UN chief urges governments intensify efforts to end tuberculosis by 2035

24 March - With some 37 million lives saved between 2000 and 2013 through the diagnosis and treatment of tuberculosis, it is possible to end the epidemic by 2035, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said on World Tuberculosis Day, urging leaders to recommit to ending one of humanity's top killers.

“Victory is not guaranteed,” Mr. Ban said in his message for the Day, observed each year on 24 March.

“I urge Governments, communities affected by tuberculosis and health workers around the world to intensify their efforts in line with the ambitious strategy established by the World Health Assembly in 2014 to end the global epidemic within two decades,” he stated.

Tuberculosis, or TB, is one of the world’s top infectious killers. Approximately 9 million people fell ill from it in 2013, and 1.5 million died. TB’s impact is felt acutely by the most vulnerable populations, including those struggling with poverty and poor health systems. For women aged 15 to 44, tuberculosis is one of the top five killers. For children, prisoners, migrants and those living with HIV, TB remains the most common form of illness and the leading cause of death.

Last May, governments agreed on a new 20-year (2016-2035) strategy to end the global tuberculosis epidemic. To that end, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) is calling for new action in the global fight against the scourge. Its ‘End TB’ strategy outlines clear actions and targets that provide a pathway to a world free of tuberculosis deaths and suffering. The plan also links to the wider poverty eradication, social protection and universal health coverage agenda.

“While achievement by 2015 of one of the key health-focused Millennium Development Goals, namely the reversal of the spread of tuberculosis, is significant, World Tuberculosis Day reminds governments and communities that this is no time for complacency. Efforts must begin now to ensure the effective global roll-out of the ‘End TB’ strategy and to stimulate the
research that will underpin its success,” Mr. Ban said.

‘End TB’ sets targets and outlines actions for governments and partners to provide patient-centred care, pursue policies and systems that enable prevention and care, and drive research and innovations needed to end the epidemic and eliminate tuberculosis.

WHO is also calling on governments, affected communities, civil society organizations and health-care providers to join the drive to roll out this strategy and to reach, treat and cure all those who are ill today.

“With patient-centred care at the heart, this dynamic action plan will drive forward the critical advances in research and innovation that are needed to combat tuberculosis, including the worrying surge in its multi-drug-resistant and extensively drug-resistant forms,” Mr. Ban emphasized.

**UN to unveil permanent memorial in New York honouring victims of transatlantic slave trade**

24 March - A permanent memorial to honour the victims of one of the most horrific tragedies of modern history will be revealed at United Nations Headquarters in New York on Wednesday, when the world marks the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The Permanent Memorial to Honour the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade at the United Nations, entitled ‘The Ark of Return,’ is designed by Rodney Leon, an American architect of Haitian descent. It pays tribute to the courage of slaves, abolitionists and unsung heroes while promoting greater recognition of the contributions made by slaves and their descendants to societies worldwide.

“It is absolutely vital that the dangers inherent in racism are made crystal clear to all,” said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. “The Ark of Return will bring home to people around the world the terrible legacy of the slave trade. It will help us to heal as we remember the past and honour the victims.”

The memorial aims to remind visitors of the complete history of slavery, urging them to acknowledge the tragedy and its legacy, and to heighten awareness of the current dangers of racism, prejudice and slavery’s lingering consequences that continue to impact the descendants of slavery’s victims today.

An international committee was established in 2009 to oversee the project of placing the memorial on the UN’s grounds. In 2013, the committee chose Rodney Leon’s design following an international competition featuring 310 entries from 83 countries.

The International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade has been marked on 25 March in each of the last seven years to honour the memories of the estimated 15 million men, women and children who were victims of the largest forced migration in history.

This year’s theme, ‘Women and Slavery,’ pays tribute to the women victims and to those who fought for freedom from slavery and for its abolition. It also celebrates the strength of enslaved women, who succeeded in transmitting their African culture to their descendants.

“Women slaves played a key role in maintaining the dignity of their communities. Too often their leadership and brave resistance have been underestimated or forgotten,” said Mr. Ban.

