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Top UN official on refugees welcomes EU agreement on plan for Western Balkans migration route



A group of asylum-seekers waiting at a reception centre to be registered for a temporary transit visa, near the town of Gevgelija in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) after crossing the border from Idomeni in Greece, on 27 August 2015. Photo: UNICEF/Gjorgji Klincarov

26 October - As European leaders met this week to hammer out a 17-point plan of action on the Western Balkans migration route for refugees and migrants fleeing Syria and other strife-torn regions, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees commended the fact that a consensus had been reached.

“It is absolutely vital for me that Europe, the European Union (EU) remain a continent of asylum; that the sustainability of Europe’s protection of refugees is guaranteed,” said António Guterres, speaking at a press conference on the Western Balkans Migration Route agreement in Brussels yesterday.

Mr. Guterres also said that Europe’s protection of refugees must be a “project of all European countries,” with the “will to receive refugees coming from troubled areas,” while also noting the importance of adequate registration capacities in “hotspot” areas for the registration and screening of refugees, as well as to facilitate interaction with their countries

of relocation.

The High Commissioner added that he was concerned by the approach of winter, which would make “movement chaotic through the Balkans,” and warned of the need to “facilitate humanitarian assistance to avoid the tragedy that could occur in the winter” because of harsh conditions.

Referring to the 17-point plan of action on the Western Balkans route, he said that there was also a consensus about a clear distinction between refugees and migrants, noting that “there are people in need of protection – those that are considered refugees. It is not an option to receive them or not.

Europe has the obligation to receive them, to grant them protection and assistance and to guarantee their future.” He also noted that “people that move for other reasons” should have their “dignity and human rights fully respected.”

Mr. Guterres also said that the consensus among those present at the meeting on the migration route was “an important contribution to allow for the right bodies of the EU to take decisions that are needed,” which will not only lead to effective management of the refugee crisis but would also “guarantee the union and stability of European institutions.”

The meeting was convened by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission and brought together the countries concerned and most affected by the emergency situation along the Western Balkans route.

The leaders representing Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia met in Brussels at the Commission's Berlaymont Headquarters and agreed to improve cooperation and step up consultation between the countries along the route and decided on pragmatic operational measures that can be implemented as of today to tackle the refugee crisis in the region.

Yemen: UN envoy announces impending peace talks, says negotiations only way to end 'cocktail' of dramatic crises



Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed. UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz

26 October - Stressing that a political solution is key to resolving the "terrible cocktail" of crises in Yemen, the United Nations Special Envoy for the country today announced that preparations have begun for talks between the conflict parties.

In a recent interview with UN Radio, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed said that the impending peace talks will be carried out for two weeks and the preparations are being planned in phases.

He said that the initial meetings would not encompass any direct talks between the two parties but between the Houthis and the General People's Congress and between the Government of Riyadh and Government of Yemen.

“[These discussions] will really lay down the real basis on which the talk could take place in terms of agenda, [...] the subjects which we will be discussing, [...] the outcome and particularly managing the expectations,” said Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed.

He observed that there is a lack of trust between two parties and added that this is a primary obstacle in successfully conducting the peace talks.

“We need to build confidence. We need to make sure that the two parties understand that there is no solution except a peaceful solution,” he added.

Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed warned that unless a peaceful political solution is imposed, Yemen will continue to be embroiled in a “terrible cocktail of dramatic humanitarian situation, continuous battle by air or on ground [...] and terrorist groups who are taking advantage of the situation.”

He also noted that UN Security Council resolution 2216 (2015) will provide as framework to the peace talks where the discussions, which will range from a complete ceasefire between the two warring parties, surrender of big weaponry and withdrawal of militias from the main cities.

The envoy also added that to ensure smoother discussions, there must be agreements on facilitating humanitarian access, release of prisoners and no provocation at the borders.

He also urged to both parties to dissuade from talking through the media and said that making “statements do not help them.”

However, he did note that both parties are coming close to realizing that a political solution is the only possible solution to end the crisis.

He further suggested that all parties who are to join in the peace talks must ensure proper presentation and should participate with the intention of goodwill and to make a difference.

Lastly, he advised the international community and neighbouring countries, to help the in transition of Yemen after the resolutions made during the peace talks are implemented.

