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‘Yemen is collapsing before our eyes,’ UN chief warns, urging international support to end crisis

12 February - Amid a dangerous political and humanitarian crisis and a seething secessionist movement, Yemen sits on the brink of collapse, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned the Security Council today, reminding the international community of its “solemn obligation” under the UN Charter to help the country prevent an escalation of the conflict and re-launch its political process.

“We have all been following recent developments in Yemen with the deepest concern,” said Mr. Ban, as he briefed the 15-member Council alongside the UN Special Advisor, Jamal Benomar. “Let me be clear: Yemen is collapsing before our eyes. We cannot stand by and watch,” the UN chief warned.

Despite the formation of a new Government in November 2014 aimed at ending a period of political turbulence and bringing about a full transition towards democracy, Yemen continues to be plagued by violence and mass political demonstrations.

Just two weeks ago, Mr. Ban voiced serious concern about developments following the abduction by the opposition group Ansarallah of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi’s chief of staff and the resignation of the President and Prime Minister amid a takeover of the capital, Sana’a by secessionist Houthi militants. This followed a steady deterioration since the beginning of the year as Government forces clashed with militant groups throughout the capital.

At the same time, the Secretary-General said today, “widespread and lethal” attacks by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and escalating hostilities between AQAP and the Houthis have pushed the country to the edge of civil war. These developments, coupled with a burgeoning humanitarian crisis which has enveloped an “astounding” 61 per cent of the population, now threaten regional and international peace and security, Mr. Ban added.



Damage to property and infrastructure caused by fighting between Government troops and militants is estimated at 95 per cent in some areas of Yemen. Photo: OCHA/EmanAl-Awami

“Given these troubling circumstances, we all have a solemn obligation to live up to our commitments under the UN Charter,” he continued. “We must do everything possible to help Yemen step back from the brink and get the political process back on track.”

The Secretary-General pointed out that Yemen’s transition had, in fact, an agreed roadmap. Nonetheless, he also appealed to all members of the Council to work closely with regional and international partners to help de-escalate tensions in the Gulf country and “pave the way for a peaceful way forward through political negotiations.”

In addition, he said members should urgently boost funding for the 2015 Humanitarian Response Plan – a critical element towards “preventing an escalation of the conflict and creating the basis for reverting to peaceful political transition, which I firmly believe is the way forward.”

UN Special Adviser on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, who has continued to facilitate negotiations with all national stakeholders despite very difficult operational circumstances, also cautioned the Council that Yemen stood at a “crossroad.”

“Either the country will descend into civil war and disintegration, or the country will find a way to put the transition back on track,” he declared. “This largely depends on the political will of Yemeni leaders. They all bear responsibility for the current state of affairs, as well as responsibility for finding a way to pull the country from the brink.”

The transition, he said, had managed to make “good progress” despite the “many minefields” encountered along the way. Now, however, it remained in disarray amid a series of “dramatic events” including unilateral actions by Ansarallah which had created a “strong backlash domestically and internationally.”

The effects of this continuing instability have transformed Yemen into a patchwork of simmering feuds – an explosive mix of unresolved grievances which risk inundating the entire peace-making process. In the oil-rich province of Mareb, for instance, Mr. Benomar noted that the situation had become “very tense” with many locals fearing an imminent confrontation between Houthis and tribesmen. Meanwhile, in the South, the situation remains volatile with Southerners, long marginalized and excluded from Yemeni political life, now demanding full separation.

The Special Adviser also reiterated Mr. Ban’s concerns about the resurgence of AQAP and Yemen’s brimming financial insecurity which, he cautioned, would only further exacerbate the country’s deep humanitarian crisis.

“The political, humanitarian and security environments pose serious challenges for UN operations. Nevertheless, the UN will not leave,” he continued. “Despite all the setbacks this dream is still alive. The Yemenis can still make it. The Security Council and the international community have a responsibility to support them in these difficult times.”

Ban commends ‘intensive’ diplomatic efforts to end Ukraine crisis, urges respect for cease-fire terms

12 February - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today commended the perseverance of the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany to bring the conflict in Ukraine to an end, resulting in the signing of a package of measures for the implementation of the Minsk accords of September 2014.

