UN Daily News

Issue DH/6974

Wednesday, 26 August 2015

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UN refugee agency chief calls on Europe to formulate a collective response to migrant crisis

26 August - With the number of migrants fleeing to Europe the violence in their countries of origin continuing to increase, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, today urged the European Union to speed up the formulation of an adequate collective response to this unprecedented crisis.

“Since the beginning of the year, 293,000 migrants and refugees tried to reach Europe via the Mediterranean Sea and 2,440 of them died during the crossing,” said Mr. Guterres during a press conference in Geneva.

Joined by the French Minister of Internal Affairs, Bernard Cazeneuve, who was on a visit to the Swiss city, Mr. Guterres called on European countries not to deal individually with the migration crisis.

“It’s a huge number for countries like the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or Serbia, or even Hungary or Greece; if we also think of the capacity of Germany, which today has most Syrian refugees,” he acknowledged, before adding that the same figure, with in mind the size of the whole European continent and its 508 million inhabitants, is in fact relatively low.

It is even lower, considering the efforts provided by neighbouring countries of Syria, like Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Lebanon in particular, a country whose a third of the population is now made up of Palestinian and Syrian refugees.

“It is clear that Europe has the capacities and the size needed to meet the challenges, assuming that it shows unity and jointly assume this responsibility,” concluded Mr. Guterres.

The High Commissioner's press conference followed incidents on August 21 and 22, during which thousands of migrants prevented to enter the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia following the decision of the authorities to close the...
country's border with Greece had attempted to force the passage.

The migrants, coming mostly from Syria, had initially reached Greece from Turkey at sea, prior to crossing the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to Serbia and Western Europe.

“Taking into account all the human tragedies that these people have suffered, it only makes sense that we must act; we must act quickly; and must act effectively,” advocated the High Commissioner, citing the chaos of the past days at the border between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Envisioning a more inclusive and responsible migration policy at the European level, Mr. Guterres emphasized the need to increase resources allocated to development cooperation, as well as humanitarian assistance, in particular to address root causes.

“I remind you that the support program to Syrian refugees is only funded only up to 41 per cent overall and up to 21 per cent in Turkey, which is also the country where from the most dramatic displacements have been recorded in eastern Mediterranean,” he said to journalists.

The High Commissioner also called to accelerate implementation of the decisions taken by the European Council to improve reception and registration of refugees, but also relocation and resettlement.

The latter, he observed, “today would likely require much higher figures than those that have been proposed so far.”

Sierra Leone begins 42-day countdown to be declared free of Ebola virus transmission – UN health agency

26 August - Sierra Leone today began its countdown to be declared by the World Health Organization as free of Ebola virus transmission as the West African nation’s President described the release of the last patient treated for the disease at a treatment centre as “the beginning of the end of Ebola.”

“For first time in more than a year, there are no people being treated for Ebola virus disease and no confirmed cases of Ebola in the country,” WHO reported, but noted that President Ernest Bai Koroma reminded the nation that Ebola transmission would not be considered ended in Sierra Leone “until the WHO declares we have gone 42 days with no case.”

The 42-day period began on Tuesday.

In its latest update on Ebola released today, the UN health agency reported 3 confirmed cases of in the week to 23 August, all of which were reported from Guinea.

WHO confirmed that no new confirmed cases were reported from Sierra Leone for the second consecutive week.

Dr Anders Nordström, WHO Representative in Sierra Leone “the hard work that got Sierra Leone to this point has to continue.”

“Surveillance, searching for cases, notifying any deaths in the community, testing anyone with Ebola symptoms, all must continue intensively,” Dr. Nordström said. “And the community involvement that has led us to this point must continue as well.”

No new cases were reported from Liberia as well. All contacts in Liberia have now completed their 21-day follow-up period.
UN food relief now reaching more than 400,000 flood victims in Myanmar

26 August - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) is now delivering rice, beans, cooking oil and salt to more than 400,000 people affected by flooding in Myanmar and “reachable only on foot, after floods and landslides destroyed roads across the country,” the agency said today.

More than 1.7 million people in Myanmar have been affected by widespread flooding and landslides as a result of heavy monsoon rains since early August.

