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Least developed countries face challenges in funding sustainable development – UN report

19 July – Lack of funding is among the biggest challenges for the world’s 47 least developed countries (LDCs) in their implementation of sustainable development targets, according to a United Nations report released today.

“While we continue to see mixed progress for this group of countries, there is tremendous potential to close the gaps and achieve momentum toward their investment needs,” said Fekitamoeloa Katoa ‘Utoikamanu, the newly-appointed High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, in a press release.

 Launching the 2017 edition of the State of the Least Developed Countries report at the UN Headquarters in New York, she noted that the LDCs are among the most vulnerable countries in the world with large segments of their population living in extreme poverty with few prospects to improve their situation.

This year’s report, compiled by her office (UN-OHRLLS), focuses on the financing of the Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA), which charts out the vision and strategy for the sustainable development of LDCs through 2020, on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted by all countries in 2015 with a view to create a peaceful, inclusive world.
free of poverty by 2030.

Achieving the goals of IPoA complements efforts to achieve the SDGs, she stressed.

However, due to large gaps in investment, including for sustainable energy and ICT, the report notes that access to all modes of financing needs to increase for LDCs.

The average gross domestic product (GDP) growth for LDCs remained low at 3.8 per cent in 2015, the lowest rate in the past two decades and well below the 7 per cent target set by the Istanbul Programme, according to the report.

The LDCs share of total trade continued to decline, from 1.09 per cent in 2014 to 0.97 per cent in 2015, making it difficult to reach the 2 per cent target.

Despite the significant challenges, the report also highlights progress in a few key areas including in the transport sector, and access to electricity, which rose from 32.3 per cent of the population in 2010 to 38.3 per cent in 2014.

In addition, a greater share of the total amounts of climate finance flowing from developed to developing countries needs to be allocated to LDCs, especially for adaptation projects that result in reduced vulnerability.

In June 2017, Equatorial Guinea graduated from the group, bringing the number of LDCs to 47. Nine LDCs reached the graduation thresholds in 2015, while several others aspire to graduate by 2020 or shortly thereafter.

**International community needs to 'change narrative' about Africa – UN chief Guterres**

19 July – Briefing the Security Council on their strengthened collaboration, top officials from the African Union (AU) and the United Nations today highlighted their joint work on peace and security in the Gambia, Somalia and South Sudan, as well as other African countries, and urged adequate, timely and predictable funding.

Addressing an open debate of the Council in New York, Secretary-General António Guterres said, “the international community needs to change the narrative about Africa and to establish a higher platform of cooperation that recognizes its enormous potential and promise.”

He noted that the AU and the UN have a shared interest in strengthening mechanisms to defuse conflicts before they escalate, and to manage them effectively when they occur.

The organization's shared objective is “to work closely on the basis of the principles of mutual respect and comparative advantage in all stages of the conflict cycle and in a systematic, predictable and strategic manner,” he added.

Mr. Guterres highlighted a landmark framework signed between the UN and the AU in April to strengthen partnership between the two organizations on peace and security pillars, as well as their organization’s commitment to further institutionalize and build on the partnership.

The Joint UN-AU Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security includes four key action areas: preventing and mediating conflict and sustaining peace; responding to conflict; addressing the root causes; and the continuous review and enhancement of the partnership.
Financing peace operations in Africa

One of the main points raised by Mr. Guterres, as well as Smail Chergui, the Commissioner for Peace and Security of the AU, who also addressed the Council, was the question of financial resources, equipment and technology.

Mr. Guterres echoed points from his 26 May report, where he identified four options where UN assessed contributions could be used to help meet AU's operational needs in peace missions. The report was submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 2320 (2016) on enhancing the relationship between the UN and regional and sub-regional organizations.

In his address, Mr. Chergui urged Council members for political leadership and guidance to help the AU and the UN deliver on their mandates.