A statement issued by his spokesperson said the Secretary-General has closely followed the intensive diplomatic efforts under way in Minsk, Belarus, over the past two days. The talks have resulted in a ceasefire and, reportedly a peace roadmap towards ending the Ukraine conflict.



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. UN Photo/Mark Garten (file)

In that regard, Mr. Ban, according to the statement, expects that the commitments which have been made in Minsk will be respected by the parties. “He urges the parties concerned to ensure that a genuine and lasting cease-fire will commence on 15 February as agreed, paving the way for a broader political settlement of the conflict, based on the Minsk accords,” it adds.

The United Nations stands ready to assist in any way deemed helpful, the statement continues, noting that the Organization will continue to monitor the human rights situation and deliver humanitarian support to those in need.

“The Secretary-General joins the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany in reiterating full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine,” the statement concludes.

The Ukraine crisis began to deepen in late February 2014 when it evolved from an initial internal political crisis into violent clashes in parts of the country. It later reached full-scale conflict in the east. Despite an earlier Minsk cease-fire, the situation in Ukraine has since continuously deteriorated, with serious consequences for the country's unity, territorial integrity and stability. Recent media reports have suggested a potential worsening of the situation amid claims of a massive recruitment campaign by anti-Government groups.

UN, partners seek \$2 billion to help millions of people across Africa's Sahel region



Drought has affected residents of the Mbera refugee camp, Mauritania, in the Sahel region of Africa. Photo: WFP/Justin Smith

12 February - The United Nations and its partners today launched an appeal for nearly \$2 billion to provide vital humanitarian assistance to millions of people in nine countries across Africa's Sahel region.

“I am gravely concerned by the crisis in the Sahel. Families are extremely vulnerable to changes in the climate and many are affected by insecurity and the precarious economic situation in many countries,” said UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos.

“We need the support of the international community and sustained government leadership to ensure that we do not forget the people of the Sahel,” she added, referring to a region that stretches across the southern fringe of the Sahara desert and is one of the harshest

environments in the world.

Some 145 million people in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal live in a region that is constantly challenged by chronic food and malnutrition crises, and is vulnerable to climate change, droughts and unpredictable rainfall.

The Sahel humanitarian appeal for 2015, launched today in New York and totalling \$1.96 billion, is part of a regional multi-year strategy to respond better to the chronic challenges in the region by emphasizing early intervention and forging closer partnerships with governments and development actors.

Over 20 million people in the region are short of food, 2.6 million of whom need life-saving food assistance now; and nearly six million children under the age of five are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2015.

Violent conflict and insecurity have worsened over the last 12 months in many of the countries. As a result, 2.8 million people have been uprooted from their homes, over one million more than this time last year.

“Violence in north-east Nigeria, the volatile situation in Mali, and the crisis in the Central African Republic are creating more suffering for communities that are already amongst the poorest in the world,” said Robert Piper, the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel.

In an interview with the *UN News Centre*, Mr. Piper noted that number of people in need is vast. “With that \$2 billion we aim to provide food assistance to almost 10 million people; to treat 3.2 million acutely malnourished children; to protect up to 10 million people from epidemics; and to get at least 2 million children into schooling that are in emergency conditions.

“These are very big numbers but you can imagine behind these numbers is a huge amount of suffering in terms of households, in terms of uncertainty for the future. So the stakes are extremely high.”

Security Council approves resolution targeting sources of financing for ISIL

12 February - Urging global cooperation “to impair, isolate and incapacitate” terrorist threats, the United Nations Security Council today approved measures targeting sources of funding for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Al-Nusra Front (ANF), condemning those buying oil from the groups, banning all trade in looted antiquities from Iraq and Syria, and calling on States to end ransom payments.

Unanimously adopting a Russian-led resolution, the Council reiterated its deep concern that oilfields, as well as other infrastructure such as dams and power plants, controlled by ISIL, ANF and other Al-Qaida-associated groups, “are generating a significant portion of the groups’ income, alongside extortion, private foreign donations, kidnap ransoms and stolen money from the territory they control.”

As such, the Council, acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter – which authorizes the use of force – condemned any engagement in direct or indirect trade, in particular of oil and oil products, and modular refineries, with ISIL, ANF and Al-Qaida affiliates, and reiterated that “such engagement would constitute support for such individuals, groups, undertakings and entities and may lead to further listings” by the relevant Sanctions Committee.

