UNICEF, the number of “exhausted and desperate” women and children making their way from Syria through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia seeking refuge in Europe has tripled just in the past three months.

“We are witnessing this in the growing migration crisis that is playing out on the shores of Europe, with the number of migrants and asylum seekers at record highs,” Mr. O’Brien said. “This growing crisis puts all the more onus on the need to find a political solution to the Syria conflict.”

Gaza could become uninhabitable in less than five years due to ongoing ‘de-development’– UN report

1 September - A new report published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development on assistance to the Palestinian people warns that the Gaza Strip could become “uninhabitable” by 2020 if current economic trends persist.

In addition to eight years of economic blockade, over the past six years, Gaza has endured three military operations that have shattered its ability to export and produce for the domestic market, ravaged its already debilitated infrastructure, and left no time for reconstruction and economic recovery.

According to UNCTAD, conflict has accelerated the “de-development” of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, a process by which development is not merely hindered but reversed.

The report highlights the severe crises in Gaza related to water and electricity, as well as the destruction of vital infrastructure during the military operations in July and August 2014. For example, it finds that Gaza’s 1.8 million inhabitants rely on coastal aquifers as their main source of freshwater, yet 95 per cent of this water is not safe to drink.

In addition to the 500,000 people who have been displaced in Gaza as a result of the most recent military operation, the report estimates significant economic losses, including the destruction or severe damage of more than 20,000 Palestinian...
homes, 148 schools and 15 hospitals.

Serious damage was also inflicted on Gaza’s sole power plant.

The UN estimates that in 2014, unemployment in Gaza reached 44 per cent, the highest level on record. UNCTAD describes the economic well-being of Palestinians living in Gaza as being worse today than two decades ago.

In fact, the report shows that with negative economic growth of minus 0.4 per cent last year, the economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory witnessed its first recession since 2006 and a fall in income per capita for the second year in a row. The deteriorating situation is reportedly due almost entirely to a range of “discriminatory” economic policies imposed on it.

These include Israel withholding almost $700 million of Palestinian clearance revenue, which comes from taxes on imports into the Occupied Palestinian Territory, compounding a fiscal crisis for the Palestinian National Authority, on whose behalf Israel collects the revenues.

Finally, UNCTAD is warning that donor support remains a necessary but insufficient condition for Gaza’s recovery and reconstruction. Short of ending the blockade, it said donor aid will remain vitally important but will not reverse the ongoing de-development and impoverishment in Gaza.

**General Assembly hands over draft global sustainability agenda to UN Member States**

1 September - The United Nations General Assembly today approved a resolution sending the draft ‘2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ to Member States for adoption later this month, bringing the international community “to the cusp of decisions that can help realize the… dream of a world of peace and dignity for all,” according to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

“This is the start of a new era. We have travelled a long way together to reach this turning point,” declared Mr. Ban, recounting the path the international community has taken over the 15 years since the adoption of the landmark Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) towards crafting a set of new, post-2015 sustainability goals that will aim to ensure the long-term well-being of our planet and its people.

With world leaders expected to adopt the text at a 25-27 September summit in New York, the UN chief said Agenda 2030 aims high, seeking to put people at the centre of development; foster human well-being, prosperity, peace and justice on a healthy planet and pursue respect for the human rights of all people and gender equality.

“It speaks to all people in all countries, and calls for action from everyone everywhere. It aims to inspire and create genuine partnerships among all countries and actors,” said Mr. Ban, underscoring that the Agenda prioritizes the vulnerable and marginalized, vowing to leave no one behind, marking a paradigm shift that would complete the unfinished business of the MDGs and lift the level of ambition and tackle emerging issues and challenges.

The Agenda and its adoption later this month mark the culmination of a series of watershed events in 2015, including Third International Conference on Financing for Development, in Addis Ababa in July, and efforts to forge a new path forward on climate change the 21st meeting of the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), widely referred to as COP-21 in Paris in December.

