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Sustainable Development Goals critical for better future for all – deputy UN chief Amina Mohammed

28 February – Delivering her first address as the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed underlined that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are essential for a safe and secure future that brings prosperity, opportunity and human rights for all.

“Around the world, success in achieving the SDGs will ease global anxieties, provide a better life for women and men and build a firm foundation for stability and peace in all societies, everywhere,” said Ms. Mohammed at the opening of the 2017 Economic and Social Council segment on Operational Activities for Development.

Ms. Mohammed, earlier today, was administered the oath of office by Secretary-General António Guterres at a ceremony at the UN Headquarters in New York.

“Success will require a bolder approach to financing and partnerships. Nothing will be achieved without engaging all actors,” she added, urging all countries to rethink systems, approaches, redefine traditional planning, delivery and monitoring.

She also said that the UN too needed to be “fit for purpose” to help its Member States implement 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
“We must innovate, and revamp our approach to partnership and financing, with a focus on the long haul. We must empower youth to participate in and shape the political and economic lives of their countries and communities; to be the agents of peace and development,” she noted.

Further in her remarks, the deputy UN chief also highlighted that despite much progress, Africa continued to remain vulnerable, and therefore needs to be a UN priority.

Noting that efforts should be stepped to support the least developed, landlocked and small island developing states to reduce vulnerability and build resilience, she added that “It is critical that, across the world, we focus on those furthest behind first. Because in all regions, the rising tide of optimism and empowerment, has not yet reached everyone.”

She also underlined the need to address growing inequalities around the globe as well as combat gender discrimination which continues to limit the opportunities and potential of women and girls in all countries.

Looking ahead, Ms. Mohammed said that focus would be based on broadly three principles: strengthening impartial leadership of the UN development system for coherence and integration at all levels; addressing the trust deficit to entail accountability and transparency at all levels; and being responsive to national priorities.

“Solutions from the past will not, alone, meet the challenges of the future,” she underlined.

The UN Deputy Secretary-General also spoke of the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) process that established a sequenced approach to the review of the UN development system as well as on the empowerment of Resident Coordinators and implementation of standard operating procedures for UN Country Teams.

Noting that the world has a unique, once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver a better future for all humanity, she stressed: “The task ahead is challenging, but nothing is impossible when we work together.”

Opening the segment, ECOSOC Vice-President Cristián Barros said the Council would contribute to the implementation of the QCPR in three ways: by laying the foundation for its work after the receipt of comprehensive proposals requested from the Secretary-General in the QCPR; by discussing concrete steps that the UN development system can initiate immediately to enhance system-wide coherence and efficiency; by reflecting on adjustments needed to improve impact of support provided to different groups of countries to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

As a result of the deliberations in the general Assembly on the QCPR, Mr. Barros said there is now growing recognition among Member States that the UN development system is at a “critical juncture” where important decisions will need to be made for the Organization to effectively support delivery of the 2030 Agenda.

This is why the new QCPR resolution of the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to prepare proposals for their consideration in the course of this year on the system's functions and capacities.

“These options will enable Member States to make decisions on the changes required at different levels for the kind of transformation we need to bring the UN development system up to speed with the level of ambition of the 2030 Agenda,” he said.
Russia, China block Security Council action on use of chemical weapons in Syria

28 February – With ‘no’ votes from permanent members Russia and China, the United Nations Security Council today failed to adopt a resolution that would, according to press reports, have imposed sanctions against parties using chemical weapons in war-torn Syria.

While nine of the Council’s members voting in favour, Bolivia joined Russia and China in rejecting the text, as Egypt, Ethiopia and Kazakhstan abstained. A negative vote – or veto – from one of the Council’s five permanent members means a resolution cannot be adopted.

Media reports suggest that the draft resolution would have established a sanctions regime, a committee and an expert panel to hold accountable those using and producing chemical weapons in Syria. The text would also have imposed sanctions on a number of individuals and entities linked to the use of chemical weapons in cases where responsibility was established by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM).

The Council came together on 19 December to unanimously adopt a resolution demanding that all parties to the Syrian conflict ensure immediate and unhindered access for the monitoring of evacuations from eastern Aleppo.