Other events taking place at UN Headquarters on the International Day include a special commemorative meeting of the General Assembly where the historian and slave-trade expert Sylviane Diouf will deliver the keynote address; a culinary event at which chef Pierre Thiam will present a range of food illustrating the impact of the Middle Passage on culinary traditions in the countries that participated in the transatlantic slave trade; and performances by drummers and dancers of the
Djoniba Dance and Drum Centre.

**Security Council urges ‘effective, comprehensive’ steps to end tensions in South Sudan**

24 March - The United Nations Security Council has voiced its “profound disappointment” at the failure of all parties in South Sudan to conclude an agreement that would bring the country closer to resolving its ongoing conflict and usher in a period of national unity and peace.

In a presidential statement, the 15-member body underscored “the seriousness and urgency” of the situation on the ground in South Sudan and reiterated its “strong condemnation” of the repeated violations of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, accepted and signed by both the Government and opposition forces last year.

Moreover, the Council reiterated its intent to impose any sanctions that may be appropriate in order to encourage all parties to accelerate efforts in forming a Transitional Government of National Unity and to “take effective and comprehensive steps” to end military operations and all acts of violence.

The statement, read out by Ambassador François Delattre of France, which holds the Council presidency for March, also reaffirmed the body’s “deep concern that the conflict has resulted in great human suffering,” and restated its “deep appreciation” for the “courageous actions” of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in protecting civilians.

“The Security Council further underscores the significant importance of fighting impunity and ensuring accountability for serious violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law in South Sudan, including those that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity,” the statement added.

The security situation in South Sudan has deteriorated steadily over the past year since political in-fighting between President Salva Kiir and his former Vice-President, Riek Machar, and their respective factions erupted in December 2013. The hostilities subsequently turned into a full-fledged conflict that sent nearly 100,000 civilians fleeing to UN bases around the country.

While the crisis has uprooted an estimated 1.9 million people and placed more than 7 million at risk of hunger and disease, a recent peace deal between the warring factions had fostered hope of a definitive end to the year-long conflict.

Currently, UN bases are sheltering over 110,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) with an additional 1.5 million others displaced throughout the country and 500,000 outside the country.

In addition, the number of food-insecure civilians is slated to rise from the current 2.5 million as the country approaches its critical lean season.
Senior UN official meets with Nigerian refugees in northern Cameroon

24 March - The United Nations refugee chief António Guterres began a two-day visit to Cameroon today to see the impact of the displacement crises in neighbouring Nigeria and Central African Republic (CAR), which have sent over hundreds of thousands fleeing for safety.

“The High Commissioner will discuss both humanitarian crises with President Paul Biya and thank the Cameroonian Government and people for their generous open door policy and hospitality towards refugees,” Karin de Gruijl, a spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told reporters in Geneva.

“They will also discuss the support that is needed to improve the living conditions for the refugees, internally displaced people and the host communities in Cameroon.”

More than 74,000 Nigerians have crossed into the Far North region of Cameroon, including 25,000 who escaped clashes between the regional military forces and insurgents in north-eastern Nigeria in the month of February alone, according to UNHCR.

Cameroon is also hosting more than 244,000 people who escaped the conflict in CAR, the agency added. In addition, border clashes in northern Cameroon have also led to the displacement of 96,000 Cameroonians.

“Because of the highly insecure situation in the border areas in the Far North region, UNHCR has been moving the refugees to Minawao refugee camp, located some 90 kilometres from the regional capital Maroua,” said Ms. de Gruijl. “The relocation exercise is ongoing, but, despite the insecurity, many refugees prefer to stay close to the border either to wait for relatives, take care of their cattle or return home as soon as the situation there improves.”

Mr. Guterres will visit the Minawao camp on Wednesday to hear the refugees’ testimonies first hand and see the conditions in the camp, which is now home to nearly 33,000 Nigerian refugees. He will also meet with some of the estimated 96,000 Cameroonians who have been internally displaced by insurgents crossing into the country and offer UNHCR’s support to help cover their most urgent needs.

This support consists of shelter and basic household items for the internally displaced, projects to improve local health and other facilities, as well as interventions to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence and strengthen the protection of children.

In February, UNHCR issued an appeal for $71 million for life-saving protection and assistance activities in Nigeria and the neighbouring countries.

