UN Latin America commission forecasts low but positive growth for region in 2017

4 August – With better commodity export prices and an improved international context, the Latin America and the Caribbean region will record a small positive growth rate this year – with the exception of Venezuela and two Caribbean countries, according to a new report of the UN Latin America commission.

The Economic Survey of Latin America and the Caribbean 2017 foresees that, after two years of contraction, nearly all countries in the region will experience, on average, 1.1 per cent positive growth rates in 2017 – except for Venezuela, whose gross domestic product (GDP) is seen falling -7.2 per cent; and Saint Lucia and Suriname, which is forecast to contract -0.2 per cent.

“To resume medium- and long-term growth, countercyclical policies are needed that not only focus on reducing the cycle's fluctuations, but also on modifying those specific characteristics that negatively influence growth and the productive structure of countries in the region,” said Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), during a press conference in Santiago where the document was presented.

The UN body's annual report underscores the importance of macroeconomic policies to invigorate long-term growth and move toward the necessary structural change in the region's economies.

“This means moving toward countercyclical frameworks for fiscal policy that defend and promote public and private investment. This involves revising fiscal rules so they continue to serve as pro-stability instruments, but also as pro-investment. This fiscal framework must be accompanied by a financial policy aimed at credit stabilization and a monetary policy that supports investment growth and goes beyond instruments such as the interest rate,” she explained.

The Economic Survey analyzes policy challenges to stimulate investment and growth, indicating that in the process of
achieving indebtedness and fiscal balance equilibrium, public investment must not be neglected. In that sense, separating the handling of investment spending and current spending would help eliminate the bias against investment in processes of public spending adjustments.

It also notes the importance of strengthening increased public revenue through tax structure changes, with the establishment of more direct taxes; fortifying tax administrations; and reducing evasion and avoidance.

According to the report, as in prior years, different growth dynamics are projected among countries and sub-regions.

While the gross domestic product (GDP) of South America is expected to grow 0.6 per cent this year, the economies of Central America and Mexico are seen expanding 2.5 per cent on average, thanks to an increase in remittances income and improved growth expectations for its main trading partner, the United States. Meanwhile, 1.2 per cent growth is forecast for English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean economies, following a -0.8 per cent contraction in 2016.

According to ECLAC, some positive factors affecting the region's performance this year include the moderate recovery of the global economy, which will end 2017 with 2.7 per cent growth, three-tenths of a percentage point higher than in 2016; a slight 2.4 per cent international trade volume rebound; and increased price levels for basic products, which are forecast to be 12 per cent higher on average than last year. At the same time, on spending, a narrow improvement in investment and greater dynamism in private consumption are being observed.

Finally, the 2017 regional account balance is expected to remain similar to that of 2016, around -1.9 per cent of GDP, although with improved trade and an increase in exports, which is forecast at 8 per cent for the entire year.

**DR Congo: UN report indicates Government participation in ethnic massacres in Kasai**

4 August – Violence in the Kasai provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) appears to be taking on an increasingly disturbing ethnic dimension, a United Nations human rights wing has warned, citing testimonies that Government forces have led ethnicity-based attacks.

"Survivors have spoken of hearing the screams of people being burned alive, of seeing loved ones chased and cut down, of themselves fleeing in terror. Such bloodletting is all the more horrifying because we found indications that people are increasingly being targeted because of their ethnic group," said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein in a news release from his Office (OHCHR).

"Their accounts should serve as a grave warning to the Government of the DRC to act now to prevent such violence from tipping into wider ethnic cleansing," he added, calling on the Government to take all necessary measures to fulfil its primary obligation to protect people from all ethnic backgrounds in the greater Kasai area.

The report is based on interviews with 96 people who had fled to neighbouring Angola to escape the violence in Kamonia territory in Kasai.

The UN team was able to confirm that between 12 March and 19 June, some 251 people became the victims of extrajudicial and targeted killings, including 62 children, of which 30 were aged under eight.

