Marking World Humanitarian Day, UN urges protection for civilians in armed conflict

18 August – Civilians in conflict are not a target, top United Nations officials today stressed at a special event marking World Humanitarian Day, which honours aid workers and pays homage to those killed in service, while also drawing attention to the millions of people today living in war zones.

“For the millions of people caught in conflict, struggling to find food, water, and safe shelter; who have been driven from their homes with little hope of return; whose schools have been bombed; and who await life-saving medical care – we cannot afford to fail,” Secretary-General António Guterres said, urging each person and country to stand in solidarity with civilians in conflict.

Standing at Headquarters in New York alongside UN aid workers and staff who lost colleagues in war zones, the Secretary-General lent his support to the #NotATarget,” campaign, which highlights the need to protect civilians caught in conflict, including humanitarian and medical workers.

Joining Mr. Guterres to mark World Humanitarian Day, which is officially commemorated on 19 August, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien spoke of the challenges faced by aid workers around the world.

“Last year, 288 aid workers were targeted in 158 attacks. In the past three months alone, relief workers have been shelled and shot at, kidnapped and killed in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria,” he said. “This is blatantly unacceptable.”

Earlier in the week, the UN and partners launched the #NotATarget petition urging global leaders do more to ensure the rules of war are upheld and civilians are protected in armed conflicts.

With more than 10,500 signatures, the petitioners demand that world leaders do more to protect people trapped in conflicts,
with a particular focus on those living in urban areas, children, targets of sexual violence, forcibly displaced people, humanitarian workers and health workers.

The petition will be presented to the Secretary-General during the high-level General Assembly, which opens on 12 September this year.

The UN General Assembly designated 19 August as World Humanitarian Day in 2008, selecting the date to coincide with the anniversary of the deadly 2003 bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad.

Originally coined by Médecins Sans Frontières in 2015, the #NotATarget hashtag is being used in the World Humanitarian Day digital campaign this year to call for action on behalf of all civilians trapped in conflicts.

**Yemen's 'man-made catastrophe' is ravaging country, senior UN officials tell Security Council**

18 August – Warning about escalating suffering in Yemen's man-made catastrophe, senior United Nations officials today addressed the Security Council, calling on the international community to push for a political solution to the more than two-year-old conflict.

“Death looms for Yemenis by air, land and sea,” Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed told the 15-member Council in New York.

Reiterating one of the key points from Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien, who addressed the Council just moment earlier, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed said that that diseases and epidemics are at unprecedented levels in Yemen.

“Those who survived cholera will continue to suffer the consequences of 'political cholera' that infects Yemen and continues to obstruct the road towards peace,” added Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed.

He noted that while the international community is united in its support of a peaceful solution, certain parties to the conflict take advantage of internal divisions and focus on personal interests.

“What is missing at this point is for the parties to the conflict, without any delays, excuses or procrastination, to demonstrate their intention to end the war and put the national interest above personal gains,” the UN envoy said.

Every day spent without serious action means more destruction and death, he said, as well as the spread of terrorist groups – such as the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – and “uncontrolled migration” through the Gulf of Aden to Yemen, where more than 41 migrants died in early August after being forced to abandon their boats and jump.

Before the conflict, Yemen had been making progress, with fewer people hungry and rising school enrolment, Mr. O’Brien said in his statement.

“All of his has not been sharply reversed,” he said, noting that 17 million Yemenis are hungry, nearly 7 million facing famine, and about 16 million lack access to water or sanitation.

Mr. O’Brien highlighted several key challenges, including a funding shortage – the $2.3 billion Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan is only 39 per cent funded.
He also underscored the interference to movement of critical commercial and humanitarian supplies and staff.

“De facto authorities in Sana'a or local officials in areas under their control block, delay or otherwise interfere with humanitarian action,” said Mr. O'Brien.

The humanitarian official urged the international community to ensure that all ports are open to civilian, including to commercial traffic.

He called for those Governments and individuals with influence to influence the fighting parties to respect the international humanitarian and human rights law and to strengthen accountability.

With 1.2 million public employees not paid regularly for months, he also urged that civil servant salaries be paid so that the basic services in the country do not collapse.

“This human tragedy is deliberate and wanton – it is political and, with will and with courage which are both in short supply, it is stoppable,” he said, reiterating the UN's ongoing calls for a political solution to the conflict.

More than 350,000 children vaccinated against polio in hard to reach areas of Syria – UN

18 August – A United Nations polio vaccination campaign in Syria has provided protection to more than 355,000 children under age five in two governorates, where violence has made access especially difficult.

In response to a recent outbreak of vaccine-derived polio in the country, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO) and partners have completed the first round of a vaccination campaign in the Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa governorates.

“UNICEF applauds local partners and health workers for their extraordinary efforts and commitment to vaccinate children against this crippling illness,” said Fran Equiza, UNICEF Representative in Syria in a statement.

“No child should have to live with the devastating effects of polio,” she added.

This is the second polio outbreak to hit Syria since the start of the conflict in 2011. The continued violence has devastated its health infrastructure and severely disrupted routine immunization services, particularly in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa.

Prior to the crisis, Syria was polio-free, with an immunization rate over 80 per cent. National vaccination coverage is now just over 40 per cent.

“As of 18 August 2017, 33 children under the age of five have been paralyzed,” said Elizabeth Hoff, WHO Representative in Syria.

“The detection of the circulating vaccine derived polio virus type 2 cases demonstrates that disease surveillance systems are functional in Syria,” she continued. “Our priority now is to achieve the highest possible polio immunization coverage to stop the circulation of virus.”

To vaccinate every child in need, UNICEF ran an outreach campaign and provided the vaccines and essential cold chain equipment. WHO has trained more than 1,000 field volunteers, transported the vaccines to the conflict-affected area, and funded the implementation of the campaign.
UNICEF and WHO said they will continue engaging with local partners and health personnel in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor Governorates to protect all children from polio.

Both agencies also call on all parties to the conflict to allow vaccinators full access to children in need.