In the headlines:

- As evacuations resume in Aleppo, UN prepares to redeploy staff to monitor process
- DR Congo: UN envoy voices concern over wave of ongoing arrests and detentions
- As bitter winter grips Middle East, UNICEF faces funding gap for support to millions of children
- Agriculture support ‘critical’ for Horn of Africa as region braces for another hunger season
- UN rights chief calls for murder investigation after Philippine President admits to killing three people
- On International Day, UN chief stresses need for solidarity to bridge sustainable development gaps
- At Security Council, UN chief underlines need to tackle root causes of human trafficking
- UN condemns ‘horrific’ terrorist attack in Berlin

As evacuations resume in Aleppo, UN prepares to redeploy staff to monitor process

20 December — As the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) resumed this morning evacuations from besieged neighbourhoods in eastern Aleppo, the United Nations reported that it has received authorization to send 20 international and national staff to the city to play a critical role in the monitoring and the response.

“This will almost triple the number of international staff currently deployed to Aleppo,” Jens Laerke, spokesperson for the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), told the regular news briefing in Geneva where he informed reporters of the Syrian Government’s decision to “unblock” the 20 staffers, who were already in the capital, Damascus, to be redeployed “as soon as possible to Aleppo.”

He noted that perhaps 100 UN staff members are already in western Aleppo and ready to deploy to the eastern districts.

Mr. Laerke praised the efforts of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and ICRC, who have been overseeing the evacuations in Syria. As of 9:20 a.m. local time today, the organizations had escorted 10 buses from the Ramouseh checkpoint to Khan al-Assal in western Aleppo. Nearly 19,000 people have been evacuated out of east Aleppo since the evacuations began on 15 December and more buses are expected to transport civilians out of the city today.

According to the spokesperson, the operation will continue until all those who need and wish to leave have been able to do so safely and with dignity.
Yesterday, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution to enable the UN and its partners to carry out monitoring activities on evacuations from eastern Aleppo, report on such operations, and deploy additional staff. It “demands all parties to provide these monitors with safe, immediate, and unimpeded access.”

The resolution opens the door for evacuations and humanitarian assistance. It also requires the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to report to the Security Council within five days on the implementation of the text.

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the UN Information Service in Geneva, noted that the resolution followed a dramatically more difficult situation on the ground, as well as Mr. Ban’s assessment that the city had become “a synonym for hell.”

A spokesperson for the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that so far, 301 patients have been medically evacuated (43 yesterday) to hospitals in Idlib, rural western Aleppo, and Turkey. UN partners and non-governmental organizations in Gaziantep and Idlib province are receiving people as they arrive and providing urgent humanitarian assistance, including medical care for the sick and wounded.

A team of 233 staff members from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is also providing assistance with non-food items such as health, emergency, and shelter kits in Aleppo.

Adrian Edwards, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), reported that the UN had no indication of people moving across the border to Turkey and that refugee camps in the country were being run by Turkish authorities. However, UNHCR has stockpiles in place and ready for an additional 100,000 people should the situation change.

**DR Congo: UN envoy voices concern over wave of ongoing arrests and detentions**

20 December – The United Nations envoy for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) expressed grave concern today over the wave of arrests and arbitrary detention “of those who seek to express their political views” in the country over the past three days, and reiterated the necessity for all Congolese authorities to respect the rules of the country and ensure protection of free speech.

“I urge the national authorities to strictly adhere to their international human rights obligations, to create a climate of political tolerance and respect at this important juncture in the DRC’s history, and to grant full access to United Nations personnel to all detention centres,” said Maman S. Sidikou, the Special Representative of the Secretary General and Head of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission (MONUSCO).

The United Nations has documented 113 arrests in the country, including opposition leaders and sympathizers, civil society activists and human rights defenders, media professionals and other individuals, since 16 December. In addition, the UN has not always been granted the required access to verify the conditions of those arrested, he explained.

Most of the arrests took place in Goma, Kinshasa and Bukavu, undertaken by the Congolese National Police (PNC), Agence National de Renseignement (ANR) and the Republican Guard.

“I call on the relevant authorities to apply due process for all those who have been detained and to bring an end to politically-motivated detentions,” said Mr. Sidikou, adding that he has previously highlighted the necessity for all Congolese to respect the laws of the Republic.
The Special Representative also underlined the importance of promoting and protecting human rights, including the freedoms of opinion, expression and peaceful assembly enshrined in the Constitution, in an open political space. “This is essential to create a conductive environment for the conduct of meaningful dialogue on the way forward in the DRC,” he stated.