“Together, they are foundational steps to begin implementing the 2030 Agenda,” the Secretary-General explained, adding that those meetings will be followed by next year by further crucial steps, including the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May, the Habitat III, Conference in Quito in October and the special session of the UN General Assembly on the World Drug Problem.

“At this month’s Summit, we expect Heads of State and Government to not only endorse the new Agenda but to affirm their
strong political commitment to its timely implementation. I am delighted that more than 150 world leaders as well as His Holiness Pope Francis will join us to start this new era for sustainable development, said the UN chief, adding: “We must all now act with utmost ambition – and mobilize maximum political will.”

In his remarks, General Assembly president Sam Kutesa said the spirit with which the outcome document was formulated and agreed by consensus is a triumph for multilateralism. “We have proven that the global community can work together to address pressing issues facing humanity, while making the necessary commitments for the benefit of all.”

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the main component of the new development framework, are comprehensive and address the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in an integrated way, he said, and while the new Goals will be universally applicable, there is also recognition of national circumstances, different levels of development and the needs of countries in special situations, particularly the least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries, small Island developing States (SIDS) and Africa.

“As I have underscored before, the task ahead will be to ensure successful implementation of the new development agenda, once adopted. In this context, integrating it into our respective national development plans, mobilizing adequate financial resources, technology development and transfer and capacity building and ensuring effective follow-up and review will be critical.”

The international community and citizens around the world have waited for this moment with anticipation and great expectations, continued Mr. Kutesa. By adopting the draft resolution and transmitting the outcome document to the Summit for adoption of the post-2015 development agenda, “we will have taken an important step towards putting our world on a more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable path.”

“As we embark on this collective journey, we have to uphold the pledge that no one will be left behind.”

**Some 3,000 asylum-seekers now pass through former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia daily – UNICEF**

1 September - The number of “exhausted and desperate” women and children making their way from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq through the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia seeking refuge in Europe has tripled in the past three months, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said today.

“An estimated 3,000 people are transiting through the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia daily,” UNICEF said in a press release. “A third of them are women and children – up from 10 per cent in June. Some 12 per cent of the women are pregnant.”

UNICEF went on to say that “many families have been on the move with their children for months, enduring searing hot days, arriving with only the clothes and shoes they are wearing. They are physically exhausted and in desperate need of a place to rest. Many are suffering dehydration, blisters, cold, diarrhoea and sunburn.”

“Despite the best efforts, they need more water and greater access to sanitation and hygiene facilities,” the agency said. “Many are deeply distressed and some need medical assistance.”

Since June 2015, more than 52,000 people have been registered at the border’s Reception Centre in Gevgelija after entering from Greece, according to UNICEF, which also said “it is estimated that just as many transit through the country without being registered.”

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported seeing people arriving in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and moving on almost immediately by bus or train up to Serbia and then onwards from there.

According to figures from the Ministry of Interior, 80 per cent originate from Syria, while 5 per cent are from Afghanistan
and another 5 percent are from Iraq.

And “the number of women and children fleeing violence in their countries of origin and passing through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia seeking refuge in Europe has tripled in the past three months,” according to the agency.

UNICEF said “regardless of their status, children moving across borders, with their families or unaccompanied, should be given appropriate help and protection” and that earlier this year UNICEF had put forward a 10-point plan to the European Union to be guided on the best interests of children who were migrants or refugees.

“Their applications for refugee status should be processed swiftly and fairly at border crossings with proper monitoring and enforcement.” It said. ”Authorities in Europe should apply existing laws and policies to safeguard and protect the rights of children.”

UN refugee agency delivers aid to non-government controlled area in Ukraine for first time in weeks

1 September - The United Nations refugee agency announced today that it managed to deliver humanitarian aid to non-Government-controlled areas in eastern Ukraine for the first time in several weeks, including to Horvlika and other nearby areas north of Donetsk, which experienced heavy fighting in August.