In a press release issued in Yangon, Myanmar, WFP said it is appealing for $12.3 million urgently required to meet flood needs.

Emergency relief efforts began earlier this month within 48 hours of the President’s declaration of a state of natural disaster, WFP said, adding that with the provision of free transport by the Government and local airlines, more than 2,500 metric tons of food has been delivered to the flood-affected areas so far.

“WFP has supported the Government of Myanmar to save lives with emergency food, including supporting many who are reachable only on foot, after floods and landslides destroyed roads across the country,” according to WFP Country Director Dom Scalpelli. “It is quite an achievement, and I would like to thank our funding and cooperating partners for their support.”

WFP, working with the Government, other UN organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), aims to have reached more than 440,000 people with food assistance by the beginning of September.

People affected by the flooding receive a one-month ration of rice, pulses, cooking oil, and salt. In some cases, they also receive a week’s supply of high-energy biscuits, the agency said.

The emergency has forced WFP to temporarily suspend regular programmes such as school feeding nutrition assistance for pregnant women and nursing mothers, and the provision of food for people living with HIV and tuberculosis.

The flood relief efforts have so far been supported through contributions from Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, European Union, Germany, Japan, Myanmar, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States as well as the Japan Association for WFP, the UN Central Emergency Response Fund and the private sector.
As momentum builds for December climate talks in Paris, Ban looks ahead to ‘bold’ outcome

26 August - Commending France’s “exemplary leadership” on efforts to tackle climate change, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today affirmed that the international community is now at a stage where the final elements of the new climate agreement are being negotiated.

“The climate conference in Paris later this year is at the very top of the international agenda. I expect a bold and meaningful outcome at the Conference of Parties…in December.” stated the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his remarks to the French diplomatic corps, which has been meeting this week in Paris.

“I was especially glad to be invited to attend your gathering this year because of the historic efforts that are under way to chart a new development path for the human family,” Mr. Ban continued, adding that the climate negotiations cap a “transformational” year for human progress.

In March, he underlined, the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, agreed on important steps to build more resilient societies, while in July, the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, in Addis Ababa, revitalized the global partnership for development.

“And earlier this month, in New York, Member States agreed on the final text of an inspiring new development agenda that will guide us through to the year 2030,” he also mentioned, rejoicing that world leaders will formally adopt it next month.

Calling the 17 adopted Sustainable Development Goals a “path to sustainable development,” the Secretary-General said they offered a “blueprint” for ending poverty in all its dimensions “without leaving anyone behind” and identified the fundamental links between promoting prosperity and ensuring peaceful societies and respect for human rights.

But unless the world takes urgent action on climate change, sustainable development will not be achieved, he warned. “In my engagement with leaders, I have made it clear what I believe a meaningful [climate] agreement could include,” referring to the expected outcome of the 21st meeting of the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), widely referred to as COP-21.

First, Mr. Ban noted, it must send a strong signal that the world is committed to a low-carbon future, “and there is no going back.”

Second, he continued, an agreement must be durable so that it provides the private sector with the predictability and policy frameworks it needs to invest in clean energy and climate-resilient approaches.

“Third, it must be flexible so that it can provide incentives and incorporate more ambitious, science-based nationally determined targets over time,” the Secretary-General recommended.

Fourth, it must uphold the principle of equity, support the adaptation needs of developing countries, and demonstrate solidarity with the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable countries.

Fifth, it must include credible, clear mechanisms for measuring, monitoring and reporting progress in a transparent manner on a full range of actions, Mr. Ban went on to say.

And sixth, credible climate financing is essential, he stressed, recalling it is “imperative” that developed countries provide
greater clarity on the public finance component of the $100 billion before the Paris conference, as well as on how they will engage private finance.

The UN chief therefore is engaging with leaders “from north and south” to make sure this goal is met and is considered credible by all.

An agreement must also acknowledge the need for long-term, very significant financing beyond 2020, and the Green Climate Fund must be up and running, with funds that can be disbursed before Paris, he emphasized in conclusion, encouraging countries and companies to “take the lead” in developing clean energy technologies and markets.