Just three days ago, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said he was “deeply alarmed” at a planned Government shutdown of social media networks in the country from the evening of 18 December, ahead of the end of President Joseph Kabila's mandate, coupled with a continuing ban on demonstrations by civil society and the opposition.

As bitter winter grips Middle East, UNICEF faces funding gap for support to millions of children

20 December – Millions of children throughout the Middle East are in danger as bitter cold temperatures and winter weather bear down on the region, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said today, as it warned the agency faces a $38 million funding gap as it races to provide assistance.

“The winter months are even more brutal for vulnerable children in the region,” said Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

He explained that they are weakened from months of undernutrition and lack of health care, putting them at high risk of hypothermia and serious respiratory infections from the cold.

“Without help, winter could be another harsh sentence for many of them,” the UNICEF official stressed.

Families affected by the conflict in Syria and Iraq are exhausted from years of violence, displacement, and unemployment. Their financial resources are drained, making it all but impossible to purchase warm clothing and heating fuel. On top of the struggle to survive with the bare minimum, many are living in makeshift shelters and camps that offer scant protection against the cold. Many have fled conflicts without bringing any belongings.

UNICEF is hoping to provide more than 2.5 million children in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt with warm clothing, thermal blankets, and cash assistance for families this winter.

So far, winter kits have been distributed to nearly 50,000 children in Syria, including those living in shelters following evacuations from east Aleppo. The agency has provided heating to schools in Lebanon for 95,000 children and cash assistance for more than 50,000 in Jordan. 38,000 children and 400 pregnant or lactating mothers in Iraq have received winter clothing.

However, needs are outpacing support: UNICEF has received just slightly more than half of the $82 million required to help protect vulnerable children from the cold.

The winter assistance the agency seeks to provide is in addition to its ongoing programmes that provide health, nutrition, water, sanitation, protection, and education to millions of children throughout the Middle East.
Agriculture support ‘critical’ for Horn of Africa as region braces for another hunger season

20 December – In the wake of the multiple droughts that hit the Horn of Africa over the past year, countries in the region will face rise in hunger and further decline of local livelihoods in the coming months, while also dealing with the growing number of refugees, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) reported today.

According to the agency, nearly 12 million people across Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia face harsh food conditions, and are in need of emergency assistance. Families in the region also experience rising debt, low cereal and seed stocks, and low milk and meat production.

Farmers need urgent support to recover from consecutive lost harvests and to keep their breeding livestock healthy and productive at a time that pastures are the driest in years. Production outputs in the three countries are grim.

“We’re dealing with a cyclical phenomenon in the Horn of Africa,” said Dominique Burgeon, Director of FAO’s Emergency and Rehabilitation Division, stressing that timely support to farming families can significantly boost their ability to withstand the impacts of these droughts and soften the blow to their livelihoods.

The agency has already begun allocating funds to Kenya and Somalia to support emergency feed, repairs of water points, vaccinations for breeding and weak animals, and seeds and tools to plant in the spring season.

FAO is also cooperating with local officials to help countries prepare for emergencies, “especially in those areas where we know natural hazards are recurring,” said Mr. Burgeon, adding that working with the Government to further build up the ability to mitigate future shocks is a smart intervention that can significantly reduce the need for humanitarian and food aid further down the line.

Kenya currently has nearly 1.3 million people that are food insecure, and the number could increase in early 2017 due to an expected drought. To help the livestock, FAO is providing feed, water, and veterinary support and good management skills training for local officials.

Somalia has also seen two poor rainy seasons this year, with a 50 per cent below average drop in Gu cereal harvest this spring. About five million Somalis are food insecure through December 2016, including 1.1 million people in Crisis and Emergency conditions of food insecurity, a 20 per cent increase in just six months.

Meanwhile, Ethiopia is still recovering from the 2015 El Niño-induced drought, with 5.6 million food insecure people, and millions more depending on livestock herds. FAO and more than 25 non-governmental organizations and agencies reached 1.5 million households with drought-resistant seeds.