But today’s decision comes after the Council’s two most recent failed attempts to take action on Syria: on 8 October, Russia vetoed a resolution that would have called for an end to military flights over Aleppo; and on 5 December, a measure calling for a seven-day ceasefire in the beleaguered city failed to pass after negative votes by both China and Russia. In the past five years, Russia has vetoed seven Council texts on the Syrian conflict, while China has vetoed six of those seven.

People fleeing war more likely to find shelter in poorer countries, says UN refugee agency

28 February – Most of the 3.2 million people driven forcibly from their homes in early 2016 found shelter in low- and middle-income countries, according to a new study by the United Nations refugee agency.

“The biggest contributors providing a safe haven to the world’s uprooted people are poorer communities,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi in a news release yesterday.

More than half the new refugees in the first half of 2016 fled Syria’s conflict, with most staying in the immediate region – Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, according to the UN Refugee Agency’s (UNHCR) Mid-Year Trends 2016 report.

Other sizable groups fled Iraq, Burundi, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Somalia,
South Sudan and Sudan, the UN agency reported.

For example, relative to the sizes of their populations, Lebanon and Jordan host the largest number of refugees, while in terms of economic performance the biggest burdens are carried by South Sudan and Chad.

“Today we face not so much a crisis of numbers but of cooperation and solidarity,” Mr. Grandi said.

Of all countries, Turkey sheltered the greatest number of refugees, hosting 2.8 million by mid-2016. It was followed by Pakistan (1.6 million), Lebanon (one million), Iran (978,000), Ethiopia (742,700), Jordan (691,800), Kenya (523,500), Uganda (512,600), Germany (478,600) and Chad (386,100).

Speaking earlier this month, he criticized the politicizing of refugees in Europe, the United States, and other industrialized countries and regional blocks.

“These are people that flee from danger, they’re not dangerous themselves,” he had said.

**Migrating children and women, suffer ‘sexual violence, exploitation, abuse and detention’ – UN agency**

28 February – A senior United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) official is calling the routes from sub-Saharan Africa into Libya and across the sea to Europe one of the “world’s deadliest and most dangerous for children and women,” as the agency reported that nearly half of the women and children interviewed after making the voyage were raped.

“Refugee and migrant children and women are routinely suffering sexual violence, exploitation, abuse and detention along the Central Mediterranean migration route from North Africa to Italy,” UNICEF warned in a new report, A Deadly Journey for Children: The Central Mediterranean Migrant Route.

At the time of the report, 256,000 migrants were recorded in Libya – of who about 54,000 included women and children. UNICEF estimates that this is a low count with actual numbers at least three times higher.

In addition, it is believed that at least 181,000 people – including more than 25,800 unaccompanied children – used smugglers in 2016 to try to reach Italy. At the most dangerous portion ¬– from southern Libya to Sicily – one in every 40 people is killed, according to UNICEF.

“The Central Mediterranean from North Africa to Europe is among the world’s deadliest and most dangerous migrant routes for children and women,” said Afshan Khan, UNICEF Regional Director and Special Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe.

“The route is mostly controlled by smugglers, traffickers and other people seeking to prey upon desperate children and women who are simply seeking refuge or a better life,” Mr. Khan added.

The UNICEF report is based on a survey in the field of 122 people, including 82 women and 40 children from 11 nationalities. Among the children, 15 are girls between the ages of 10 and 17.

“Nearly half the women and children interviewed had experienced sexual abuse during migration – often multiple times and in multiple locations,” according to the report, with “widespread and systematic” sexual violence at crossings and checkpoints.
In addition, about three-quarters of all the children interviewed said that they had “experienced violence, harassment or aggression at the hands of adults” including beatings, verbal and emotional abuse.

At the mercy of smugglers, children and women were left in debt and often had to agree to “pay as you go” arrangements.

In western Libya, women were often held in detention centres where they reported “harsh conditions, such as poor nutrition and sanitation, significant overcrowding and a lack of access to health care and legal assistance,” according to UNICEF.

Included in the report is a six-point agenda calling for safe and legal pathways and safeguards to protect migrating children. The UN agency is urging Governments and the European Union to adopt this agenda.

Meanwhile, in Libya, the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and partners held a five-day training for managers and staff of Libyan detention centres to promote human rights and ensure that the detainees are treated in line with international standards.

**Yemen: UN verifies nearly 1,500 boys recruited for use in armed conflict**

*28 February* – The United Nations human rights office today urged all warring parties in Yemen to immediately release child soldiers, noting that the UN has verified the recruitment of 1,476 children, all boys, between 26 March 2015 and 31 January 2017.