“The needs described in this appeal have however already been surpassed and we are preparing an updated one for release in the coming weeks,” said Ms. de Gruijl. “Thus far, only $6.8 million in contributions have been received for this crisis, making it one of UNHCR’s most underfunded emergencies worldwide.”
In wake of Cyclone Pam, UN launches humanitarian appeal for battered Vanuatu

24 March - The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has launched a flash appeal for urgent funding to help with ongoing relief efforts in Vanuatu following the devastation wrought by Cyclone Pam.

The Category 5 tropical cyclone descended upon Vanuatu, Tuvalu and a number of other Pacific islands 11 days ago battering them with 250kmph winds and 320kmph gusts which caused widespread damage to agriculture, infrastructure, and impacting services such as electricity and communications. Initial assessments of the storm’s immediate aftermath in Vanuatu counted 17 people dead and some 65,000 people homeless as well as 166,000 people in urgent need of life-saving assistance.

“The people affected by Tropical Cyclone Pam face serious immediate risks to their health and wellbeing, as well as threats to their livelihoods and future resilience to disasters,” the UN’s humanitarian coordinator for the archipelagic nation, Osnat Lubrani, said in a press release issued earlier today. “Today we stand with the Government of Vanuatu and urgently seek the support of the international community at a time of immense need.”

The appeal – launched by OCHA and the Government of Vanuatu – calls for $29.9 million to ensure that initial support provided by the Government, donors and humanitarian partners can be sustained to cover the needs of affected people until the end of June 2015. According to further estimates, around 75,000 people are in need of shelter and 110,000 people do not have access to safe drinking water.

“Although the people of Vanuatu have shown immense resilience and strength at this difficult time, more urgent assistance is required to ensure that Vanuatu can focus on recovering from this disaster – and that potentially life-threatening impacts from disease, food insecurity and a lack of shelter can be avoided,” added Ms. Lubrani.

An initial assessment by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has found “extensive damage” to crops, livestock and fisheries as a result of the storm. The banana crop was almost entirely destroyed by the storm, as have most coconuts and all of the inland cabbage plants and leafy vegetables. Root crops, which are an important local food source, have been uprooted and flooded in most areas, while the majority of fruit trees have been stripped and chickens and pigs have been killed.

As well as crops, most household food and seed stocks and garden production were also destroyed, leaving many families without food and income and increasing the need for imports. With the first harvest from replanted fast-growing food crops likely to be available only in mid-June, Vanuatu could be without locally produced food until then.

It will be some time before the full scale of damages and needs on Vanuatu's more than 80 islands will be known due to a lack of functional communications and limited access following the destruction, according to the UN. However, with 99 per cent of all households on the outer islands dependent on agriculture for consumption needs and income, and with 75 per cent of households in the capital, Port Vila consuming their own produce, the impact will be large.

Meanwhile, briefing reporters in Geneva, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) spokesperson, Christophe Boulierac, said around 82,000 children, or two-thirds of Vanuatu's youth, were in need of humanitarian assistance.

As a result, the UN agency had announced a $4.8 million humanitarian appeal as part of the wider OCHA request in order to make sure that children and their families in Vanuatu and in affected communities in Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, and Kiribati had access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene and health services including immunisation.

Mr. Boulierac added that UNICEF was already on the ground providing treatment for diarrhoea, care of new-borns and nutrient supplements while also protecting children from violence, exploitation, and abuse.
Amid Yemen unrest, UNICEF warns of grave child rights abuses, spike in deaths

24 March - Grave violations of children’s rights are continuing to take place in Yemen, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) confirmed today, on the heels of a spate of recent attacks on mosques in Sana’a that killed 12 children and injured 20.

UNICEF spokesperson Christophe Boulierac told a news conference in Geneva that 2014 saw a 40 per cent increase in the number of children killed and wounded in Yemen, compared to 2013. There has also been a 100 per cent increase in attacks on schools and hospitals, while recruitment of children into armed groups has increased by 47 per cent.

During an emergency meeting of the Security Council held on Sunday, UN Special Adviser Jamal Benomar warned that Yemen stands on the brink of civil war amid deepening political tensions. Despite UN efforts to bring about a peaceful political resolution, Yemen has continued to be plagued by violence and mass political demonstrations.