The Secretary-General also had today a “very productive meeting” with French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, with whom he discussed a number of global challenges with national and continental implications, including migrations.

“More people are displaced today than at any time since the Second World War. Many millions are fleeing violence and persecution in Syria and elsewhere. Others are seeking to escape poverty and looking for opportunities to lead a dignified life. They are making perilous journeys and should not face yet another ordeal upon arrival,” he said, welcoming countries that are showing solidarity.

Violent extremism is another major area of concern, the UN chief added. “As we saw with the recent potential mass attack here in France, we must be vigilant in addressing threats without ever becoming overcome by fear and suspicion, which is precisely the intent of those who seek to terrorize.”

**At Security Council, UN envoy says Libyan parties must come together, make ‘final push’ for peace**

26 August - With the United Nations-supported political dialogue process in Libya nearing its last stages, “time is running out” for leaders on all sides and at all levels to make the “final push,” the head of the UN Mission in the country (UNSMIL) told the Security Council today.

“Overcoming the political polarization and divisiveness in Libya will be no easy task…the onus is on Libya’s leaders on all sides, and at all levels, to make that final push towards peace,” said Bernardino León, who is also the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the North African country.

Briefing to the 15-member Council body via videoconference from Paris, he said the magnitude of the challenges should not be underestimated, nor of the resources required to pull the country back from the brink of economic meltdown and total collapse of State institutions.

“It will be the determination and commitment of Libyans themselves, more specifically their political leaders, which will safeguard the country. The international community must move quickly to present a clearly articulated strategy in support of the Libyan State,” Mr. León declared.

Outlining the details of the Secretary-General’s latest report, which “paints a mixed picture of the evolving security dynamics in Libya,” Mr. León said that while the situation in western Libya had witnessed a marked reduction in military tensions, this stood in stark contrast to security dynamics elsewhere in the country.

Fifteen months since the start of military operations in Benghazi, confrontations has gradually transformed into “war of trenches” with no immediate end foreseen. The situation in the south is equally appalling, where the absence of the State and of a properly functioning security apparatus has exacerbated competition among rival groups for power and resources.

At the national level, the scale of human suffering is staggering for a country with large oil reserves and strong economic potential, Mr. León said. An estimated 1.9 million people require urgent assistance to meet their basic health-care needs, and access to food is a major problem for 1.2 million people. Close to 250,000 migrants are estimated to be in or transiting
through the country, many of them facing significant protection issues.

“This year alone has seen more than 2,000 migrants drown in the Mediterranean Sea, the vast majority in a desperate bid to reach Europe,” he explained.

Since he last briefed the Council in mid-July, Mr. León said, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Sham (ISIL), or Da’esh, has extended to a 200-kilometre stretch of coastline east and west of Sirte. Libyan stakeholders must recognize that no strategy aimed at containing, if not eliminating, the Da’esh threat would be viable unless it was part of a concerted, unified and coordinated effort that brought all Libyans together under a single banner.

To that end, he reconvened political talks in Geneva on 11 and 12 August focusing on ways of expediting dialogue ahead of the 21 October deadline, when the mandate of the House of Representatives would end. Although the General National Congress in Tripoli did not initial the main text of the Libyan Political Agreement along with other dialogue participants on 11 July, he is confident that their concerns could be addressed in the ongoing discussions on the annexes.

Seven months since the Mission launched the political dialogue process, the talks had come a long way in narrowing the trust deficit that existed among the country’s political stakeholders and in forging agreement on a road map to end the country’s political crisis and military conflict, Mr. León said. He called on Libyan leaders not to “squander the historic and unique opportunity they have before them to be peacemakers”. The Agreement may not be perfect, but it was a fair and reasonable one in which “the only winners are the Libyan people,” he said.

UNICEF demands that water not be used to achieve ‘military and political gains’ in Syria

26 August - Amid the unremitting brutality of the war in Syria and a scorching summer heat wave, there is increasing evidence that parties to the conflict are using water to achieve military and political gains, warned the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

“Clean water is both a basic need and a fundamental right, in Syria as it is anywhere else,” reminded Dr. Peter Salama, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa in a press release. “Denying civilians access to water is a flagrant violation of the laws of war and must end.”

