Warning of ‘empathy gap,’ Ban urges faith leaders to speak up against injustice and brutality

22 April - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today urged faith leaders gathered in the General Assembly to stand up for the collective good and amplify their voices in support of moderation and mutual understanding, warning that he fears an “empathy gap” is causing people to turn their eyes from injustice and numbing them to atrocities.

“At a time when we are seeing so much division and hatred, I wanted to bring people together under the banner of the United Nations to explore how best to respond,” the Secretary-General said on the second day of a gathering at Headquarters in New York of leaders representing diverse faiths, including Islam, Judaism, Christianity, as well as ministers, academics, and spiritual teachers.

Mr. Ban said that he was deeply concerned as today communities rushed to point out an affront against themselves, but ignored or dismissed the legitimate grievances of others. “I am worried that a certain numbness and helplessness may be setting in as people witness atrocity after atrocity,” he said.

“Religion does not cause violence, people do,” the Secretary-General continued. “Today we turn to what you as men and women can and must do in this vital endeavour,” he told the High-Level Assembly meeting on Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation, Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies and Countering Violent Extremism, which opened yesterday and concludes today.

“The dignity and worth of the human person, the equal rights of men and women, tolerance and living together in harmony…these principles are our bedrock and they are what this organization defends,” he emphasized.

But those values are held in contempt by violent extremists and “bankrupt ideologies.” Such violent extremism transcends borders. Brutal acts are vividly committed by D’aesh, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and other sectarian groups.
Migrants are among the most vulnerable targets, Mr. Ban said, adding that there is a “direct line” between prejudice and extremism, racism and genocide. After the Holocaust, and with the establishment of the UN, “the world vowed never again…but we have seen injustices over and over again.”

The human contradiction is that “we are capable of utmost brutality but also compassion, tolerance and reconciliation,” the Secretary-General pointed out, adding that “today, I ask for your wisdom and leadership.”

“We need you to promote dialogue as an antidote to intolerance. Your voices will be critical in countering hate speech and finding common ground,” Mr. Ban told the meeting. “Faith leaders are on the frontlines of your community and many of you see the forces of radicalization. Use your influence to stand up for moderation and mutual understanding.”

Equally important is addressing the root causes of extremism. Abuses and indignities make individuals ripe for recruitment for sectarian and violent groups, the UN chief said, calling on leaders to ensure another way, a better way, which includes equality, and promoting opportunity and upholding human rights.

He also announced that later this year, he would present a UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. Meanwhile, faith leaders must raise their voices to counter the narrative of extremists.

“Missiles may kill terrorists, but I am convinced that good governance is what kills terrorism,” Mr. Ban said, urging the gathering to speak out against human rights breaches and social injustice wherever they were encountered. “I ask you, too, to do more to amplify the voice of the moderate majority so we may drown out those who preach violence and hatred.”

The international community must protect the rights of people to think, speak and worship freely. Faith leaders gathered today have a vast audience, great influence and an immense responsibility.

“Together, we can rise to the call of the UN Charter to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, reaffirm human rights, and promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,” Mr. Ban concluded.

Speaking to reporters later in the day, Mr. Ban said that religious leaders can play a central role in “healing sectarian divides and countering the forces of radicalization.”

“That is why I wanted people from many faiths to come together at the United Nations to express our shared abhorrence at such violence,” the UN chief said, pledging to form an advisory panel of faith leaders to guide the global communit.

“When governments respect human rights and provide opportunities for people to voice their grievances…the attraction to violent extremism will wither and peace and prosperity will grow,” Mr. Ban added.

**Ahead of World Immunization Week, UN warns global vaccination targets ‘far off track’**

**22 April** - The United Nations World Health Organization today warned that progress towards global vaccination targets for 2015 is “far off track,” with one in five children still missing out on routine life-saving immunizations that could avert 1.5 million deaths each year from preventable diseases.

The warning comes as many countries worldwide have experienced large measles outbreaks in the past year, threatening efforts to achieve the global target of eliminating measles in three regions by the end of this year.