Today’s resolution, which bolsters the Council’s previous measures to cut off financing for ISIL and its affiliates, reaffirms the existing obligations of Member States to “freeze without delay” funds and other financial assets or economic resources of persons who commit, or attempt to commit, terrorist acts.

Coming in the wake of a spate of particularly vicious killings, including the beheading of a Japanese journalist and the immolation of a Jordanian pilot by ISIL in the past two weeks, the Council’s resolution reaffirms its condemnation of kidnapping and hostage-taking committed by the groups, further strongly condemns abduction of women and children, and expresses “outrage at their exploitation and abuse, including rape, sexual abuse, forced marriage.”

The resolution also condemns the destruction and smuggling of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria by ISIS and ANF, “whether such destruction is incidental or deliberate, including targeted destruction of religious sites and objects.” It also notes with concern that the groups are generating income from engaging directly or indirectly in the looting and smuggling of cultural heritage items.

Against that backdrop, the Council decided “that all Member States shall take appropriate steps to prevent the trade in Iraqi and Syrian cultural property and other items of...historical, cultural, rare scientific and religious importance illegally removed from Iraq since 6 August 1990 and from Syria since 15 March 2011.” Encouraging steps to ensure such items are returned to their homelands, the Council called on the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Interpol, and other international organizations to assist in such efforts.

The resolution goes on to reaffirm that payment of ransoms to individuals, groups, undertakings or entities on the Al-Qaida Sanctions List, regardless of how or by whom the ransom is paid is considered a violation of international legal obligations. It calls upon all UN Member States to encourage private sector partners to adopt or to follow relevant guidelines and good practices for preventing and responding to terrorist kidnappings without paying ransom. Gravely concerned at the role of external donations in developing and sustaining ISIS and ANF, the Council urges States to take steps to ensure that financial institutions within their territory prevent these groups from accessing the international financial system.

Just after the resolution was adopted, UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova, welcomed the measure’s explicit condemnation of destruction of cultural heritage and its approval of legally-binding measures to counter illicit trafficking of antiquities and cultural objects from Iraq and Syria.



Ambassadors representing two countries under attack from ISIL, Bashar Ja'afari (right) of Syria, and Mohamed Ali Alhakim of Iraq, speak to journalists following the adoption of a Security Council resolution targeting sources of financing for the group. UN Photo/Mark Garten

Calling the resolution a “milestone for enhanced protection of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria,” she said that pillage and destruction of the countries’ culture has reached an unprecedented scale. “It fuels the conflict by providing revenues for armed groups and terrorists. This resolution acknowledges that cultural heritage stands on the frontline of conflicts today, and it should be placed on the frontline of the security and political response to the crisis,” she added.

Welcoming the explicit role attributed to UNESCO by the Security Council, the Director-General reaffirmed the agency’s organization’s commitment “to stand by Member States to ensure the full respect of the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property”.

On International Day, UN demands end to use of child soldiers in conflict



This child soldier, demobilized in South Sudan in 2015, has never been to school and he really wants to go to school now. Photo: UNICEF/2015/South Sudan/Doune Porter

12 February - From Afghanistan to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as the world's conflicts become more brutal, intense and widespread, children are finding themselves increasingly vulnerable to recruitment and deployment by armed groups, the United Nations warned today.

In a joint press release marking the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, observed every 12 February since 2002, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict called for “urgent action to end grave violations against children” and appealed to all parties of conflicts to meet their obligations under International Law.

“While Governments of the world have made progress to recognize children have no place in their armies, the recruitment of child soldiers is still a huge problem, especially with armed groups,” said Leila Zerrougui, the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

“Out of 59 parties to conflict identified by the Secretary-General for grave violations against children, 57 are named because they are recruiting and using child soldiers,” she added.

According to the UN, tens of thousands of boys and girls are associated with armed forces and armed groups in conflicts in over 20 countries around the world. In Afghanistan, for instance, children continue to be recruited into national security forces and, in some extreme cases, used as suicide bombers. Meanwhile, in the territories of Iraq and Syria controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), children as young as 12 are undergoing military training and being used to carry out suicide bombings and executions as well.

At the same time, a number of conflicts in Africa have witnessed a rise in the use of children for military purposes. In the Central African Republic, where sectarian violence continues to ripple across the country, boys and girls as young as eight years old have been recruited and used by all parties to the conflict.