According to UNICEF, Yemen remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with 47 per cent of children under the age of five suffering from malnutrition. It has, after Afghanistan, the highest number of malnourished children. Levels of malnutrition are alarmingly high at the moment, with 1.6 million persons affected, out of which 850,000 children are suffering from acute malnutrition and 160,000 from severe acute malnutrition.

Mr. Boulierac said that Yemeni children are exposed to a number of dangers, including mines, drones, suicide attacks and sexual violence. UNICEF is appealing to all parties in the conflict to spare schools, hospitals and civilian targets. It is also asking for an immediate halt to the recruitment of children and immediate assistance to those in need.

The current crisis in Yemen has also had a disastrous effect on the economy. Social welfare funds are frozen, with no payments made since the beginning of the year, affecting large swathes of the population. Beneficiaries of the Social Welfare Fund, which covers 35 per cent of the population, have not received their payments since January this year.

UNICEF and its partners on the ground continue to provide vaccines to children, construct child friendly schools, provide psychosomatic support to children in distress, and provide therapeutic food to mothers and children who are malnourished.

Mr. Boulierac also said that the provision of vaccines has been secured for the following two months only, and that the Government is not in a position to pay for subsequent months, putting many children who have not been vaccinated at risk. Vaccine stocks and storage are at risk of being damaged, as well. This month UNICEF paid the fuel to avoid a disruption, as the Government was unable to.

An estimated 200,000 children have been affected by attacks or closure of schools. Girls are most affected, as parents decide to keep their children at home due to insecurity and poverty.

UNICEF added that it needs $60 million in 2015 to respond to the needs of mothers and children in Yemen.
UN trade report calls on governments to improve environment for e-commerce

24 March - The scope for developing countries to participate in and benefit from e-commerce is expanding, according to a new United Nations report released today, with improved connectivity, new e-commerce applications, platforms and payment solutions, and the emergence of local e-commerce companies that are tailoring their services to local demands.

The 2015 edition of the Information Economy Report (IER), published by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), analyses trends and international policy issues related to information and communications technology and its links with trade and development.

“As the digital economy expands and more business activities are affected, it becomes more important for governments to consider policies that can help to harness e-commerce for sustainable development,” said UNCTAD Secretary-General Mukhisa Kituyi, specifying that governments need to improve areas including information and communications technology infrastructure, the legal and regulatory environment, and develop skills in their populations.

The report includes a B2C (Business-to-Consumer) E-commerce Index, which draws on data to assess e-commerce readiness and help States to formulate their national e-commerce strategies. Through the Index, governments can identify their relative strengths and weaknesses. In Africa, for example, internet penetration levels need to rise to promote e-commerce readiness.

Making information and communications technology work for development requires more than expanding the infrastructure, the report says. In order to foster productive and inclusive use of information and communications technology, governments need to create legal, institutional and policy frameworks and generate the necessary skills in government, business and civil society and the Index measures progress in those areas.

Among developing countries, States at the top end of the Index are in East Asia, including the Republic of Korea and Singapore, with larger countries such as Brazil, China and Russia performing better than predicted, suggesting that large markets facilitate e-commerce.

Business-to-consumer e-commerce, valued at $1.2 trillion, is currently much smaller than business-to-business (B2B), which is worth $15 trillion, but is growing at a faster rate, especially in Asia and Africa, and is expected to double in size to $2.4 trillion by 2018.

To enable that, postal networks will be vital and the report measures data on home postal delivery as an indicator of countries’ readiness to engage in B2C e-commerce. In Latin America and the Caribbean and in Asia and Oceania, the extension of postal home delivery was found to be particularly important.

“Posts are seeing the mail makeup changing, with more merchandises making their way through their networks,” said Bishar A. Hussein, the Director General of the Universal Postal Union (UPU). “They must prepare for this growth by adapting their products and services, processes and infrastructure.”