“It is critical that the global community now makes a collective and cohesive effort to put progress towards our six targets back on track,” Dr. Flavia Bustreo, WHO Assistant Director-General, Family, Women’s and Children’s Health said just ahead of World Immunization Week, which runs from 24 to 30 April.
World Immunization Week creates a focused global platform to reinvigorate our collective efforts to ensure vaccination for every child, whoever they are and wherever they live,” the WHO doctor was quoted as saying in a press release issued today in Geneva, where the UN health agency is headquartered.

WHO noted that nearly 22 million infants in 2013 missed out on the required three doses of diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis-containing vaccines (DTP3), many of them living in the world’s poorest countries, and called “for an end to the unnecessary disability and death caused by failure to vaccinate.”

All 194 WHO member States at the World Health Assembly endorsed in 2012 the Global Vaccine Action Plan, a commitment to ensure that no one misses out on vital immunization, but a new independent assessment report on progress rings an alarm bell, warning that vaccines are not being delivered equitably or reliably.

“Only one of the six key vaccination targets for 2015 is currently on track,” WHO said.

The Plan recommends three key steps for closing the immunization gap: integrating immunization with other health services, such as post-natal care for mothers and babies; strengthening health systems so that vaccines continue to be given even in times of crisis; and ensuring that everyone can access vaccines and afford to pay for them.

Dr. Jean-Marie Okwo-Belé, WHO Director of Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals, pledged the Organization will work to increase its support to all countries that are lagging behind in meeting immunization targets.

Next month, WHO will bring together high-level representatives of 34 countries with routine vaccination coverage of less than 80 per cent to discuss the challenges faced by countries and to explore solutions to overcome them.

“Although progress has stalled in recent years, this early success demonstrates the potential of vaccines, which are increasingly being extended from children to adolescents and adults, providing protection against diseases such as influenza, meningitis and cervical and liver cancers,” WHO said in its release.

A global collaborative drive for immunization begun in the mid-1970s achieved dramatic results, raising vaccination levels from as low as 5 per cent to more than 80 per cent in many countries by 2013, resulting in immunizations preventing between 2 and 3 million deaths annually, according to WHO.

The Global Vaccine Action Plan envisions a world where everyone lives life free from vaccine preventable diseases by 2020. It had set six targets for 2015:

**Immunization against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough (DTP3)**

- **Target**: 90% immunization coverage against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough by 2015.
- **Gap**: 65 countries

**Introduction of under-utilized vaccines**

- **Target**: At least 90 low or middle income countries to have introduced one or more under-utilized vaccines by 2015.

**ON TRACK**

**Polio eradication**

- **Target**: No new cases after 2014
- **Gap**: 3 countries remain polio endemic

**Maternal and neonatal tetanus: Global elimination by end-2015**
Target: Eliminate maternal and neonatal tetanus
Gap: 24 countries

Measles elimination

Target: Eliminate from three WHO regions by end-2015
Gap: 16% of all children are not being immunized against measles

Rubella elimination

Target: Eliminate rubella from two WHO regions by end-2015
Gap: Half of all children do not receive the rubella vaccine

‘The power to change begins with you,’ says Ban, urging sustainable choices on Mother Earth Day

22 April - Humanity is well aware of the devastating damage and pollution it have wrought on planet Earth, and “even with this knowledge, we have yet to change our ways,” United Nations Secretary-General said today urging people to reset their relationship with nature and every living being it sustains.

In his remarks on International Mother Earth Day, marked worldwide on 22 April, Ban Ki-moon called Earth humanity’s “ultimate mother – an astounding planet that has, since time immemorial, supported life in myriad forms.”

This year’s celebration marks the 45th anniversary of Earth Day celebrations from Morocco to Uganda, Armenia to India.

“This can be the year our children and grandchildren will remember as when we chose to build a sustainable and resilient future – both for Mother Earth and all those that development has until now left behind. Let us seize this historic opportunity together,” he said.