He also recommended setting up an internationally monitored mechanism that will ensure that there the norms of the ceasefire is respected.

Mali: UN mission says three civilians killed, two peacekeepers wounded, by mine explosions

26 October - The United Nations mission in Mali has condemned the explosion of a mine or an explosive device in the Kidal region of the country Saturday, killing three civilians and wounding two peacekeepers.

“MINUSMA [UN Integrated Multidimensional Stabilization Mission] strongly condemns such acts aimed at paralyzing operations on the ground and indiscriminately targeting the United Nations, or innocent civilians,” the Mission said in statement.

Around 12:30, MINUSMA went to the scene to find two peacekeepers wounded – one seriously – following the explosion of another mine 5 km south of the UN mission’s camp in Tessalit.



Mine clearance in Timbuktu, Mali.
Photo: MINUSMA/Marco Dormino

MINUSMA sent its condolences to the bereaved families and wishes a speedy recovery to its peacekeepers.

First nine months of 2015 are hottest on record, UN agency reports



The melting of ice sheets in Illulissat, Greenland, is accelerating. UN
Photo/Mark Garten

26 October - Earth has just had the hottest January-September on record, the United Nations World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said today, adding that the average air and sea temperatures in September logged the greatest rise above monthly average in the 136-year historical record.

According to a press release from WMO, the Global Climate Report from the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the globally averaged air temperature over land and sea surface temperature for September was 0.90°C (1.62°F) above the 20th century average temperature. Record warmth was observed across much of South America and parts of Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia.

The year-to-date globally averaged combined temperature of the air over land and ocean surface temperature was 0.85°C (1.53°F) above the 20th century average, said in the report. This was the highest for January–September in the 1880? record, surpassing the previous record set in 2014 by 0.12°C (0.19°F), according to NOAA.

With strong El Niño conditions in place, the September globally averaged sea surface temperature was 0.81°C (1.46°F) above the 20th century average of 16.2°C (61.1°F). The highest departure for September on record, which beat the record in 2014 by 0.07°C (0.13°F), was 0.25°C (0.45°F) higher than the global ocean temperature for September 1997, preceding the

peaking up of the last strong El Niño of 1998.

Earlier this year, WMO reported that the globally averaged temperature for the first half of 2015 was 0.85°C (1.53°F) above the 20th century average of 15.5°C, the hottest for such period on record.

An annual Statement on the Status of Global Climate will be released by WMO in November 2015, the UN climate change conference in Paris, COP-21, analyzing the combination of data. A summary of the global climate in 2011-2015 will be released at the same time, said in the WMO's statement.

UN agencies ready to support Government-led relief efforts in quake-hit South Asia



Damage caused by an earthquake in Afghanistan in 2009. Photo: UNAMA/Qaheer Khan

26 October - United Nations agencies are mobilizing and stand ready to support Government-led relief operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today, adding that his thoughts are with the people of the two countries after a powerful earthquake struck Badakshan province in Afghanistan.

“The Secretary-General sends his deepest condolences to the people and Governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan and to everyone affected, particularly those who have lost family members and friends. He wishes a speedy recovery to those injured,” said a statement issued by his spokesperson in New York.

The statement also said that early reports suggest that there has been loss of life and serious damage to infrastructure in both countries.

“United Nations agencies are mobilizing and stand ready to support Government-led relief operations in both countries, if requested,” the statement concluded.

During the daily press briefing at UN Headquarters, Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric said that thus far, there are reports of damage across the northeast part of Afghanistan and in Kabul. Scattered reports at this stage indicate damage across the Northeast and in Kabul. The Government and UN are both hampered by the lack of phone service.

Early indications are that the impact of the initial shock may be relatively light, given the low density of population. Afghan disaster response mechanisms at the national and provincial levels have been mobilised, and the UN stands ready to provide assistance if requested, he explained.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, the National Disaster Management Authority says that 148 people have been killed and 815 injured by the quake. [Hospitals] are on alert around the main impacted region – around the Khyber region, Mr. Dujarric continued.

He said that UN agencies are mobilizing emergency stocks as a preparatory measure in case support is required. The UN and its humanitarian partners stand ready to support the Pakistani Government’s ongoing relief effort for the people affected by the earthquake and mobilize any support, if requested.