“The numbers are likely to be much higher as most families are not willing to talk about the recruitment of their children, for fear of reprisals,” Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), told reporters at the regular bi-weekly press briefing in Geneva.

She said her Office received numerous reports of the recruitment of children in Yemen for use in the armed conflict, mostly by the Popular Committees affiliated with the Houthis.

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.

Just last week, OHCHR received new reports of children who were recruited without the knowledge of their families.

“Children under the age of 18 often join the fighting after either being misled or attracted by promises of financial rewards or social status. Many are then quickly sent to the front lines of the conflict or tasked with manning checkpoints,” Ms. Shamdasani said.

She reminded all parties to the conflict that the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict is strictly forbidden by international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and when concerning cases of recruitment of children under fifteen may amount to a war crime.

The conflict in Yemen has, between March 2015 and 23 February 2017, led to 4,667 civilian deaths and 8,180 injured civilians.

At the same briefing, Christophe Boulierac, spokesperson for the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), said that every 10 minutes, a child under the age of five died in Yemen from preventable diseases such as diarrhoea, pneumonia or measles, because the health system is on the verge of collapse. Some 50 per cent of the health facilities in the country were not functioning.
“The rate of severe acute malnutrition in children under five had tripled between 2014 and 2016. There are currently approximately 2.2 million malnourished children in the country, including 462,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition,” he said.

**UN migration agency reports surge in displacement from Mosul as fighting intensifies**

**28 February** – The United Nations migration agency today reported thousands of new arrivals at Iraqi sites for the internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing Mosul’s western sector where fighting is taking place between the Government forces and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh) terrorists.


Since the start of Iraqi forces’ efforts to retake the city’s western section on 19 February, more than 10,000 people have been displaced in the zone, according to Iraq’s Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD).

“We are very worried about the fate of the tens of thousands of families still trapped inside of West Mosul,” said Mr. Weiss.

IOM reported some 1,650 people arrived today at the Hamam al-Aleel facility, and nearly 2,800 arrived at Qayara air strip on Sunday night. Both these locations are in Nineweh Governorate southeast of Mosul.

MoMD estimates another 3,000 individuals are already moving towards the checkpoints and are expected to arrive tomorrow.

These numbers, among the largest in weeks, are just a fraction of the 250,000 or more people who could yet be displaced from western Mosul as fighting escalates, said IOM Iraq press officer Hala Jaber.

“There is serious concern for the 750,000 trapped in the densely populated western sector, with conditions worsening daily, according to reports and testimonies from those who have managed to escape,” she said.

Those who arrived at the Qayara site yesterday, including children, spoke of seeing dead bodies on the streets as they escaped. Many corpses, they said, were ISIL fighters; others civilians killed by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) laid by militants.

Families escaping with children are reportedly taping their mouths with duct tape to ensure they don’t cry or make a sound that would alert ISIL. Other families are giving their children sleeping pills or Valium to keep them quiet during their escape.

IOM’s Qayara site is currently providing shelter for 4,472 displaced families or 25,344 individuals, with a planned capacity to hold 10,000 families or 60,000 individuals. The Haj Ali emergency site is currently hosting 1,565 displaced families, or 6,994 individuals, with a planned capacity for 7,000 families, or 40,000 individuals.
South Sudan: UN official calls for unfettered relief access to avert further catastrophe

28 February – With hundreds of thousands in need of assistance in famine-struck parts of South Sudan and rising insecurity hampering relief work, a senior United Nations relief official in the country has called on all parties to ensure that humanitarians have immediate, safe and unhindered access across the nation.

“The people of South Sudan are suffering beyond measure. [The famine] represents only the most extreme tip of the iceberg of needs in this country,” said Eugene Owusu, the Humanitarian Coordinator in the country, in a news release issued by the UN Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

On 20 February, famine was formally declared in parts of the country. A formal declaration means people have already started dying of hunger.

“To avert further catastrophe, it is imperative that humanitarians are able to act swiftly and robustly,” Mr. Owusu underlined.

The UN official's call follows a series of recent events which have hampered humanitarian operations and placed civilians at risk. For instance, during clashes in Jonglei state, humanitarian compounds were looted by armed actors and community members; and 28 humanitarian workers were forced to relocate from Mayendit County, one of the two counties hit by famine in Unity State, due to insecurity.