“But the big decisions that lie ahead are not just for world leaders and policy-makers. Today, on Mother Earth Day, I ask each one of us to be mindful of the impacts our choices have on this planet, and what those impacts will mean for future generations,” he added.

“Not everyone is able to make sustainable choices, but for those who can, simple decisions such as switching to energy-efficient lighting or buying only what you will consume – when accumulated across billions of people – can transform our world. The power to change begins with you,” the UN chief added.

Humanity’s dependence on Earth makes it all the more astonishing that “we have allowed rapid and often unwise human development to disrupt so many of the delicate systems that have functioned harmoniously for millennia,” he said.

This year, the world aims to finalize the post-2015 sustainable development agenda and reach a new and meaningful universal climate change agreement. These processes have the potential to redefine the future for the better, by eradicating extreme poverty in all its forms.

“We are increasingly aware of the damage our species has wrought – the pollution, the dwindling resources, the species of flora and fauna forever gone, the rush towards tipping points that may alter the way our planet functions. Even with this knowledge, we have yet to change our ways,” he said.

“As a global community, we have the opportunity to make 2015 a turning point in human history,” Mr. Ban emphasized.
In a separate statement on the Day, Martin Sajdik, President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) said: “Now more than ever, on this Earth Day, we must recognize the beauty of our earth, and work as one and deliver for all.”

**UN food relief agency ‘extremely worried’ about missing staff in volatile South Sudan**

22 April - The World Food Programme today drew attention to the disappearance of three of its staff members who went missing earlier this month when fighting reportedly erupted along their food distribution route in volatile Malakal South Sudan, where more than 2 million people are unsure of where their next meal is coming from.

“We are extremely worried about the fate of our missing colleagues and are working hard for their safe return,” WFP Executive Director Ertharin Cousin said in a press release issued today. “Our staff take enormous risks every day to bring vital aid to people in critical need.”

According to WFP, their disappearance comes after another WFP staff member was abducted at gunpoint in October 2014 from the airport in Malakal in South Sudan and hasn’t been heard from since.

WFP fears that worsening insecurity in some parts of South Sudan will make it harder for humanitarian agencies to reach conflict-affected communities with badly needed assistance, just as the lean season is set to begin.

The three WFP staff members disappeared on April 1 en route to a food distribution in South Sudan’s Upper Nile state.

They were traveling in a convoy from Malakal to Melut, carrying food intended for thousands of conflict-affected people, when witnesses say intercommunal fighting erupted along the road on which they were traveling. WFP lost contact with the three men and has not heard from them since, despite intense efforts to reach them.

The agency also noted that because of increasing concerns about staff safety, it is re-assessing its ability to work in some parts of Upper Nile state. According to the press release, WFP plans to temporarily reduce its operations in those areas where it no longer believes it’s safe to work.

“We regret that we must temporarily suspend food assistance in Akoka and Fashoda counties,” said WFP Deputy Country Director Eddie Rowe, in Juba, South Sudan. “We hope to resume as soon as we have the necessary assurances that our staff and partners can work safely.”

The UN says that 10 humanitarian workers have been killed in Upper Nile state since the start of South Sudan’s conflict more than 16 months ago.

“We are equally concerned about the welfare of innocent people, particularly women and children, who are suffering the consequences of this conflict,” Ms. Cousin said. “We are committed to assisting the South Sudanese people the best we can, but we cannot do our lifesaving work unless national and local authorities are willing and able to safeguard humanitarian staff.”

According to WFP, 2.5 million people in South Sudan started this year unsure of where their next meal is coming from. Food security analysts believe this number will increase with the start of the lean season in May. WFP aims to assist roughly 3 million people throughout the country in 2015.

The WFP has raised its most recent concerns as the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) reports that fighting erupted in Malakal on Tuesday evening and continued throughout most of the morning and early afternoon. The residence of the Upper Nile state governor was reportedly shelled by mortar rounds and two of his security officers were also wounded.