UN condemns attack on human rights workers in Afghanistan that killed two, injured six

26 October - The top UN official in Afghanistan has condemned the killing of two human rights workers today by a remote-controlled explosive device in the eastern city of Jalalabad, saying “the climate of fear created by such attacks, threatens vital human rights work” being carried out throughout the country.

“An intentional attack against people who dedicate their lives to protecting the rights of Afghan citizens is an atrocity,” said Nicholas Haysom, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), in a statement issued in Kabul.



Special Representative for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom. Photo: UNAMA/Fardin Waezi

The two killed were employees of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). Six other staff of the Commission were injured when a remote-controlled improvised explosive device detonated against the human rights group’s minibus in Jalalabad.

“Victims of human rights violations and abuses in Afghanistan often rely on AIHRC to document and draw attention to their plight,” Mr. Haysom said. “The climate of fear created by such attacks, threatens vital human rights work carried out throughout Afghanistan.”

The UN mission “encourages relevant authorities to undertake prompt, thorough and impartial investigations, to hold those found responsible to account, and to ensure an effective remedy for victims.”

It also said “authorities should take robust measures to ensure adequate protection of human rights defenders, women’s rights activists, journalists, civil society organizations and other individuals and organizations working to promote and protect human rights.”

In addition, UNAMA noted that the deliberate targeting of civilians and the indiscriminate use of explosives in civilian populated areas are violations of international humanitarian law and “may amount to war crimes.”

Valuing women’s work key to achieving new global goal on gender equality – UN labour agency



The future of work depends on the future of women at work. Photo: World Bank/Simone D. McCourtie

26 October - Applauding the decision by Member States to include gender equality as a key plank of the newly-adopted 2030 Agenda, a senior United Nations labour agency official has stressed the importance of empowering women in employment, salaries and the working environment, urging governments to commit to this achievable, basic right of women.

“The world has fallen short in bringing women’s employment, earnings and working conditions in line with those of men,” stressed Shauna Olney, Chief of Gender, Equality and Diversity Branch at the International Labour Organization (ILO), while acknowledging progress made in education and maternal mortality.

The quality of jobs is paramount. However, Ms. Olney stated that half of women are employed globally and their wages are about ¾ of what men earn, in addition to their domestic responsibilities.

Workplace violence and under-representation in senior positions are two other prominent issues to tackle, according to Ms. Olney.

Moving on to women's social and economic status, she said cultural traditions and economic conditions cannot excuse discrimination and other violations of fundamental human rights. Countries, she said, cannot any longer afford to lose out on this aspect of gender parity.

"ILO equality Conventions, addressing discrimination, equal remuneration for work of equal value, maternity protection and work and family measures, including access to parental leave as well as quality and affordable social care services for dependent family members, provide the road map for action," said Ms. Olney.

More countries are making public policies by considering the root causes and results of gender inequality and discriminations, among which Chile, France and Ethiopia have set some good examples.

Until appreciation and measures of women's work are made will there be gender equality, highlighted Ms. Olney.

She went on to spotlight ILO's Women at Work Centenary Initiative, which has been prepared for the centenary of the agency, saying that it showcases a leading role ILO plays in guiding the transformation to gender equality in the workplace.

"Promoting decent jobs for women is imperative," Ms. Olney echoed ILO's Director General, adding that "Goal 5 is achievable. The evidence is there and the commitments as well. It is now time to take action and invest in women."

UN human rights chief dispatches assessment mission to South Sudan following reports of rights abuses

26 October - After reports of alleged violations and abuses of human rights committed by both parties to the conflict in South Sudan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is deploying a 10-member mission to the country to assess the situation.

"The team will examine violations of international human rights law and of international humanitarian law committed by actors on both sides of the political divide," said a press release from the Office of High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

He added that the first three members of the mission had already arrived in the South Sudanese capital, Juba, last week, and will focus on the human rights violations that have affected civilians since the outbreak of violence in the country in December 2013.

Mr. Zeid also said that the assessment report will then be presented to the UN Human Rights Council, which mandated the mission, at its next session in March 2016.

"Given the time constraints, this will be a preliminary assessment, building on the work done by the human rights division of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and it will advise the Human Rights Council on appropriate follow-up action," Mr. Zeid added.