Interviewees indicated that local security forces and other officials actively fomented, fueled, and occasionally led, attacks on the basis of ethnicity.
The UN Mission in the DRC has identified at least 80 mass graves in the Kasais.

The fighting between the Kamuina Nsapu militia and the Government began in August 2016. The UN team was able to confirm that another militia, called the Bana Mura, was formed around March/April 2017 by individuals from the Tshokwe, Pende and Tetela ethnic groups. It was allegedly armed and supported by local traditional leaders and security officials, including from the army and the police, to attack the Luba and Lulua communities who are accused of being accomplices of the Kamuina Nsapu.

According to the report, the Bana Mura allegedly undertook a campaign aimed at eliminating the entire Luba and Lulua populations in the villages they attacked. In many of the incidents reported to the team, soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, known by its French acronym FARDC, were seen leading groups of Bana Mura militia during attacks on villages.

Given the situation in the Kasais, the report highlights the need for the team of international experts on the situation in the Kasais, established in June by the UN Human Rights Council, to be granted safe and unrestricted access to information, sites and individuals deemed necessary for their work.

This report will be put at the disposal of the international experts, as well as any other judicial institution addressing the human rights situation in the Kasais, in an effort to advance accountability efforts in this regard.

**Tallying fewer crossings, UN agency reports rise in migrant deaths at US-Mexico border**

4 August – Even as the flow appears to have thinned, migrants crossing the United States-Mexico border are dying at a faster rate in 2017 than in past years, according to a new United Nations agency study.

“Some 232 migrant fatalities have been recorded in the first seven months of 2017, an increase of 17 per cent compared with the 204 deaths recorded between January and July 2016,” said Julia Black, coordinator of the Berlin-based Missing Migrants Project (MMP) at the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.

“These numbers are especially concerning considering that, according to US Border Patrol figures, fewer migrants seem to be crossing into the US in 2017. The US Border Patrol has apprehended 140,024 migrants between January and June 2017, about half the number recorded in the first six months of 2016,” she added.

“Fifty bodies were recorded as discovered in July, the most recorded in any month so far this year,” Ms. Black said, explaining that their remains were found across the border region.

“Nine were recorded in various locations along the Rio Grande; ten in a truck in San Antonio, Texas; and 16 in other locations in Texas,” she elaborated.

Fifteen others were recovered in Arizona’s Pima County, a notoriously dangerous crossing, where seasonal temperatures regularly soar above 100 degrees Fahrenheit or 38 degrees Celsius between the months of May and September. So far this year, 96 bodies have been recovered in Pima County.

According to the briefing, its Missing Migrants Project has recorded more than 1,250 migrant fatalities on the US-Mexico border since 2014.
MMP staff reflecting on the deaths see each as an individual tragedy that serve as reminders of the many migrants who continue to risk their lives pursuing their 'Sueño Americano,’ or 'American Dream.’

Although the story of 10 migrants who died trapped in the back of a tractor-trailer in Texas last Sunday was covered in the media, most recorded deaths in the border region – which occur in single digits on a nearly daily basis throughout the summer – rarely make headlines.

Many of those pursuing el Sueño Americano travel from Mexico to Texas, compelled to cross the swift-flowing Río Grande to the US.

For example, on Wednesday, a five-year-old child migrant drowned in the Río Grande near Tamaulipas, Mexico, as the father went missing during the river crossing.

According to the IOM, 57 people drowned in the border river in 2017 – a 54 per cent hike over the 37 deaths recorded in the Río Grande between January and July 2016.

IOM's office in Mexico cites heavy rainfall in recent months, which has made the river faster and deeper, as a possible cause for the increase. However, the upsurge in migrant deaths in other border areas, such as the Arizona desert, remains unexplained.

Though migrant fatalities on the US-Mexico border represent 65 per cent of the total number recorded in the Americas, it is likely that many migrant deaths occur in Central and Southern America that go unrecorded. Notably, several bodies, presumed to be migrants, were seen floating off the coast of Nicaragua on Tuesday; another migrant was killed near Oaxaca, Mexico on Sunday after being struck by a train; and another, from El Salvador, was the victim of a stabbing.