In recent months, up to five million people living in cities and communities across the country indeed have suffered the consequences of long and sometimes deliberate interruptions to their water supplies. That includes 2.3 million in Aleppo, 2.5 million in Damascus and 250,000 in Dera’a.

In the northern city of Aleppo, where fighting has crippled the main pumping station for months at a time, UNICEF has recorded 18 deliberate water cuts this year alone. Taps in some communities were left dry for up to 17 days in a row – and for over a month in some areas of the city.

With no water at home, children often take on the task of collecting water from street standpipes and collection points. One UNICEF engineer tells of a little girl he met who had stood in line for hours to fill two small water containers, only to realize that they were too heavy for her to carry. “She just burst into tears,” he recalled.

The unpredictability of warfare can make the process of fetching water dangerous, and even lethal, UNICEF underlined. In recent weeks, conflict cost the lives of at least three children while they were out collecting water in Aleppo.

Water shortages bring other consequences as well. Families in Damascus, Dera’a, Aleppo and other areas have to rely on dirty water from unregulated and unprotected groundwater sources, exposing children in particular to the risk of contracting diarrhea, typhoid, hepatitis, and other diseases. In recent weeks, water prices have increased in Aleppo by up to 3,000 per cent, at a time when families are finding it harder than ever to make ends meet.
Syria’s water crisis has deepened along with the conflict; water availability is about half what it was before the crisis began in 2011. Ongoing violence and heavy clashes have caused severe damage to pipelines and other water infrastructure, and municipal workers are often unable to carry out the necessary repairs.

Frequent power cuts make it hard for technicians and engineers to pump water to civilians. Some areas receive only one hour of electricity a day and cuts lasting up to four days are reported. The misery is particularly acute for millions of displaced families who have to share limited water supplies in over-crowded shelters.

To add to the suffering, Syria – like much of the region – has been wilting under a heat wave said to be the harshest in decades. Temperatures in Aleppo have soared to above 40 degrees Celsius in recent weeks.

UNICEF called on parties to the conflict to take urgent steps to avert further suffering of civilians in Syria, by immediately halt water cuts and all actions that interrupt public water supplies, end all attacks on water facilities and infrastructure, and protect the safety of water engineers and other personnel who repair water supply installations.

**Ebola response panel is studying ways to enforce compliance with key UN legal health instrument**

*26 August* - A special United Nations international panel reviewing the role of existing international health regulations in the response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa is studying the use of possible sanctions and other mechanisms to ensure better compliance with what it described as “a very important legal instrument in order to improve the global health security.”

“In many countries, even in the Ministry of Health… sometimes the regulations about the International Health Regulations are not well known, so I think that there is a question of information communication, there is a question of capacities, there is a question of compliance to the rules; that’s very important,” said Didier Houssin, newly-elected Chair of the Review Committee on the Role of International Health Regulations in the Ebola Outbreak and Response.

The 68th World Health Assembly in May 2015 set a mandate for a Review Committee on response to the Ebola outbreak, which has claimed more than 11,300 lives to date mostly in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, to recommend steps to improve the functioning, transparency, effectiveness and efficiency of the regulations, and to strengthen preparedness and response for future emergencies with health consequences.

In a press conference after the committee’s two-day meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, Mr. Houssin said the review will divided by three working groups – one on communications to define the flow of information from the World Health Organization (WHO) to member States, a second to address capacities, epidemiology, points of entry, surveillance and a third to evaluate member states’ compliance to rules and governance of international health regulations.

“The International Health Regulations…are a very important legal instrument in order to improve the global health security; that’s an instrument for public health to protect the health of the population in the world and it’s existing since several decades and it has been modified in 2005,” Mr. Houssin said. “And, of course, it has strengths and weaknesses and, recently, the Ebola outbreak suggested that probably there were things to improve in these Regulations.”

He said the committee requested from the WHO to inform it about the various methods of compliance which can be used in international laws, Mr. Houssin said.