According to the press release, the DRC has witnessed a similar phenomenon in child soldier recruitment with boys being dispatched into conflict while girls are reportedly commissioned as sex slaves. In South Sudan, some child soldiers have been fighting for up to four years and many have never attended school. In the last year alone, 12,000 children, mostly boys, have been recruited and used as soldiers by armed forces and groups in South Sudan as a whole.

“The release of all children from armed groups must take place without delay. We cannot wait for peace to help children caught in the midst of war,” said UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Yoka Brandt.

“Investing in ways to keep children away from the frontlines, including through education and economic support, is absolutely critical to their future and the future of their societies.”

Partnerships key for future development agenda, says UN Economic, Social Council President



President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Martin Sajdik. UN Photo/Evan Schneider

12 February - Multi-stakeholder partnerships hold the key to achieving global development goals, Martin Sajdik, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has said, stressing that ending poverty, transforming people's lives and protecting the planet will require more than the work of States alone and must draw from a diverse cross-section of actors.

"I think that without an all-encompassing approach toward the implementation of the post-2015 agenda, we will not be able to really fully succeed and implement the agenda," said Mr. Sajdik in a recent article for *Devex Impact*, an initiative between Devex and USAID.

The ECOSOC President's observations come as the world prepares to wrap up by the end of this year, the landmark UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed 15 years ago. There has been significant progress in meeting the targets. For example, global poverty has been halved well ahead of the 2015 deadline; in developing countries, 90 per cent of children now enjoy primary education; the number of people lacking access to improved drinking water has been halved, and the fight against malaria and tuberculosis has shown results.

Yet challenges persist, and with the deadline of the MDGs set for the end of this year, UN Member States are crafting a new set of targets, now known as sustainable development goals (SDGs). This new agenda will aim to address a raft lingering and emerging challenges, such as the fact that globally, 73 million young people are looking for work and many more are trapped in exploitative jobs.

Amidst a flurry of actions by bilateral and multilateral donors, foundations and non-profits, the agenda's framework and funding will include both private sector and other non-State actors.

"You cannot only rely on State actors," Mr. Sajdik emphasized, "if we want to have a development agenda that is for all countries of the world both developed and developing, we cannot ignore the fact that there are many more actors."

In a so called 'synthesis' report presented to the UN General Assembly last month – *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet* – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon lays out the way forward, and among others, he stresses strengthening the means of implementation to revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

To that end, Mr. Sajdik said the UN is eager to more actively engage with business, especially through its Global Compact initiative for businesses that are committed to aligning their operations and strategies with universally accepted principles in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption.

Participation has grown rapidly, with more than 12,000 corporate participants and other stakeholders from more than 145 countries involved, a sign, according to Mr. Sajdik, that more companies see the importance of sustainability.

Still, he told *deveximpact*, it is a work in progress. Governments need to be better educated about the role of the private sector and there should be better parameters for partnership engagement, which will be one of ECOSOC's main areas of focus in the first half of this year.

That engagement needs to happen at various levels – from the global to the regional to the national – and ECOSOC is gathering examples of structures that governments can use to bring together stakeholders at a national level, encourage information sharing through regional bodies and work to further integrate stakeholders in top-level political forums, Mr. Sajdik added.

He picked up that thread in an article published for *The Guardian*, where he underscored that there is no question that



broader, more strategic relationships with the private sector and civil society can yield great impacts for people at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

“Engaging with the private sector can mean more than generating financial support, but also tapping into skills and innovative solutions for addressing the root causes of poverty, and advancing the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development,” he said, adding: “We must work closely with stakeholders like the private sector ... to build a climate that is open to the needs of enterprises and the very real determinants that effect how they make decisions.”

Spotlighting the role of ECOSOC, he said the body has provided space for member governments, the private sector, the philanthropic community, academia, non-governmental organization (NGOs) and others to hold a dialogue on ways to partner in support of the UN’s development goals. Moreover, for the past six years, it has held an annual partnerships forum where stakeholders were brought together to jointly mobilize efforts across sectors such as public health, education, science and technology.

The ECOSOC President went on to say business has been widely recognized as an important partner in development, be it in terms of bringing knowledge and expertise, driving innovation and technology transfer, or financing innovation. The private sector’s full commitment is thus vital for the success of the post-2015 agenda, and for creating a global partnership that is both inclusive and people-centred.