Noting that the true number of migrant fatalities in 2017 is likely to be higher than the MMP indicates, Ms. Black concluded by pointing out that “it's something that is true for all regions of the world, unfortunately.”

**UN, Government join forces to boost Somalia's drought response capacity**

4 August – In the wake of a severe drought in Somalia that has displaced more than 800,000 people, the United Nations migration and development entities are helping the Horn of Africa country enhance its national drought response capacity.

As part of such efforts, the Government, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) co-organized a four-day training session, which ended 4 August, to build displacement management capacity, focusing on Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM), improved humanitarian coordination and information management, and early recovery.

This was the first-ever CCCM training in Somalia, run by the CCCM Cluster, which was activated in May 2017 to respond to growing displacement in Somalia.

“CCCM Cluster is new in Somalia and I am excited to work with the Government, and other partners working in displacement sites, so that we can improve living conditions and ensure access to services for displaced individuals,” said Kathryn Ziga, IOM Somalia's CCCM Cluster Coordinator.

“CCCM activities help ensure that communities have the space to voice their opinions, participate in service delivery and give feedback to humanitarian organizations.”
UN Daily News 4 August 2017

UNDP is engaged in building a resilient society in Somalia by minimizing human, economic and environmental losses from disasters and humanitarian crises, and by helping the sustainable recovery of people affected by crisis, including those displaced.

This requires mitigating both natural and human-induced hazards, reducing the exposure and vulnerability of at-risk communities, and building the capacity of government and other stakeholders including those from civil society, media, academia, private sector and communities.

The training started with the introduction of key CCCM concepts, the roles and responsibilities of various actors, and community participation and engagement. Participants were trained on engagement with informal settlement managers, communication with communities, plus early recovery and disaster management approaches.

New UN human rights office to open in Liberia in early 2018

4 August – Although Liberia has made significant progress since the civil war ended, precarious human rights conditions have prompted the United Nations to open an office there early next year to monitor and report on the situation.

“Liberia has progressed dramatically since my last visit just after the brutal civil war,” said UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Andrew Gilmour after wrapping up a three-day visit to Liberia.

After commending the efforts of the Government and the Liberian people, he noted that the human rights gains are “still precarious, hence the vital need for the UN to continue our support.”

With the main purpose of the visit to establish a UN Human Rights Office in the country, an agreement was signed with the Government for the new office to open in early 2018.

“What we have learned in country after country is that neither peace nor development can be properly sustainable unless they are firmly grounded in human rights,” said Mr. Gilmour.

He expressed his appreciation to Foreign Minister Marjon V. Kamara, with whom he signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the new office, set to open early in 2018.

This office will conduct human rights monitoring and reporting, as well as provide technical assistance to State institutions, the Independent National Commission for Human Rights, civil society and other partners.

Mr. Gilmour highlighted the primary role of the Government in promoting and protecting human rights in Liberia.

During his visit, the senior UN human rights official met with Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, cabinet ministers, several leaders of civil society organizations, and foreign ambassadors.

Underlining Liberia’s international human rights obligations, Mr. Gilmour expressed serious concern over the continued prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) and urged the Government to do far more within its power to discourage this and other harmful traditional practices, including trial by ordeal, accusations of witchcraft and ritualistic killings.

He discussed the plight of lesbian, gay and transgender people, saying that their unbearable discrimination and abuse must be confronted. He also raised trepidations surrounding the rights of people with disabilities.

While acknowledging Government efforts to address sexual violence, he stressed that the appalling frequency of rape in Liberia, including of young girls, is partly due to widespread impunity for this crime.
After visiting Monrovia Central Prison, Mr. Gilmour praised the work of the wardens but remarked on the very serious overcrowding and insufficient food, which he attributed to a high number of people held in pre-trial detention owing to the slowness of judicial procedures.