Calling the AU “an indispensable partner in promoting peace and security in Africa,” Mr. Chergui noted that the number of AU troops killed in the last decade exceeds the number of UN peacekeeping casualties over the last 70 years.

“Despite these sacrifices and commitment, African troops are faced with some of the most challenging situations due to inadequate force enables and multiplies, as well as financial resource gaps,” he said.

Mr. Chergui said that financing of peace support operations “remains a perennial issue,” and given that the AU is not able to fund peace initiatives on its own, looks forward to a possible decision by the Security Council this September on a dedicated mechanism from the UN to support Council-mandated African peace support operations.

UN reports more people warned against tobacco use, but industry interference continues

19 July – Despite measures protecting a majority of people from tobacco-related illness and death, the tobacco industry continues to hamper Government efforts to fully implement life and cost-saving interventions, the United Nations health agency today reported.

“One-third of countries have comprehensive systems to monitor tobacco use. While this is up from one-quarter of countries monitoring tobacco use at recommended levels in 2007, Governments still need to do more to prioritize or finance this area of work,” according to the UN World Health Organization’s WHO report on the global tobacco epidemic, which was launched today on side-lines of the UN High-level political forum on sustainable development in New York.

The report shows that some 4.7 billion people – more than 60 per cent of the population – are protected by at least one “best practice” tobacco control measure from the WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC). These measures include no smoking areas and bans on advertising tobacco products, for example.

In the foreword to the report, the head of WHO urged Governments to incorporate all the provisions of the WHO FCTC into their national tobacco control programmes and policies, and to fight against the illicit tobacco trade.

“Working together, countries can prevent millions of people from dying each year from preventable tobacco-related illness, and save billions of dollars a year in avoidable health-care expenditures and productivity losses,” said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General.

The report, funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies, noted that systematic monitoring of tobacco industry interference in government policymaking protects public health by shedding light on tobacco industry tactics.
Such tactics include “exaggerating the economic importance of the tobacco industry, discrediting proven science and using litigation to intimidate governments.”

Douglas Bettcher, director of WHO’s Department for the Prevention of Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs), said tobacco industry interference in government policy making represents “a deadly barrier to advancing health and development in many countries.

Controlling tobacco use is a key part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda includes targets to strengthen national implementation of the WHO FCTC and a one-third reduction in premature deaths from NCDs, including heart and lung diseases, cancer and diabetes, according to a press release launching the report.

“The progress that’s been made worldwide – and documented throughout this report – shows that it is possible for countries to turn the tide,” said Michael R. Bloomberg, WHO Global Ambassador for Noncommunicable Diseases and founder of Bloomberg Philanthropies.

UN chief welcomes Seoul’s proposal to reopen dialogue with Pyongyang

19 July – Secretary-General António Guterres today welcomed the move by the Republic of Korea to lower tensions on the Korean Peninsula, his spokesperson said.

“The Secretary-General welcomes the proposal by the Republic of Korea to reopen inter-Korean communication channels and encourages the leadership of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to respond positively,” UN Deputy Spokesperson Farhan Haq told journalists in New York.

The comments follow Monday’s announcement by the Republic of Korea that its Defence Ministry had proposed to meet with DPRK representatives with the goal of ending hostilities.

“The absence of communication channels with the DPRK could be dangerous,” the spokesperson said in today’s press briefing, echoing the statement Mr. Guterres made on 28 April at the Ministerial-level Security Council meeting on non-proliferation.

At that time, Mr. Guterres said that “we need to avoid miscalculation and misunderstanding. We need to act now to prevent conflict and achieve sustainable peace.”

He urged DRPK to refrain from further testing, comply with relevant Security Council resolution, and explore the resumption of dialogue.

“This means reopening and strengthening communication channels, particularly military to military, to lower the risk of miscalculation or misunderstanding,” Mr. Guterres said in that speech.
More flexibility and mobility for UN peacekeepers in DR Congo – senior official says

19 July – The United Nations peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is becoming more flexible and mobile, the head of that mission today said, by focusing on rapid deployment of troops and air surveillance.