He went on to say the assessment report would also contain recommendations for ways to improve the human rights situation in the country and to ensure accountability for gross violations.

A resolution of the Human Rights Council has stressed the importance of an objective assessment of the human rights situation in South Sudan and called for the deployment of a mission.

The text also calls for monitoring and reporting the situation of human rights, including a comprehensive assessment of allegations of violence and abuses of human rights with a "view to ensuring accountability and in complementarity with the African Union Commission of Inquiry."

The resolution further requires the mission to report on the steps undertaken by the Government to monitor and ensure accountability of violations and abuses of human rights.



Children at a protection of civilians site in Juba, South Sudan, run by the UN Mission, perform at a special cultural event in March 2015. UN Photo/JC McIlwaine

This includes, “work to establish appropriate criminal justice mechanisms; to decrease and prevent violence against children and the recruitment of child soldiers; to investigate, arrest and prosecute perpetrators of any human rights violations and abuses, and of rape and sexual violence, including those in armed groups and the military; to investigate, arrest and prosecute perpetrators of targeted killings; to increase democratic space, especially for the media and civil society; and to prevent arbitrary detention.”

Lastly, Mr. Zeid said that he looked forward to complete cooperation and support of the Government of South Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition.

New UN report links processed meats to cancer in humans; red meat also likely to cause the disease



Red meat on sale at Hamarwayne market in Mogadishu, Somalia. Photo: AMISOM/Omar Abdisalan

26 October - The cancer research arm of the World Health Organization (WHO) has determined that the consumption of processed meats like hotdogs, ham, sausages and meat-based sauces causes colorectal cancer, while eating red meat like beef, pork and lamb is “probably carcinogenic to humans.”

“In view of the large number of people who consume processed meat, the global impact on cancer incidence is of public health importance,” said Dr. Kurt Straif, Head of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) programme responsible for the findings.

After reviewing the accumulated scientific literature, a working group of 22 experts from 10 countries convened by the IARC, processed meat was classified as *carcinogenic to humans* based on *sufficient evidence* in humans that the consumption of processed meat causes colorectal cancer.

Processed meat refers to meat that has been transformed through salting, curing, fermentation, smoking, or other processes to enhance flavour or improve preservation. Most processed meats contain pork or beef, but processed meats may also contain other red meats, poultry, offal, or meat by-products such as blood.

The agency said examples of processed meat include hot dogs, or frankfurters, ham, sausages, corned beef, and biltong or beef jerky, as well as canned meat and meat-based preparations and sauces.

The experts “concluded that each 50 gram portion of processed meat eaten daily increases the risk of colorectal cancer by 18 per cent,” according to a press release issued today.

The agency also said that the consumption of red meat is *probably carcinogenic to humans* based on *limited evidence* that the consumption of red meat causes cancer in humans. Red meat refers to all types of mammalian muscle meat, such as beef, veal, pork, lamb, mutton, horse, and goat.

The association between red meat and cancer was observed mainly for colorectal cancer, but associations were also seen for pancreatic cancer and prostate cancer, it said.

“These findings further support current public health recommendations to limit intake of meat,” said IARC director Dr. Christopher Wild.

“At the same time, red meat has nutritional value,” Dr. Wild said. “Therefore, these results are important in enabling governments and international regulatory agencies to conduct risk assessments, in order to balance the risks and benefits of eating red meat and processed meat and to provide the best possible dietary recommendations.”

The IARC Working Group considered more than 800 studies that investigated associations of more than a dozen types of cancer with the consumption of red meat or processed meat in many countries and populations with diverse diets.

The IARC’s mission is to coordinate and conduct research on the causes of human cancer, the mechanisms of

carcinogenesis, and to develop scientific strategies for cancer control.

UN chief welcomes Israel's commitment to restore calm at holy sites in Jerusalem



The Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Photo: Flickr/Tony Kane

26 October - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today welcomed the statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterating Israel's commitment to uphold the status quo at the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

In a statement issued by his spokesperson, the Secretary-General also noted Mr. Netanyahu's affirmation that Israel does not intend to divide the holy sites, and that it "respects the importance of the special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, as reflected in the 1994 peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, and the historical role of King Abdullah II."