FAO reports that Somalia and Kenya are among the first to benefit from its new Early Warning Early Action Fund (EWEA), which ensures quick activation of emergency plans when there is a high likelihood of a disaster that would affect agriculture and people's food and nutrition security.
UN rights chief calls for murder investigation after Philippine President admits to killing three people

20 December – Stressing that the killing of “about three” people, which the President of the Philippines admitted to personally committing, while serving as the Mayor of the city of Davao clearly constituted murder, the United Nations human rights chief called on the judicial authorities in the country to uphold the rule of law and investigate the self-professed crimes.

“The killings committed by [President Duterte of the Philippines], by his own admission, at a time when he was a mayor, clearly constitute murder,” said the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein.

“It should be unthinkable for any functioning judicial system not to launch investigative and judicial proceedings when someone has openly admitted being a killer,” he added.

According to the UN human rights arm, Mr. Duterte told business leaders last week that he had patrolled the streets personally on his motorcycle and killed people. On Friday, in an interview with the BBC, he confirmed that he had personally killed “about three” people during his term as the mayor of Davao.

“The killings described by President Duterte also violate international law, including the right to life, freedom from violence and force, due process and fair trial, equal protection before the law, and innocence until proven guilty,” underscored High Commissioner Zeid, adding that if Mr. Duterte, as a government official, encouraged others to follow his example, he may also have committed incitement to violence.

Mr. Zeid also said that Mr. Duterte's repeated calls for the police, military and the general public to engage in a 'war on drugs', bringing people in 'dead or alive', has emboldened an environment of alarming impunity and violence and that repeated statements indicating immunity for police officers who engaged in human rights violations in the line of duty were “a direct violation of all democratic safeguards that have been established to uphold justice and the rule of law.”

UN's human rights chief Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein on Tuesday urged the Philippines judicial authorities to launch investigative processes following last week's admission of murder by the president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte.

The High Commissioner's Office (OHCHR) said that since Mr. Duterte's assumed presidency on 30 June, more than 6,100 people have reportedly been killed either by police, or by vigilantes and mercenaries, apparently acting in response to the President's 'war on drugs.'

“In his public comments last week, Mr. Duterte promised 'For as long as there are drug lords, this campaign will go on until the last day of my term and until all of them are killed.,”’ OHCHR noted.

“Credible and independent investigations must be urgently re-opened into the killings in Davao, as well as into the shocking number of killings that have occurred across the country since Mr. Duterte became president,” underlined the UN human rights chief, stressing:

“The perpetrators must be brought to justice, sending a strong message that violence, killings and human rights violations will not be tolerated by the State and that no one is above the law.”

Mr. Zeid also called on the Government to lift a series of preconditions it imposed on a planned visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on summary executions to investigate alleged extra-judicial killings of suspected drug dealers.
On International Day, UN chief stresses need for solidarity to bridge sustainable development gaps

20 December – While the world has achieved significant progress in human development over the past two decades, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon pointed out today that “prosperity has not been shared by all,” as he lauded the virtues of confronting the void with solidarity.

“The global poverty rate fell by more than half. People are living longer and healthier lives, and are better educated,” Mr. Ban said in his message commemorating International Human Solidarity Day. “Despite these and other advances,” he continued “inequalities, extreme poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and environmental degradation continue to be prominent features of societies around the world.”

The UN chief noted that discrimination and prejudice remain major barriers to building inclusive societies, and that many vulnerable social groups find their situation worsening. Additionally, he added that the impacts of climate change would fall most heavily on those who did least to cause the problem.

“Solidarity is essential to address these gaps in sustainable development,” Mr. Ban underscored.

Let us emphasize the role of human solidarity in building lives of dignity for all on a healthy planet

He recalled that ‘leaving no one behind,’ promoting prosperity and ensuring inclusiveness and equality are core principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by world leaders in September 2015, and of the Paris Agreement on climate change adopted in December of that same year.

“As nations strive to uphold their promises and to meet the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), mutual support will be crucial. Global problems require collective solutions,” he emphasized.

At a time of divisiveness on many key global issues, from armed conflict to forced migration, Mr. Ban said that people “need to turn toward each other in common cause, not away from each other in fear.”