The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in DRC, Maman Sidikou, said the mission, known by its acronym MONUSCO, will close five fixed bases at the end of the month in the North-Kivu province.

“MONUSCO changes its mode of operations, as it continues to fulfil its mandate, that is, continuing to back Congolese authorities’ efforts for civilians’ protection,” said Mr. Sidikou.

The new operations are already underway in the Kasai province, where some 350 MONUSCO troops have been deployed.

The Mission is setting up an early warning system, including to improve its access to people.

“To make the device more effective, it would be critical that communities swiftly transmit all security-related information to MONUSCO,” the Mission’s military authorities said.

In March, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of MONUSCO for another year, but lowered the approved number of military personnel and military observers from 19,815 and 760, respectively, to 16,215 and 660.

The Council tasked the Mission, with, among other responsibilities, ensuring effective and dynamic protection of civilians under threat of physical violence, including by preventing, deterring, and stopping all armed groups and local militias from inflicting violence on the populations.

UN chief calls tolerance, understanding and compassion 'catalysts for peace'

19 July – Religion is being distorted to increase differences, Secretary-General António Guterres said, urging the international community to counter such narratives.

Speaking Tuesday at a panel discussion on The Role of Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding in the Middle East, the Secretary-General called for expanding the space for dialogue with local and regional leaders, and other people with a voice and influence within their communities.

“Sustainable peace requires not only political will from all sides, but also the collective efforts of the international community, civil society and fundamentally, religious leaders,” he told participants organized by the UN Alliance of Civilizations.

He noted that the world was witnessing a spiralling wave of discrimination and stereotyping of people who are sometimes referred to as “the other.”
“As Muslim, Jewish and Christian religious leaders, you have the opportunity to teach the shared humanistic values of tolerance, understanding, compassion and peace,” he continued.

Calling them the core values embraced by all three monotheistic faiths represented at the gathering, he pointed out that “they can be the catalysts for peace.”

The Secretary-General applauded efforts towards promoting the peaceful co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis, calling the initiatives “the way to a more hopeful future – a future of tolerance and mutual understanding as a pathway to just and lasting peace.”

In his speech, Mr. Guterres decried the elusiveness of peace in the Middle East conflicts, noting that “with every passing day, frustration grows, hope diminishes, and the perspective of a peaceful resolution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems more distant.

He reiterated that a two-state solution was the only path for Palestinians and Israelis to realize their historic aspirations and live in peace, security and dignity.

“There is no plan B,” Mr. Guterres said.

**UN refugee agency 'shocked' by reported airstrike and casualties in Yemen**

*19 July* – The United Nations refugee agency today said that it is “deeply shocked and saddened” at reports of the deaths and injuries of internally displaced persons in an aerial attack on the embattled Mawza district in Yemen’s Taizz governorate.

“This latest incident once again demonstrates the extreme dangers facing civilians in Yemen, particularly those attempting to flee violence, as they disproportionately bear the brunt of conflict,” said William Spindler, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in a press release.

Since 2015, the southern Arabian nation has been in a conflict between forces loyal to President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and those allied to the Houthi rebel movement.

The airstrike was reported on Tuesday afternoon and the civilian casualties are still being verified with initial reports pointing to at least 20 deaths, including that of women and children, the spokesperson said.

Most of those killed are believed to be from the same family. The victims were reported to have been displaced to Mawza from nearby Al Mokha district, which is also experiencing intensified hostilities.

There are two million internally displaced people in Yemen who have fled elsewhere across Yemen since the beginning of the conflict, but continue to be exposed to danger as the conflict has affected all of Yemen's mainland governorates.

UNHCR has been appealing to parties to the conflict to ensure their utmost in the protection of civilians and the mitigation of suffering, Mr. Spindler said, stressing that a peaceful political solution is urgently needed.