The Secretary-General also said in the statement that strengthened security arrangements between Israel and the Jordanian Waqf would help ensure visitors demonstrate restraint and respect for the sanctity of the holy site.

Mr. Ban, who visited the region last week, said he hoped the renewed commitment will "put an end to the provocative rhetoric that has added to the tensions and violence over the past weeks."

"Only by restoring calm will all parties be able to refocus their efforts on renewing confidence and creating conditions on the ground, in the region and internationally for meaningful negotiations towards a two-state solution and to put an end to the occupation that began in 1967," he added.

He also expressed his appreciation for the discussions which led to the renewed commitment, which were held by United States Secretary of State John Kerry with Prime Minister Netanyahu, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan.

Urging swift probe into 'act of terror,' UN special envoy condemns attack against Palestinian politician



Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov. UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz

25 October - Condemning today's attack in Ramallah against a prominent Palestinian political figure, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov has called for a thorough investigation into the incident and has reiterated the call by top United Nations officials to reduce tensions in the region and avoid actions that would spark further violence.

"Earlier today I spoke to Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) member and Secretary-General of the Palestinian National Initiative party, and condemned today's attack against him near his house in Ramallah," said Mr. Mladenov in a statement issued by his Office, referring to the incident, which, according to media reports, was perpetrated by unknown assailants.

"Such attacks serve only those who are interested in harming the Palestinian social and political fabric," the statement continued, adding the Special Coordinator's call on the Palestinian authorities "to promptly investigate this act of terror and to bring the perpetrators to justice."

Mr. Mladenov recalled that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has just returned from the region, which has recently seen an uptick in violence since early September. A series of ever-more deadly clashes between Palestinians and Israelis, including Israeli security forces, has marked much of October, with incidents reported in more than 50 different locations, including in East Jerusalem, Ramallah, Hebron, Bethlehem, Jenin, Tulkarm and Nablus.

On his return to New York this past Friday, Mr. Ban told reporters at UN Headquarters that he had had “long and detailed” discussions with Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian leaders, and stressed that “there is still time to step back from the brink,” despite anger and polarization in the region. “All agreed on the urgent need to reduce tensions and avoid actions that would further fuel the violence,” the UN chief said.

In his statement today, Mr. Mladenov noted that the Secretary-General had stressed the urgent need to reduce tensions and avoid actions and statements that would further fuel violence.

“This is imperative in order to restore the hope of the Palestinian people that an end of the occupation and a negotiated two-state solution are possible,” concluded the Special Coordinator.

In New York’s Central Park, Ban unveils sculpture depicting ‘great hope all of us have invested in the UN’

24 October - As worldwide celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the United Nations kicked into high gear, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and a host of senior UN officials gathered this evening in New York’s Central Park to unveil a new sculpture, *Enlightened Universe*, comprised of a sphere surrounded by a spiral of 70 human figures – one for each of the 70 years since the UN was created, which Mr. Ban said, “depicts the great hope that all of us have invested in the [Organization].”



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon unveils “Enlightened Universe”, a monumental art installation by Spanish artist Cristóbal Gabarrón, on Saturday, 24 October, in Central Park in New York City in celebration of the 70th anniversary of the United Nations. UN Photo/Cia Pak

The interactive sculpture, created by renowned Spanish artist Cristobal Gabarron, honours UN70 and is the newest addition to Central Park’s sculpture programme.

The historic ceremony was presided over by the Secretary-General and the President of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly, Mogens Lykketoft. It was expected to include the President of the Security Council, Román Oyarzun, of Spain, and the President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Oh Joon, alongside New York City officials, including Commissioner for Department of Parks and Recreation Mitchell Silver.

The sculpture’s central sphere and its diameter of 6,371 millimeters are a tribute to the Earth, whose average radius measures 6,371 kilometres. The 70 figures form a universal chain of the human values defended by the UN – freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, shared responsibility, education and culture.

In his remarks, the Secretary-General said: “This structure behind us depicts the great hope that all of us have invested in the United Nations. The 70 figures surrounding the globe represent the 7.3 billion humans living on Earth today.”

“Their hands are joined in solidarity, to show how we create a more inclusive world. A world in where we have shared values and a shared responsibility to protect our planet,” observed the UN chief, expressing gratitude to Mr. Gabarrón “for creating this masterpiece and for doing so on his own initiative. His artistic talent is only matched by the generosity of his spirit and his Foundation.”