Since the start of the conflict in 2014, the UN estimates that 40 per cent of the population has left, and according to local authorities only 150,000 out of 250,000 people remain there, said the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

“This past weekend, 13 UNHCR trucks carrying 260 metric tons of shelter materials and basic relief items travelled with support from the World Food Programme and partners,” said agency spokesperson Adrian Edwards, at the regular press briefing in Geneva.

The delivery also included reinforced plastic sheets, timber, plywood, roofing sheets, cement and other construction materials for acute and medium repairs.

Despite a ceasefire agreement signed in February 2015, fighting since the beginning of August around Horvlika has reportedly caused damage to residential areas and forced local residents to retreat into the basements of their ruined homes.

“More than 1,200 private houses were destroyed by shelling in Horlivka,” Mr. Edwards continued, “and many families’ homes have been left without roofs, windows or walls.”

According to local authorities, over 260 multi-storey buildings were damaged, including 17 hospitals and 82 schools and kindergartens. Six road bridges and nearly a quarter of the city’s heating facilities were also affected. As a result, there are reported disruptions in the provision of electricity and water.

UNHCR explained that the humanitarian and shelter goods which were delivered will provide over 5,000 families with material for emergency repairs. Another 110 households will receive shelter materials for light and medium repairs. Over 3,000 beneficiaries will be provided with basic relief items such as blankets, bed linen and towels.

The distribution to the affected civilian population will be organized in the next ten days under the supervision of the UNHCR partner ‘People in Need.’

In the past week, UNHCR also delivered assistance to over 1,500 people in Government-controlled areas. In particular, basic relief items were distributed to some 800 people in the area of Mariupol in the southern part of the Donetsk region.
UN environment agency unveils low-cost device for air quality monitoring

1 September - A ground-breaking air quality measuring device expected to cost up to 100 times less than existing solutions has the potential to “revolutionize” air quality measurement in developing countries and help prevent deaths from air pollution that claim 7 million lives each year, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

“We know from the World Health Organization (WHO) that 88 per cent of deaths related to outdoor pollution occur in low- and middle-income countries,” said UNEP Executive Director, Achim Steiner. “Yet it is these same developing countries that typically lack access to data on their air quality.”

“UNEP's device can spark a data boom to help countries reduce the negative effects of air pollution, potentially saving lives that would have been lost due to air pollution-related illnesses,” Mr. Steiner explained.

In an announcement in Nairobi, Kenya, where UNEP is headquartered, the agency said “the device, capable of collecting all the vital parameters of air quality, will cost around $1,500 per unit, allowing governments to establish a countrywide network of mobile and stationary air monitoring stations for as little as $150,000-200,000.

“Currently, roughly the same amount of money is necessary to set up just one monitoring station,” UNEP said, adding that it plans to make the blueprints of its device publically available.

“This will allow governments and organizations to assemble or fabricate the units themselves, creating opportunities for innovation, enterprise development and green job creation,” the agency said.

A pilot project, inaugurated Monday in Kenya’s capital, will further test the device and map the city’s air pollution hotspots.

“Preliminary test results, collected by the mobile monitoring unit, show that large parts of the city may have unsafe levels of air pollution, with certain areas particularly affected,” UNEP said.

Despite a generally lower degree of industrialization, according to the agency, African cities suffer the consequences of poor air quality, mainly due to high levels of particulate matter, containing hazardous airborne chemicals especially harmful to human health. Most fine particulate matter comes from fuel combustion, both from vehicles and stationary sources such as power plants, industry and households.

“Each year, air pollution causes 7 million premature deaths around the world, with outdoor pollution responsible for more than half of that total,” Mr. Steiner said. “Tragically, these deaths are wholly preventable.”
At UN, official stresses role of parliaments in success of sustainable development agenda

1 September - Parliaments have a critical role in translating the new sustainable development agenda – which world leaders will adopt later this month at the United Nations – into real improvements for the lives of the world’s people, says the head of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

“We are in politics because we want to make a difference in people’s lives. We want to enrich their lives. We want to help them live their dreams and this is the perfect opportunity to do so,” Saber Chowdhury said in an interview with the UN News Service on the margins of the Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament taking place in New York from 31 August to 2 September.