“Clearly, the operative word here must be collaboration and we need to be realistic about getting more companies, including small and medium enterprises, into the dialogue and ideally build on existing networks, chambers of commerce to help broaden how the UN supports and engages business going forward,” said Mr. Sajdik.

At high-level debate, UN officials urge boosted efforts for security sector reform



People displaced by fighting between armed groups in the Central African Republic (CAR), seek refuge in Batangafo, north of the capital Bangui. Photo: OCHA/Gemma Cortes

12 February - Security sector reform, good governance, the rule of law, and accountable institutions are critical building blocks for a sustainable future, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson declared today as he urged a greater international focus on security sector reform as part of an effort to strengthen the links between peace and security, development, and human rights.

“Security spending alone, without good governance and the rule of law, does not necessarily result in higher levels of safety and stability for citizens, countries or regions. Nor does it necessarily enhance development,” Mr. Eliasson said addressing the high-level meeting of the Group of Friends of Security Sector Reform earlier today at UN Headquarters in New York.

He added that from Liberia and the Central African Republic to Somalia, security sector reform efforts had to be deeply embedded within the country itself, rather than imposed from the outside, and he observed that commitment from host governments remained “absolutely critical.”

According to the UN, security sector reform is a process which aims to “enhance effective and accountable security for the State and its peoples” by transforming the security sectors – defence, law enforcement, corrections, intelligence services and institutions responsible for border management, customs and civil emergencies – into more accountable and professional institutions which fully respect human rights and the rule of law.

Providing an example, Mr. Eliasson pointed to Guinea where, under the leadership of the President, a \$12 million UN Peacebuilding Fund allocation had successfully supported “a difficult political transition.” Yet in South Sudan, a lack of broad-based political agreement on security sector reform or on how to resolve the country’s ongoing political crisis had left the young African nation teetering on the brink of a massive security and humanitarian crisis.

To secure the full implementation of security sector reform, the Deputy Secretary-General suggested what he described as

four “cross-cutting priorities”: securing political commitments and leadership by incorporating security sector reform into the mandates of senior leaders; integrating such reform with critical peacekeeping and peacebuilding tasks; deepening and broadening partnerships; and strengthening the evaluation capacity of the UN and Member States.

Also addressing the High-Level debate, Assistant Secretary-General for the Rule of Law and Security Institutions, Dmitry Titov, similarly warned that poorly trained and inadequately equipped security forces are “a threat not only to safety and stability, but also basic rights, such as the freedom of expression” – a problem which has become “all too common” in peacekeeping settings.

To that point, he proposed three priorities which, he said, should be applied within a peace operating context: the training and equipping of national security forces and the development of national governance capacities; the creation of operational partnerships; and the establishment of inclusive political agreements that ensure the popular legitimacy of the State and national ownership of security sector reform.

“Weak institutions and flaws in the rule of law are among the most serious obstacles to sustainable development,” Mr. Eliasson continued. “Inclusive and accountable security institutions, that uphold the rule of law and respect human rights, are a necessary element for sustainable development.”

Ebola: World Bank will provide seeds to farmers in West Africa to ward off hunger



Photo: FAO

12 February - The World Bank Group announced today that it has mobilized some \$15 million in emergency financing to provide a record 10,500 tons of maize and rice seed to more than 200,000 farmers in the countries most-affected by the unprecedented Ebola outbreak, in time for the April planting season.

“Agriculture is the lifeline of the economies of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone,” said Makhtar Diop, World Bank Vice-President for Africa. “By speeding supplies of urgently needed seeds of major food crops to communities in West Africa, we are jumpstarting recovery in rural areas and preventing the looming specter of hunger in the countries hardest hit by Ebola.”

According to the World Bank, “more than one million people could go hungry unless they have reliable access to food and emergency measures are taken immediately to safeguard crop and livestock production.”

A recent World Bank Group report shows that the Ebola crisis has taken a heavy toll on the economies in all three countries, and the agriculture and food sectors have been particularly hard hit.

“Reports show that desperate farming families have resorted to eating stored seed originally intended for use in the next cropping cycle. Rural flight has caused harvest-ready crops to wither in the fields,” the World Bank said in its announcement.