Thanking those that had gathered in the Park on a crisp fall Saturday, Mr. Ban reiterated the significance of UN Day, and underscored that: “For seven decades, the United Nations has served as a beacon of hope for people the world over...I hope you will leave believing that a better future is within reach.”

Hailing the sculpture as a fitting tribute to the Organization, Assembly President Lykketoft said: “This colourful and imaginative art work will serve to inspire and remind visitors to New York that billions of people around the world dream of enjoying peaceful and prosperous lives in a sustainable and just world.”

Indeed, he continued, it reminded all of their common responsibility to give to the United Nations the strength and capacity to pursue that dream on behalf of all humanity. “We who are here tonight have a strong commitment to contribute further to the ideals of the UN Charter about peace, development and respect for human rights. We must work to end the senseless conflicts and violence that disrupt development, displace millions and destroy hundreds of thousands of lives,” he

emphasized.

The worldwide celebrations of 'UN70' has been taking place since late last night, when from Australia to Azerbaijan, Indonesia to Iraq, Saudi Arabia to South Sudan, some 350 sites around the world began lighting up in UN blue – the official beginning in New Zealand and followed by a wave of blue moving across countries and continents as monuments around the world began taking part in the event.

UN Headquarters in New York will be lit up for two nights, beginning 23 October when the annual UN Day concert will be held, and concluding on 24 October, which has been celebrated as UN Day since 1948.

The Day marks the anniversary of the entry into force of the UN Charter. With the ratification of this founding document by the majority of its signatories, including the five permanent members of the Security Council, the Organization officially came into being.

“The timeless values of the UN Charter must remain our guide. Our shared duty is to 'unite our strength' to serve 'we the peoples',” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in his message for the Day.

“To mark this anniversary, monuments and buildings across the world are being illuminated in UN blue. As we shine a light on this milestone anniversary, let us reaffirm our commitment to a better and brighter future for all.”

Among the famous landmarks taking part in the 'Turn the World UN Blue' campaign will be the Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt, the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro, the Great Wall of China, Russia's Hermitage Museum, and the ancient city of Petra in Jordan.

On World Polio Day, UNICEF cites 'dramatic' progress against virus, urges efforts towards zero cases



In Bhujpura, India, a team of vaccinators knock on doors and check if any child did not receive the polio vaccine. Each house is marked accordingly so that they have a record of the work completed. © UNICEF/INDA2015-00025/Biswas

24 October - Never before in the history of polio have so few children in so few countries contracted the crippling virus, but a senior United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) official has vowed “we cannot rest until the number of cases is zero.”

“Progress to end polio is real and dramatic, with now just two countries in the world where the wild poliovirus has never been interrupted: Afghanistan and Pakistan,” said by the head of the Polio Unit at UNICEF, Peter Crowley, in a press release.

“But – and it's a big but – until all children everywhere are consistently and routinely immunized against polio, the threat remains. We cannot let down our guard; we have to keep going until there is not a single child anywhere who remains unvaccinated,” he declared.

According to UNICEF, there have been 51 cases of wild polio virus globally since the beginning of 2015, compared with 242 wild polio cases for 2014.

Nigeria was removed from the list of polio endemic countries last month, having successfully interrupted transmission of wild poliovirus. Such an achievement has encouraged countries in the African region to get closer to being certified polio-free. Moreover, in India there have been no cases of polio-induced paralysis for four years, though thousands of young patients once suffered from such paralysis.

UNICEF delivered 1.7 billion doses of vaccine last year to support the training of the frontline workers and help to build trust in the vaccine among parents and communities in some Nigeria and Pakistan.

Despite this progress, Mr. Crowley noted recent vaccine-derived poliovirus outbreaks in some countries, as the result of low routine immunization coverage. “These outbreaks serve as a reminder of the vital need for intensified efforts to strengthen routine immunization systems and address disparities in children's access to basic health services. In Ukraine, for example,

fewer than 14 per cent of children are immunized against polio.”

“We aim to bring a global halt to polio transmission by this time next year, but the only way to do this is for countries with low vaccination rates to re-double their efforts to reach every child, wherever they are and no matter how hard this may be,” he concluded.