Aid workers were also denied access last week to key locations outside of Lainya town, in Central Equatoria, where tens of thousands of people in need have not been reached with aid in months.

“I implore all parties to this conflict to uphold their responsibilities under international humanitarian law, place the plight of the people first, give aid workers unfettered access, and protect civilians,” Mr. Owusu added.

“Time is of the essence, and lives are in the balance, so it is critical that these words be translated into concrete actions on the ground immediately.”

The news release also noted that President of South Sudan provided reassurances that all humanitarian organizations will have unimpeded access to needy populations across the country.

According to OCHA, insecurity and lack of access have complicated an already worrying situation: more than 100,000 people face starvation in the famine-declared parts of the country, and a further one million are on the brink of famine. There are also fears that by the height of the lean season in July, some 5.5 million people could face severe food insecurity across the country.

Additionally, since December 2013, about 3.4 million people have been displaced, including about 1.5 million who fled as refugees to neighbouring countries.

Against this backdrop, humanitarian organizations have appealed urgent funds to respond to the escalating crisis, with $1.6 billion required to provide life-saving assistance and protection to some 5.8 million people across South Sudan in 2017.
With virtual and augmented reality, UN ‘ideas forum’ to explore collaboration on Global Goals

28 February – Policy makers, activists and private sector representatives from over 80 countries will join gaming experts and simulators tomorrow in Bonn, Germany, at the start of the first “playable” sustainable development conference organized by the United Nations and partners.

According to Mitchell Toomey, the Global Director at the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Action Campaign, the Global Festival of Ideas for Sustainable Development is designed to bring together diverse communities and come up with ideas on sustainability to let the “crowd” decide what happens next.

“The whole concept is taken from the great experience that the UN was able to participate in with the designing of the SDGs […] ‘let’s ask everybody what should be in the next agenda,’” Mr. Toomey told *UN News*.

“By opening a lot of different channels, including the My World Survey and The World We Want […] over 10 million people eventually became involved in that process,” he added.

Organized in Bonn, Germany, from 1-3 March, the Festival will see participants transform into “active players” to come up with new ideas on addressing global challenges.

Using the gaming app 2030 Hive Mind – a real-time policy simulation application – participants will explore collaboration to achieve the SDGs by 2030. They will also have to make tough choices and trade-offs along the way.

The idea to use the gaming app came from the need to “stay serious” in tackling development challenges and the importance of engaging and being approachable, explained Mr. Toomey.

“[The app is] very interesting as it relies on people coming together, sharing what they know, trading policies and advice, collaborating, bringing good ideas to crescendo by getting enough people to think about them and support them at the same time,” he added.

“The goal is to provide a way to develop policies, but also to campaign around that, by walking around the event and making sure others are supporting the policies that you are, and those who do that the best will get the best scores.”

The introduction of the app also aims to engage with everyone on the topic of sustainable development and SDGs so that the goals don’t remain in the policy domain alone and to encourage everyone to take part in the issue.

The festival also features a virtual reality zone (VRZone) to showcase, in 360-degrees, content produced across the UN system and to tell stories that inspire and generate empathy, action and positive social change. The series provides a deeper understanding for those living in the most complex development challenges, catalysing urgency for those most in danger of being left behind if the SDGs are not met.

The Global Festival of Ideas, the first in a series of annual forums, is hosted by the UN SDG Action Campaign in partnership with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) with the support of the German Government.
UN rights office disappointed with Thai Government’s refusal to criminalize enforced disappearance

28 February – The United Nations human rights office today urged the Government of Thailand to criminalize enforced or voluntary disappearance and torture.

The announcement follows news last week that National Legislative Assembly – the military-appointed parliament – decided not to enact a bill that would have done just that.

“The Assembly’s decision to reject the bill is very concerning given the continued allegations of torture and disappearances in Thailand, and it is deeply worrying that such actions may now continue without any legal redress,” Ravina Shamdasani told journalists in Geneva.

Ms. Shamdasani, the spokesperson for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), characterized the decision to not enact the bill as “a devastating blow” to the families of those who have disappeared.

Since 1980, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Voluntary Disappearances recorded 82 cases of enforced disappearances in the country.


Speaking to the press, Ms. Shamdasani also raised concern about the increasing number of criminal cases brought against human rights defenders in Thailand for reporting allegations of torture and ill-treatment.