The funds in the amount of up to \$15 million, in the form of grants financed by the International Development Association (IDA) and the Ebola Recovery and Reconstruction Trust Fund, will also be used to purchase fertilizer required to multiply foundation seed to meet tight planting season deadlines and help lay the foundations for sustained recovery, according to the announcement.

Meanwhile, the top United Nations development official, tasked by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to lead the Organization’ system-wide Ebola-related recovery planning, is in Guinea on the first leg of her weeklong visit to the region.

As she arrived in the capital, Conakry, Helen Clark, Administrator of the UN Development Program (UNDP), noted that Ebola cases had doubled for a second week in a row. “This terrible disease isn’t beaten yet,” she added.

Meanwhile, the UN mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) reported that Sierra Leone has announced that

schools will reopen on 30 March, after a seven-month shutdown to limit the spread of the Ebola virus. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been leading response partners support authorities with the safe re-opening of schools.

The World Bank Group's push marks an unprecedented effort through one of its regional programs that spans 13 West African countries, including the three Ebola-hit countries.

Country teams fanned out and identified seed suppliers in neighboring countries. Advance preparations ahead of the planting season include elaborate plans to source seeds from eight countries, completion of needs assessments, sourcing of seed suppliers, and organizing in-country distribution of seeds and fertilizers to farmers in a timely manner.

To enable free movement of seed-laden trucks, travel routes have been pre-arranged and the intergovernmental Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has authorized customs and border control authorities to let the trucks pass without difficulty.

According to the latest estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP), in Guinea, 230,000 people are food insecure and that number could rise to more than 470,000 by March 2015. Similarly, 170,000 people in Liberia are food insecure and absent interventions, the number of hungry people could top 300,000. In Sierra Leone, over 120,000 people are food insecure and their numbers could climb to more than 280,000.

According to the World Bank Group, it has mobilized about \$1 billion in financing for the countries hardest hit by the Ebola crisis.

Ban appoints two new UN refugee officials



UNHCR aid getting ready to be transported. Photo: UNHCR/S. Modola

12 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has appointed two officials at the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – George Okoth-Obbo as Assistant High Commissioner for Operations and Volker Türk as Assistant High Commissioner for Protection – the UN announced today.

Mr. Okoth-Obbo of Uganda will succeed Singapore's Janet Lim while Mr. Türk of Austria replaces Erika Feller of Australia.

Both Mr. Okoth-Obbo and Mr. Türk boast impressive careers within UNHCR with the former having previously served as the agency's Director of the Regional Bureau for Africa and the latter as Director of UNHCR's Division of International Protection.

UN expert warns African governments against privatizing basic education



Kisojo Model Primary School in Kyenjojo District in Uganda. Photo: UNICEF/NYHQ2010-1482/Shehzad Noorani

12 February - Free, quality basic education is a fundamental human right for all, and governments must not delegate this responsibility to the private sector, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education urged authorities in Africa today.

"Education is not a privilege of the rich and well-to-do; it is an inalienable right of every child. Provision of basic education free of costs is a core obligation of States," Kishore Singh said after education authorities considered, among other issues, possibly cutting costs by promoting the expansion of private education.

African education authorities discussed the possibility of reducing States' education spending during the Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Ministerial Conference on Education

Post-2015 African in Kigali, Rwanda.

Mr. Singh voiced his deep concern that some governments were actively encouraging private basic education, emphasizing,

“Now more than ever, governments should be expanding public educational opportunities for the marginalized groups, especially children from poor families.”

He recalled his 2014 report to the UN General Assembly, which emphasizes the importance of preserving education as a public good and not a profit-making business and underscores the principles of non-discrimination, equal opportunity, social justice and equity.

“Privatization in education negatively affects the right to education both as entitlement and as empowerment. Moreover, it depletes public investment in education as an essential public service and can lead to abusive practices,” the Special Rapporteur stressed.

He noted that, in the context of the UN post-2015 development agenda, “education deserves to be a high priority, receiving a high degree of public investment in recognition of the fact that it benefits both the individual and society.”

Mr. Singh called on governments “to stand against the idea of privatising basic education and to strengthen their public systems. Free basic education is the cornerstone of the right to education and must not be undermined through privatization.”

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based 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.