Strong El Niño will ‘test’ disaster resilience in hazard-prone Pacific region, UN warns

26 October - Amid growing fears that the irregular climatic activities of El Niño will result in severe weather events across the hazard-prone region of small islands and atolls in the Pacific, the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) today addressed a gathering in Suva, Fiji, of disaster reduction and humanitarian response partners from across the region at a joint programme of events around regional resilience to disasters and emergency management.



Head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) Margareta Wahlström opens the 2015 Pacific Regional Disaster Resilience Meeting in Suva, Fiji. Photo: UNISDR

“These coming months have the potential to be the most testing period in the history of the Pacific Islands. The region’s vulnerability was exposed during the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in March when Cyclone Pam inflicted heavy losses on Vanuatu. Warming waters and rising sea levels resulting from climate change threaten the viability of life in many places in the region,” said Margareta Wahlström, Head of UNISDR.

Addressing the 2015 Pacific Regional Disaster Resilience Meeting she added that the event is the first in the region since the adoption of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and will provide a platform for discussions ranging from the measures still required to ensure that the general public are risk informed and have access to early warnings and cyclone shelters.

Further, the event will include discussions on strengthening risk governance, investing in disaster resilient infrastructure and having plans in place to build back better after disaster strikes.

In a press release, Timothy Wilcox, Head of the Pacific Office for UNISDR, also reiterated that the region is a challenging environment for disaster risk management as it is exposed to extreme weather events.

“Parts of the region are now suffering drought and water shortages because of El Niño while others are preparing for the strong likelihood that they will be hit by high winds, storm surges and heavy rainfall in the months ahead,” said Mr. Wilcox.

He also noted that the event will provide an opportunity for the region to examine how to implement the Sendai Framework, which was adopted as a global blueprint for reducing disaster losses earlier this year.

The event will be attended by representatives from government, local government, the private sector, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, UN agencies, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and several non-governmental organizations.

“The Pacific region is well-placed to take a lead on showing the importance of being able to manage disaster risk as opposed to simply focusing on disaster response. A lot of good solutions will be shared this week,” said Mr. Wilcox.

OCHA is also responding to the climatic threats of El Niño by hosting the annual Pacific Humanitarian Partnership Meeting between 28th and 29th October to strengthen relationships between actors working in disaster response, resilience and recovery, as well as make preparations for the season ahead.

“Humanitarian needs are on the rise across the world. In the Pacific, countries are acutely vulnerable to a range of increasing natural hazards and the emerging impacts of climate change. It has never been more important for those working across development, humanitarian response and risk reduction to be synchronized,” Sune Gudnitz, Head of the OCHA, Regional Office for the Pacific said.

According to OCHA, approximately 4.5 million people across 11 countries in the Pacific are under the threat of El Niño.

The OCHA event aims to bring development and humanitarian actors together to commit to auctioning some of the outcomes from the World Humanitarian Summit regional consultations earlier this year.

Lawful civil society groups 'are not enemies of democracy, but key allies,' says UN expert



Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism Ben Emmerson. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

26 October - United Nations human rights expert Ben Emmerson today urged governments across the world to ensure that civil society be included in global, co-ordinated efforts to counter the spread of terrorism.

Presenting his report to the UN General Assembly's Third Committee, the Organization's main body dealing with social, humanitarian and cultural issues, Mr. Emmerson said that civil society is an "essential cornerstone of an open society."

"The abuse of counter-terrorism measures to stifle legitimate opposition and to choke public interest and human rights organizations around world is gathering pace, and has become a first rank priority for the UN human rights mechanisms," he said.

The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism then went on to warn of the spread of what he called an "ideological pandemic."

"More than 60 States have proposed or passed laws during that time restricting freedom of assembly, or prohibiting the foreign funding and activities of civil society organisations," he said.

He also said that civil society had not only been directly targeted by States adopting repressive legislation, but had also been affected by international and national measures aimed at countering terrorist financing, which had resulted in a "direct and chilling impact on public interest groups."

"They have the unique ability to reach out to local communities," said the Special Rapporteur, adding that they played "an integral part in the realization of longer term development goals."

"States need to recognize, in all the regulation that is adopted, that lawful civil society organizations are not enemies of democracy and the rule of law, but key allies," he concluded.

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the UN 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.