About 180 parliamentary leaders from nearly 140 countries have gathered for the conference, which occurs every five years, to examine ways to effectively tackle global challenges to peace and democracy.

This year’s conference is expected to place particular emphasis on achieving the 17 sustainable development goals due to be adopted at a special UN Summit from 25 to 27 September in New York. The SDGs, as they are commonly known, will set wide-ranging targets to be met by 2030, including ending extreme poverty and hunger, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and ensuring sustainable patterns of development and consumption.

“You now have a framework. You now have an internationally agreed document which we will have in a few weeks’ time here at the UN,” said Mr. Chowdhury. “We now need to deliver on that so that the trust and confidence that the people have place on us is respected.”

The summit outcome document, entitled “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” acknowledges the role of parliaments in translating the goals into concrete action through passing legislation, making budget allocations and holding governments accountable.

“This is the place where governments come and make pledges… they make a lot of promises. They make commitments. And we are basically here not to make pledges, but to make sure that the pledges that are made are in fact kept. And this is the job of parliaments,” noted the Bangladeshi national.

Mr. Chowdhury stressed that parliaments are a very important part of the puzzle when it comes to the success of the sustainable development agenda. “How parliaments respond to the SDGs, how they buy in, how they implement the SDGs will be critical to its success and implementation.”

He added that there is much that binds the IPU and the UN, most importantly the focus of both institutions on improving the lives of people.

“It is a singular focus on people, their well-being and their security, which is why I think, to a large extent, IPU and the UN are natural partners. If you look at the preamble to the Charter of the UN, it begins with the words ‘We the peoples of the United Nations,’ and IPU is the organization that is the global platform for elected representatives and institutions of the people.”

The Global Conference, organized by IPU and supported by the UN, is expected to conclude tomorrow with the adoption of a declaration which will feed into the Sustainable Development Summit.
New Ebola case in Sierra Leone prompts expansion of experimental vaccine trial – UN health agency

1 September - The detection of a new case of Ebola in Sierra Leone over the weekend after the West African country had marked almost three weeks of zero cases has prompted the use of an experimental vaccine to fight the disease, according to the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO).

“Although no-one wanted to see more cases of Ebola virus disease in Sierra Leone, we kept all our teams on alert and ready to respond and close down any new transmission” said Dr. Anders Nordstrom, WHO Representative in Sierra Leone.

A team of experts conducting the so-called “ring vaccination” trial in Conakry, Guinea travelled to the Kambia district in Sierra Leone where the new case was reported on Saturday, WHO said in a press release.

The source of the Ebola virus transmission is being investigated and all the people who may have been in contact with the infected person are being traced, according to the health agency.

Interim results published last July show that the Guinea ring vaccination trial vaccine is highly effective against Ebola. The ‘ring vaccination’ strategy involves vaccinating all contacts – the people known to have come into contact with a person confirmed to have been infected with Ebola – and contacts of contacts.

Meanwhile, heightened surveillance for Ebola virus disease in Sierra Leone includes swabbing all people who have died at home and testing those swabs for Ebola virus.

WHO said on Saturday, 29th August, a swab taken from a woman who died aged around 60, in the village of Sella, Tonko Limba, Kambia district, tested positive for Ebola virus.

Yemen: UN warns of ‘untenable’ humanitarian situation and steep increase in civilian causalities

1 September - The UN human rights office said today it is alarmed by the steep increase in the number of civilian casualties in Yemen’s Taiz governorate in recent weeks, as well as by the “untenable” humanitarian situation which is being made worse by the blockage of supply routes into Taiz city by local “popular committees” affiliated with the Houthis.