Middle East: UN launches appeal for Palestinians as humanitarian needs surge

12 February - The United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territory today launched an appeal to boost funding for more than a million Palestinians who continue to face grim conditions on the ground and an uncertain future.

In a press release issued earlier today, James Rawley, who also functions as the UN’s Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, presented the 2015 Strategic Response Plan in an effort to raise the \$705 million required to help 1.6 million Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank with their sharply increasing humanitarian needs.



The pace of reconstruction in Gaza remains slow. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

“2014 was a tragic year for Palestine,” Mr. Rawley explained. “Approximately 100,000 people are still unable to return to their homes in Gaza, and in the West Bank, thousands more live in chronic insecurity, at risk of losing their homes and livelihoods as a result of demolitions.”

According to UN estimates, a lack of donor support for the Plan would result in the continued displacement of over 22,000 families while up to 1.6 million people across the occupied Palestinian territory would be deprived of adequate water and sanitation services, and food assistance. Access to basic healthcare and education would also be compromised, Mr. Rawley added.

As a result, the 2015 Strategic Response Plan will seek to carry out a total of 207 projects presented by 77 organizations, including 64 national and international Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) as well as 13 UN agencies, with almost 80 per cent of the funding aimed at providing shelter and enhancing food security. Over 75 per cent of the requested funds target needs in the war-torn Gaza enclave.

Despite UN efforts to assist in its recovery, Gaza continues to reel from last summer’s conflict with Israel, in which nearly 2,200 Palestinians and 70 Israelis died during the 50 days of fighting.

In addition, the violence saw the wide-scale destruction of property. According to a recent UN assessment, over 100,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, affecting more than 600,000 people. Many people still lack access to the municipal

water network and blackouts of up to 18 hours per day are common.

“Alongside the humanitarian response, we need fundamental changes, particularly in Gaza which is teetering on the brink of another major crisis,” Mr. Rawley continued. “Above all, the fragile ceasefire needs to be solidified, the blockade lifted, human rights respected, and a political solution reached for the entire Palestinian territory.”

European Union needs robust search-and-rescue operation at sea – UN refugee agency



A line of hearses wait at the harbour on Lampedusa Island to collect bodies of people who lost their lives in the 9 February 2015 high seas tragedy. Photo: UNHCR/F. Fossi

12 February - The top United Nations official for refugee issues today urged the European Union (EU) to change its approach to dealing with irregular crossings of the Mediterranean Sea and make saving lives the topmost priority following the death earlier this week of some 300 people fleeing Libya on four dinghies.

“If not, it is inevitable that many more people will die trying to reach safety in Europe,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres warned in a press release issued today by his Office (UNHCR).

“There can be no doubt left after this week’s events that Europe’s Operation ‘Triton’ is a woefully inadequate replacement for Italy’s ‘Mare Nostrum,’” said Mr. Guterres was referring to the deaths this week of at least 300 people who were trying to reach Europe

from Libya on four dinghies.

“The focus has to be about saving lives,” he said. “We need a robust search-and-rescue operation in the Central Mediterranean, not only a border patrol.”

Earlier this week, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, François Crépeau,

said asylum-seekers and migrants will continue to arrive and stay in Europe “no matter what” and that “migrants will continue arriving despite all efforts to stop them, at a terrible cost in lives and suffering if nothing else is put in place.”

Last year, the number of people risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean on smugglers’ boats rose dramatically and many of them were fleeing conflicts or persecution in Syria, the Horn of Africa and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, according to UNHCR.

In all, at least 218,000 people crossed the Mediterranean and 3,500 lives were lost.

Italy, following heavy loss of life in two incidents on the high seas in October 2013, launched the *Mare Nostrum* operation – rescuing tens of thousands of people. UNHCR has repeatedly expressed concern about the ending of Mare Nostrum late last year without a similar European search-and-rescue operation to replace it.

Last November, the EU border agency Frontex launched Operation *Triton*, which focuses on border surveillance but can contribute to rescue efforts.

Concerned that Europe’s response to such tragedies is not to step up its rescue efforts, but to phase them out, Mr. Guterres called on the EU to urgently establish a search-and-rescue operation similar in scale and reach to Mare Nostrum.

UNHCR said it has called repeatedly on European governments to address the problem of people fleeing wars and trying to reach Europe across the Mediterranean, with a view to reducing losses of life at sea via improved surveillance and better search and rescue.