“In some sectors, for example, there is almost no imposition, nothing imperative; for example, human rights,” he said. “On the other hand, you have, at the other extreme, weapons and nuclear activities where there are sanctions, controls [and] inspections. Well, with the International Health Regulations there is no sanction but we observe that there is not a good compliance.”
“So, we have to find the right balance and probably encouraging mechanisms, incentives, publicity, transparency, benchmarking are the ways that we will explore but at this stage it’s too early to say what will be our recommendation,” he said.

“We are going to explore all the possibilities,” he said.

He said the recommendations are expected to be presented to the next World Health Assembly that is in May 2016.

In her opening address to the committee, WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan said on Monday that “the aftermath of the Ebola outbreak likely represents our best chance ever to transform the world’s response to epidemics and other health emergencies.”

**Top tennis player Novak Djokovic takes centre court for children as new UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador**

26 August - Novak Djokovic, the world’s top ranked tennis player, was today appointed Goodwill Ambassador by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), after having served as the agency’s Serbia Ambassador and promoting children’s rights within his own private foundation.

“Novak Djokovic is a true champion for children around the world. He has shown that a powerful voice and powerful actions can make a difference for children, especially when they are very young,” UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Yoka Brandt said in New York during an event that included the World Bank President, Jim Kim.

“I am honoured to have become a Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF, and to continue to help defend and uphold children’s rights and provide access to early childhood care and development for every girl and every boy,” said the tennis champion.

Since he started teaming up with UNICEF in 2011, Novak Djokovic has been lending his support to improving the lives of children, especially those who are amongst the most marginalized, with a particular focus on the importance of early childhood education and development in providing children with the best start to life, points out a press release.

There is now a widespread recognition that children who receive care, protection and stimulation – starting well before school years, will have a much greater chance to reach their full potential. Djokovic’s commitment to children’s issues will highlight the importance of early enrichment as critical to a holistic approach to the development of young children.

Among his other many actions for children, Novak has supported the improvement of quality of preschool programmes in Serbia. The Novak Djokovic Foundation also funded UNICEF Serbia’s innovative family outreach service aimed at connecting with families living in urban areas, which was so successful it has now been integrated into the Serbian child protection system.

During the floods in the Balkans in 2014, the tennis player made donations to UNICEF to help with the emergency aid efforts. And together with apparel giant UNIQLO, one of his official sponsors, he helped support the 'Schools for Asia' initiative in Bangladesh, China and the Philippines, as well social inclusion and poverty reduction projects in Serbia.

He also signed today a Memorandum of Understanding between the World Bank and the Novak Djokovic Foundation, setting out how the two institutions can partner more closely to promote early childhood development.

The Fund and the Foundation have established a close cooperation on bringing early childhood services to every child and family in Serbia, and the welcome addition of the Bank’s resources will allow an even broader reach to the most deprived children around the world.
UN sets up ‘child-friendly’ space at migrant rest area near former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia border

26 August - Near Gevgelija, a southeast town bordering Greece, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has established a child-friendly space with a mobile team to support women and children fleeing violence in their home countries and moving through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

“The space is providing a safe place for children to rest and play while families complete registration procedures. In addition, the mobile team is screening, identifying and referring children in need of specialized protection services,” UNICEF said in a press release.

Set up within the compounds of a migrant rest area established by the Office if the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a mobile team from the local non-governmental organization LaStrada is helping to reunite children with their families and provide psychosocial support and early childhood development services. UNICEF has procured art, play and educational materials for some 50 children at a time.

According to UNICEF, over the last month, the rate of migrants transiting through the country has increased to 1,500 to 2,000 per day – approximately 30 per cent of whom are women and children. Many are escaping conflict in their home countries of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Children are being shuttled from one authority to another, shunted and risked falling through gaps in laws, policies and practices in transit and host countries – particularly migrant children travelling alone, without parents or adult family members.

“They face a future without education, and limited access to justice and health care. At times, they have been subjected to detention and border control practices that endanger their lives,” UNICEF said.

The agency is urging authorities to recognize and treat all migrant children – regardless of their legal status, religion or affiliation – first and foremost as children with rights, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It is continuing to monitor the situation on the ground and working with local authorities to ensure their safety. “Children must receive special care and attention as well as non-discriminatory and consistent protection,” UNICEF emphasized.