“On International Human Solidarity Day, let us emphasize the role of human solidarity in building lives of dignity for all on a healthy planet. We must work together to achieve the SDGs and secure the future we want,” concluded the Secretary-General.
At Security Council, UN chief underlines need to tackle root causes of human trafficking

20 December – Highlighting the plight of victims of human trafficking, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon underlined today the need to ensure justice for victims and accountability for perpetrators, as well as to address underlying factors by focusing on human rights and stability.

“If conflict gives oxygen to traffickers, human rights and stability suffocate them,” Mr. Ban told the Security Council today at its ministerial-level meeting on the theme trafficking in persons in conflict situations.

It also featured briefings from Yury Fedotov, the Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and Zainab Hawa Bangura, UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

“We need strategic leadership in ending war – and also in preventing conflicts and sustaining peace,” added the Secretary-General, noting the UN’s commitment to supporting its Member States in early action and in preventive diplomacy.

He further drew attention to the importance of implementing the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure that the promise of “a life of dignity for all people” is delivered, and called on all countries to ratify all international human rights, refugee, labour rights and crime prevention conventions, and to put efforts into their effective implementation.

“The majority of trafficking victims are women and girls. Our response must include special attention to their rights,” he noted.

He also underlined the need to decrease funding for terrorists to make everyone, and in particular those who risk being trafficked, safer.

“Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL/Da’esh], Boko Haram, Al Shabaab and others are using trafficking and sexual violence as a weapon of terror – and an important source of revenue,” he said.

He further highlighted the need to respect and implement international law as well as strengthen national legal protections to ensure justice and accountability. He also stressed the importance of supressing trafficking syndicates by targeting money-laundering and criminal proceeds.

“The problem of trafficking is international in nature – and only an international response can succeed,” said Mr. Ban, adding: “Let us work together to help today’s victims of trafficking while creating a more stable and just world for all.”

Member States urged to take ‘decisive and immediate action’ on human trafficking

As an outcome of the meeting the Council adopted a consensus resolution, recognizing the various complexities and challenges of trafficking, in which it called on all UN Member States to take “decisive and immediate action” to prevent, criminalize, investigate, prosecute and ensure accountability of those who engage in trafficking in persons, including in the context of armed conflict.
In his remarks, Mr. Fedotov, UNODC chief warned that the pervasive nature of human trafficking meant that “there is no single measure, no one step in any given part of the world that can address this problem alone.” Indeed, building effective action requires a strong framework of international cooperation and shared responsibility, starting with the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol against Trafficking in Persons.

He went on to note that tomorrow, UNODC will launch the 2016 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, which provides a snapshot of the state of national responses to the challenges of human trafficking. Based on reliable data and information provided by Member States, it establishes that an increasing number of trafficking victims from conflict-affected countries such as Syria, Iraq and Somalia have been detected in Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Picking up that thread, Special Representative Bangura told the Council that a range of extremist groups are using sexual violence to advance their military, political, economic and ideological aims, pointing out that, of the 48 groups listed in her most recent report, 37 were non-State actors and seven are designated as terrorist groups. “They restrict women’s rights, autonomy and freedoms, and use sexual violence as a tactic to strike fear into the hearts of civilians,” she explained.

And while this is not a new phenomenon and neither was the trafficking in and exploitation of women and girls, she said, the combination of those two evils today seems “unprecedented” in its scope and brazen brutality. Recognizing sexual violence as a tactic of terrorism calls for a rethinking of the response, she said, noting that the crime represented the very front line in the battle against violent extremism. “To disrupt human trafficking was to help disrupt the business of terrorism,” she said.

**UN condemns ‘horrific’ terrorist attack in Berlin**

*20 December* – United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has condemned the terrorist attack in Berlin last night and expressed his deepest sympathy and condolences to the families “of the victims of this horrific act,” as well as to the German Government and people.

“The Secretary-General hopes anyone involved in the commission of this appalling crime will be swiftly brought to justice,” said a statement issued today by his spokesperson in New York.

According to media reports, Monday night, a man ploughed a truck through a Christmas market in the heart of the German capital, killing 12.

In the statement, Mr. Ban wished a speedy recovery to those injured.

In a separate statement, the President of the UN General Assembly, Peter Thomson, also condemned the terrorist attack, noting that according to the latest information, the incident resulted in the death of 12 people and the injuring of up to 50 others.

“President Thomson is following the situation in Berlin closely, extends his condolences to the victims’ families, the Government and the people of Germany, and wishes a speedy recovery to those wounded,” the statement said.