According to information gathered by the Office of the UN high Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), an estimated 95 civilians were killed and 129 injured in Taiz, located near the southern tip of the country, during the past two weeks. Fifty-three of these civilian deaths occurred on 20 August, reportedly as a result of a series of airstrikes by Saudi-led coalition forces that hit 20 homes near Salah Palace in Taiz.

Local reports indicated that active fighters in the Houthi popular committees – community-level armed groups – were believed to be based in the Salah Palace at the time. The other 42 civilians were killed as a result of sniper and shelling attacks, reportedly by members of the Houthi-affiliated popular committees.

The UN human rights office on Tuesday also reiterated its concern regarding the near collapse of the healthcare system in Taiz, where all six public hospitals are no longer operational due to fighting in the vicinity. In addition, the Houthi-affiliated popular committees have taken up military positions nearby and hospital staff and others are fearful of the associated risks.
This has reportedly caused smaller private hospitals with limited capacity to be overwhelmed with the vast number of severely injured patients, as well as by the outbreak of dengue fever in the area. According to the UN World Health Organization, over 420 cases of dengue fever have been suspected since 25 August.

Meanwhile, OHCHR is highlighting another serious incident which took place on 18 August in Amran governorate. An estimated 21 civilians, including four children and two women, were killed and 28 others injured, reportedly after an airstrike by coalition forces hit the office of the Teachers Syndicate. The teachers had gathered to prepare for the final examinations of primary and secondary students.

The disastrous impact on the humanitarian situation of attacks by coalition forces on Hodeida port, which is a key entry point for humanitarian supplies and commercial imports into Yemen, has also been described by OHCHR as very concerning. It is urging all parties to allow and facilitate unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief.

Since the conflict in Yemen escalated in late March, OHCHR has documented some 6,631 civilian casualties, including 2,112 civilian deaths, and 4,519 wounded.

However, the UN says the actual numbers are believed to be much higher.

**UN human rights office ‘deeply regrets’ resumption of executions in Chad**

1 September - Following the first executions in Chad since 2003, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) today deeply regretted today the resumption of the death penalty in that country and called for an official moratorium on its use.

OHCHR Spokesperson Cécile Pouilly called Saturday’s execution by firing squad of 10 people sentenced to death the day before “an extremely unfortunate development,” particularly given the Government of Chad’s abolition of the death penalty in 2014. The penalty was reinstated in an anti-terrorism law unanimously approved by Chad’s parliament on 30 July.

According to media reports, the men who were executed were believed to be Boko Haram militants, and were accused of involvement in deadly terrorist attacks in Chad’s capital N’Djamena in June and July.

OHCHR called upon the Chadian authorities to review the law, which contains a vague definition of terrorism that could be misapplied. The speed with which the executions were carried out was also a concern.

“Any trial that could lead to the imposition of the death penalty must rigorously comply with all aspects of a fair trial,” said Ms. Pouilly.
Somalia: UN envoy condemns attack on African Union base

1 September - The top UN official in Somalia, Nicholas Kay, has strongly condemned today’s attack by Al Shabaab militants on an African Union Mission (AMISOM) base at Janaale, Lower Shabelle Region manned by troops from the Ugandan contingent.

According to AMISOM, the militants used a car loaded with explosives to trigger the attack and to facilitate their forced entry into the camp after which they engaged soldiers in a gun-battle.

Full control of the base has reportedly been regained.

In a statement, Mr. Kay sent his deepest condolences to the families who lost loved ones and to the people and governments of Uganda and Somalia.

“These courageous peacekeepers sacrificed their lives in the ongoing efforts to bring lasting peace and security to Somalia,” he said, adding that the United Nations remains resolute in its support for the Somali people.

Mr. Kay, who is the head of the UN Assistance Mission in the country, known as UNSOM, also underlined that the UN’s solidarity with AMISOM and Somali security forces in their efforts to defeat Al-Shabaab “will not waver.”

The Security Council recently authorized the Member States of the African Union to maintain the deployment of AMISOM until 30 May 2016.