At least 1,500 unarmed civilians have arrived at the UN protection site outside Malakal, which brings the total numbers of civilians being protected there to that particular site to 28,000 people.
UN health agency reports deaths top 1,000 in Yemen, hospitals risk shutdowns amid hostilities

22 April - As the United Nations humanitarian wing appealed for “any initiative that can reduce the violence” in Yemen, the World Health Organization (WHO) office in the country reported that the death toll from the fighting topped 1,000 over the past month and warned that main hospitals face shutting down because of critical shortages of power, lack of fuel and oxygen.

Meanwhile, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Yemen said there were 7.9 million children among the 15.9 million people – or some 60 per cent of the total population – in need of humanitarian assistance in the war-torn country.

Reporting from its country office in Yemen, WHO said health facilities across the country had reported 1,080 deaths and 4,352 injured between 19 March and 20 April.

“Any initiative that can reduce the violence in Yemen is welcome,” the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in its latest situation update.

Due to insecurity today in Aden city and the spread of street fighting, OCHA reported that one aid agency was unable to distribute household items to displaced people staying in schools.

But another relief organization successfully delivered hygiene items to one of Aden’s major public hospitals, while water trucking has started today for vulnerable people in Al Dhubayat area of Al Dhale’e governorate, which has had no water and electricity for more than a month.

WHO noted that Yemen’s disease surveillance reports show a doubling over the past month in the number of cases of bloody diarrhoea in children under the age of five.

“Main hospitals in affected areas are at risk of shutting down due to power outages, lack of fuel for generators, and lack of oxygen,” WHO reported, adding it is supporting the Yemeni Ministry of Health by providing fuel for hospitals, vaccine storage and ambulances.

In related news, OCHA reported that after the announcement that of a halt in the month-long campaign of aerial strike, most people in the capital, Sana’a, are staying indoors and adopting a “wait-and-see” attitude. In the city of Aden, the coalition’s announcement has sparked violence; ground fighting involving tanks is taking place throughout the city and militants are entering residential areas.

An office for an international organization was damaged by explosions as a result of shelling and aerial bombardments that took place in the vicinity of Aden airport, according to the OCHA report.

Yemen’s humanitarian crisis is fuelled by conflict and widespread insecurity, large-scale displacement, civil strife, political instability, chronic food shortages, a breakdown of social services, endemic poverty and refugee influxes, notes OCHA.
Ban condemns deadly xenophobic violence in South Africa

22 April - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has condemned the wave of xenophobic violence in South Africa that has resulted in the deaths of at least seven people in the past few weeks.

“He expresses his condolences to the families of the victims,” said a statement released today in New York by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson.

“The Secretary-General notes the actions and statements of the President of South Africa and the Government to address the violence,” that statement added.

Mr. Ban in the statement also welcomed the public expressions of the many South Africans who have been calling for peaceful coexistence and harmony with foreign nationals.

“He urges that all efforts are made to avert future attacks, including any incitement leading thereto, and encourages peaceful solutions,” the statement said.

Libya: UN official condemns terrorist attack on Spanish embassy

22 April - The head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) Bernardino León has strongly condemned the latest terrorist attack in the Libyan capital of Tripoli in which the Spanish Embassy was targeted.

According to media reports, a bomb detonated outside the Spanish Embassy on 20 April damaging part of the compound's exterior wall but incurring no casualties. The incident is also the most recent in a series of attacks against foreign embassies including those of the Republic of Korea and Morocco.

In a statement released yesterday evening, UNSMIL said the attack against the Spanish embassy should serve as “a reminder that the continuing fighting and political instability contribute to providing the safe ground for terrorists to operate and expand” throughout Libya.

“UNSMIL urges the Libyans to press ahead with their efforts to reach a political agreement to restore peace and stability, as well as strengthen the State institutions to combat terrorism,” the statement added.

The bombing comes at a time when national stakeholders are gathered to reach a mediated settlement to Libya's continuing fighting.

The latest round of political talks, in fact, are currently underway in Skhirat, Morocco with parties expected to present their remarks regarding the overall framework outlined in the Draft Agreement on the Political Transition in Libya.