Concluding his stay, Mr. Gilmour visited the Palava Hut Memorial for victims of the civil war. He expressed the importance of transitional justice for national reconciliation and called for it to be a paramount concern for the new Government following the October elections – while warning against what some term a worrying rise in hate speech as election season approaches.

“True peace is never possible if people feel that their desire for justice has not been met. Abominable war crimes were committed in this country, and the perpetrators of the worst crimes should now understand that justice will catch up with them,” stressed the Assistant Secretary-General.

**Syria: UN study finds foreign fighters return 'disillusioned' by groups they joined**

4 August – A number of “disillusioned and disappointed” foreign terrorist fighters left Syria and returned to their countries of origin when they found these groups hardly make good on their promises, except promise of death and destruction, according to a report issued by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT).

The report, released Thursday, is the product of direct interviews with 43 fighters from 12 nationalities in seven countries.

The authors believe that despite some shortcomings – such as the small sample size – the survey remains a useful tool for Member States that wish to get to grips with the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, develop their capacities to deal with it, and design more effective policies and programmes to stem the flow and facilitate the effective reintegration of returnees.

This study calls for action at the national, regional, and international level based on a comprehensive and balanced approach that puts more emphasis on prevention than has been common until now.

Warning against sweeping generalizations as there is no single profile for foreign terrorist fighters, the report's findings confirm the results of other similar studies, while other findings suggest that different samples will draw different conclusions.

The report did find that while foreign fighters are most likely to be male, young and disadvantaged economically, educationally, and in terms of the labour market, evidence suggests that the flow of women, especially from Western countries has increased since early 2016, while the flow of men has declined.

Most of those interviewed in this survey are neither well educated nor well off economically. This perhaps contradicts other findings in the literature, which often conclude that foreign terrorist fighters are both better educated and better off economically than their peers.

About half of the interviewees in this sample were already married by the time they went to Syria, with or without children of their own, and a significant percentage come from large families, often where there was a history of domestic violence, single parenthood or other family problems.

Most of them also come from communities in poor urban areas or on the periphery of cities that are somewhat removed from the main centres of commercial activity. In these areas, youth share similarly low educational levels, poor job prospects, little hope for change, and limited opportunity for social or economic mobility.
This survey also suggests that friendship circles and social networks are the most dynamic and powerful mechanism through which recruitment occurs, with the Internet playing a far less significant role as an independent source of radicalisation than is generally assumed, and certainly a far less significant role than real life contact.

Bad governance, especially disregard for the rule of law, discriminatory social policies, political exclusion of certain communities, inadequate courts, corruption, particularly in the distribution of state benefits, harassment by the security authorities, and confiscation of passports or other identity documents, all contribute to feelings of despair, resentment, and animosity towards the government and provide fertile ground for the terrorist recruiter, especially when the vision of a new life is presented as almost effortlessly attainable.

In addition to these “push” factors, there are also “pull” factors, most notably the empathy felt by would-be foreign terrorist fighters towards a perceived in-group suffering from violence and aggression in a conflict zone.

Such suffering resonates well with the personal experience of some marginalized and disadvantaged youth.

The report says that the armed groups in Syria ultimately provide no positive outcomes to the youth they recruit. They hardly deliver on any of their promises, except the promise of death and destruction, both for its recruits and for the Muslim communities it claims to defend.

“It is this failure to deliver, coupled with its extreme, violent ideology and brutal tactics, its in-fighting and the corruption of some of its leaders, that, according to this survey, most often gives rise to the disappointment and sense of disenfranchisement and exclusion that leads foreign terrorist fighters to defect,” the report says.

While social networks play a key role in motivating individuals to go to Syria, their influence on the decision to return is less evident. Instead, it is the family network, particularly mothers, that exert the most influential pressure on foreign terrorist fighters to return home, though only once their disillusionment and disappointment has begun to kick in.

While the risk presented by returning foreign terrorist fighters is a real one, it should not be exaggerated. A practical, effective and proportionate response should start from a sound understanding of the root causes of the problem, the report says.