The UNCTAD report also notes that growing concerns over cybercrime affect the willingness of both buyers and sellers to make transactions online, with research showing that the enactment of laws to facilitate security and trust in online transactions varies considerably globally, with significant gaps in many developing countries.
Although the United States is by far the most targeted country, accounting for almost half of known cases of cybercrime, information security is a rising concern for governments, enterprises and consumers around the world, especially given that $3.5 billion was lost in supplier revenue due to online fraud in 2012.

UNCTAD’s report calls for interoperability of legal measures between States, with 117 countries having enacted cybercrime legislation. Ensuring international compatibility of e-transaction laws remains a challenge and the report says the legal recognition of e-signatures, electronic contracts and evidence at a national level should ideally be extended to those originating in other jurisdictions.

**Ban marks International Day by stressing need for concrete action to pursue human rights**

**24 March** - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today recalled, on the 35th anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero of El Salvador, that the United Nations has over the past year supported commissions of inquiry on the Central African Republic, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Eritrea, the recent conflict in Gaza and Syria to further the icon’s work to see that truth prevails.

“The best way to honour Monsignor Romero’s legacy of fighting for human rights and human dignity is by taking concrete action to fulfil the right to truth and other fundamental human rights in our time,” Mr. Ban said in a message marking the International Day for the Right to the Truth concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims.

The Day, observed on 24 March, was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly five years ago to honour in particular the Roman Catholic priest’s work and values as a human rights defender.

“Earlier this year, I had the honour of paying my respects at the gravesite of Monsignor Óscar Arnulfo Romero, who was murdered in El Salvador on this day in 1980,” Mr. Ban said. “Monsignor Romero was an icon for human rights and social justice.”

After witnessing numerous violations of human rights, Monsignor Romero began to speak out on behalf of the poor and the victims of repression. On 24 March 1980, an assassin fired from the door of the chapel where Romero, then Archbishop of San Salvador, was celebrating mass and shot him dead.

“The right to the truth – which is both an individual and collective right – is essential for victims but also for society at large,” Mr. Ban said. “Uncovering the truth of human rights violations of the past can help prevent human rights abuses in the future.”

“That is why,” he said, “the United Nations supports fact-finding missions, commissions of inquiry, and truth commissions to uncover the truth about gross violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law.”

The UN works to promote justice, propose reparations, and recommend reforms of abusive institutions.

In addition to the numerous commissions of inquiry supported by the UN, the world body is also providing advice and assistance to a number of transitional justice processes, including in Cote d’Ivoire and Tunisia, the Secretary-General noted.

“I once again call for the full implementation of recommendations of commissions of inquiry and truth commissions,” he said.

He went on to say: “On this vital day, let us together pledge to help victims, their families and societies realize their right to truth and protect all who strive to see the truth prevail.”
UN rights expert urges Chile to boost efforts in fighting extreme poverty

24 March - The issue of poverty continues to remain “under the radar” for many Chilean policy-makers despite the country’s impressive array of anti-poverty programmes, an independent United Nations human rights expert has warned.

The Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, extolled the South American country as a model for the region in terms of “its commitment to human rights, its high economic growth rates, and it sustained social policy innovations.”

But, he added in a news release, the country nevertheless continued to tolerate “very high levels” of poverty and inequality for a State belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

“The Chilean State’s response to the widely acknowledged problems of exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination has been piecemeal and half-hearted,” Mr. Alston said.

“Persistent inequalities result in a highly segregated society, in which separate residential areas, separate schools, and separate employment markets operate to entrench privilege and stifle mobility.”

The expert observed that efforts to eliminate extreme poverty in Chile could not succeed without “a concerted focus” on the situation of indigenous peoples or labour law reforms aimed at enabling trade unions to “defend the rights of workers effectively.”

In addition, he called for the facilitation of women’s participation in the workforce through a range of measures including better community care facilities, and better economic rewards for currently unpaid female care workers.

Mr. Alston’s remarks come on the heels of a nine-day official visit to Chile during which he met with President Michelle Bachelet and a range of government officials and civil society leaders whom he urged to develop a specific, integrated plan and more effective coordination mechanisms tackling poverty.

“There is a deep need for an entity with the responsibility, authority, funds and resources to coordinate government-wide human rights policies,” he continued, calling for progress towards the creation of the new Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. “The process seems, however, to have stalled and needs to be kick-started.”