UN peacekeeping chief warns Security Council about insecurity in Central African Republic

28 July – The head of the United Nations peacekeeping operations has warned that the increased intensity of attacks on civilians and peacekeepers is bringing Central African Republic (CAR) to the tipping point.

Addressing the Security Council in a closed-door session, the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, yesterday cited the “worsening security and humanitarian” situation in Bangassou, in the south-eastern part of the country, where three UN peacekeepers have been killed in recent days.

The attacks took place “against the backdrop of sustained fighting in the south-east of the country, heightened inter-ethnic tensions and efforts by spoilers to manipulate communities along religious lines and undermine the stabilization process in the country,” Mr. Lacroix told the 15-member Council, according to a note from the UN Spokesperson's Office.

Mr. Lacroix is scheduled to travel to the CAR over the weekend to convey a message of support to the UN stabilization mission known by its French acronym, MINUSCA, and to meet with national authorities.

In his address yesterday, Mr. Lacroix also raised concerns about the deteriorating security in the border town of Zemio, 290 km east of Bangassou, with the risk of further clashes between the Muslim community and elements affiliated with anti-Balaka, which had already led to the displacement of more than 22,000 civilians.

He also mentioned that the security situation in the town of Bria, in the north of the country, “remains fragile and that the departure of the Ugandan and American forces from the eastern part of the country this spring has created a vacuum leading to the emergence of hostile ‘self-defence’ groups.”
The violence has led to a worsening humanitarian situation in the country, with the numbers of internally displaced persons up about 40 per cent since last year.

Clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian, have plunged the country of about 4.5 million people into civil conflict since 2012. According to the UN some 2.3 million people, over half the population, in dire need of assistance. In addition to those displaced within the CAR, more than 484,000 people from the country have been forced to seek refuge in neighbouring nations.

The senior UN official also reiterated that a military solution to the problem of the armed groups will not suffice to address the root causes of the conflict: “The absence of tangible progress in the peace process risks further worsening the situation.”

He noted the importance of operationalizing the July 17 roadmap by the members of the African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation and underlined the importance of prioritizing the implementation of the ceasefire agreed upon in the Rome agreement of 20 June.

**Venezuela: UN rights wing urges calm ahead of controversial weekend polls**

28 July – The United Nations human rights office expressed deep concern today at the risk of further violence in Venezuela, where elections for a Constituent Assembly convened by President Nicolas Maduro are due to be held on Sunday.

“The wishes of the Venezuelan people to participate or not in this election need to be respected,” Elisabeth Throssell, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) told reporters at the regular press briefing in Geneva.

“No one should be obliged to vote, while those willing to take part should be able to do so freely,” she added.

The OHCHR spokesperson pointed out that demonstrations considered by the authorities to be “disturbing the elections” have been banned until 1 August.

“We urge the authorities to manage any protests against the Constituent Assembly in line with international human rights norms and standards,” she continued, calling on those opposing the election and the Assembly to do so peacefully.

“We hope that the poll scheduled for Sunday, if it goes ahead, will proceed peacefully and in full respect of human rights,” she said.

Responding to questions, Ms. Throssell said the situation in the country is “very tense and difficult.” As such, OHCHR reiterated the call for calm and for peaceful protests and for all sides to use only peaceful means to make their views heard.

With regard to the legitimacy of the vote itself, the spokesperson noted that it is “a hugely controversial issue” amplified by the fact that there had been an unofficial consultation by the opposition on the constituent assembly.

“[Our] Office is concerned about the environment in which the elections are to take place and believes that a constitutional process can only be successful if based on a broad consensus and the participation of all sectors of society,” Ms. Throssell said.
Tanzania: Attacks on persons with albinism decline; local attitudes must change, UN expert finds

28 July – Welcoming a drop in the number of reported attacks against people with albinism, a United Nations human rights expert has concluded that this group of people in rural Tanzania continue to live in fear amid widespread attitudes that lead to violence against them.

“People with albinism continue to live in a very fragile situation, as the root causes of the attacks against them remain rampant, and the effects of over a decade of violations have taken their toll,” said Ikponwosa Ero, the UN independent expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism, at the end of her 11-day visit to Tanzania.

Ms. Ero, however, praised the Government for its work to tackle the issue – which is rooted in the mistaken belief that the body parts of people with albinism have value in witchcraft practices.

“I welcome the measures already taken by the Government and civil society, and the decrease in the number of reported attacks,” she said. “There have been positive measures to address witchcraft practices, including the registration of traditional healers.”

“However, full oversight over their work has still not been achieved, and confusion still exists in the minds of the general public between witchcraft practice and the work of traditional healers,” the expert noted.

She said more work was needed to address witchcraft and educate the public.

Ms. Ero also highlighted concerns over the use of schools as protection centres for children with albinism, which in some cases have evolved from temporary shelters into long-term accommodation. Although there has been a significant reduction in the overall number of children in these shelters, more work remained to be done, she added.

During her mission to Tanzania, Ms. Ero met with various high-level officials, civil society representatives, people with albinism, and their family members.

Independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

She will present a full report and recommendations to the Human Rights Council in March 2018.
In Honduras, senior UN official urges protection of human rights defenders

28 July – Visiting a newly established United Nations human rights office in Honduras, a senior official today stressed the need to protect human rights defenders in the country.

“They are doing a tremendous service for the long-term future of Honduras and should never be attacked, punished or stigmatized,” said UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Andrew Gilmour, at the end of a three-day visit with Government officials, civil society representatives and members of the UN and diplomatic communities.

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Mr. Gilmour brought up “widespread impunity, horrific levels of violence, increased militarization of public security, restrictive access to family planning, as well as a disturbing increase in femicide and violence against women” in his discussions.

Mr. Gilmour added that he was “particularly troubled” by the violence “courageous” defenders face.

Among the groups with whom he met was the Organization of American States' Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), as well as the National Commissioner for Human Rights. Mr. Gilmour underlined the essential work they are both doing and their key partnerships with the UN Human Rights Office.

“We are glad that the direct link between corruption and human rights abuses is increasingly recognized – for example, when concessions for land or natural resources are wrongfully granted and without consulting indigenous communities,” he said.

In his official visits, Mr. Gilmour highlighted the essential work that officials and the UN Human Rights Office are both doing.

Mr. Gilmour reiterated that opening space for dialogue, access to information and meaningful participation in policy-making are key elements of a democratic society. He encouraged State officials to see human rights defenders as allies and useful agents of change.

He also warned against a reliance on harsh penal policies for juveniles and security-only approaches.

“Social investment and rehabilitation options would be far more likely to address the root causes of violence in Honduras,” Mr. Gilmour said.

In 2016, an independent human rights expert spoke out about violence targeting rights defenders in Honduras.

At that time, the special rapporteur cited reports which said Honduras had become one of the most dangerous countries in the world for human rights defenders, particularly those promoting rights related to environment and land issues.
**INTERVIEW: Preparing for Tripoli, new UN envoy in Libya seeks to work with Libyans**

28 July – Set to arrive in Libya next week, the new United Nations Special Representative said that he was coming to Tripoli to work with the Libyans, in an attempt to help find a solution out of the political crisis that led to the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and pushed the country into a crisis that sees thousands of migrants and refugees fleeing to Europe and other countries in Africa.

“I am coming to work with them and for them,” Ghassan Salamé told *UN News* about his message to the people of Libya. “I am not going to work in their place because there are things that they need to decide. [If] they’re happy to remain in that political vicious circle, I can do nothing for them. But if their decision is to get out of it, they will find in me an energetic and creative mind at their service.”

UN Secretary-General António Guterres in June appointed Mr. Salamé lame as his Special Representative and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).

During their first official meeting today, described as “long” and “fruitful” by Mr. Salamé, the Secretary-General gave his new envoy two key cards to use in Libya.

“The Secretary-General had the opportunity to express the great attention he is devoting to Libya as a high level issue,” Mr. Salamé said, and “his confidence in the leadership [that] I will need to demonstrate with dealing with this sensitive issue.”

In the month since being appointed, Mr. Salamé said he received hundreds of emails and tens of thousands of tweets offering advice on how to assist Libya – sometimes contradictory.

“Some people wanted me to be extremely interventionist in their own affairs, some people wanted me to be very, very prudent in their own affairs,” he said. “Some people wanted me to deal; some people wanted me to never talk to other people.”

“I learned a lot from all this,” Mr. Salamé said, adding that he was particularly moved by the “incredible warmth” the Libyans have shown him so far.

During the next few days, the new UN envoy plans to meet with permanent representatives to the UN of various stakeholders to refine his own view of how Libya is seen. These will include meetings with the so-called ‘P 5,’ or five permanent members of the Security Council – China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and United States – as well as countries with a direct interest in the evolution of Libyan affairs, such as Algeria, Egypt, Italy and Tunisia, as well as the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU).

Mr. Salamé is due to arrive in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, by Wednesday.

He said his first few days will be devoted to listening to Libyans: “I have reached an age where I am looking for neither a big career, money nor glory. I have reached a point in my life where my first priority is legacy. And therefore, I want this mission to be a successful one so that I can speak of my diplomatic career as much as of my academic career.

“And what is success at this case? It is to work with the Libyans for the Libyans in order for them to find a common ground that takes them out of the political quagmire they have painted themselves into,” he continued.

The comments come just days after Libya's UN-backed Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and the country's eastern commander General Khalifa Haftar met and agreed on a joint declaration that calls for a negotiated political solution, national
reconciliation and an immediate ceasefire.

The most positive result of the meeting, the UN envoy said, is that both sides agreed the solution in Libya can only be political and not military.

“They also agreed on having the elections sometime next year. Something that needs to be prepared very well,” he said, noting that the UN will support Libyan efforts to plan for free and fair elections.

UN efforts in Libya are guided by the Security Council, which established a political mission in the country in 2011. As the head of UNSMIL, Mr. Salamé will be responsible for supporting mediation and good offices to assist implementation of Libyan political agreements; consolidate governance, security and economic arrangements of the Government of National Accord; and support human rights and transitional justice efforts in the country, among others.

**Human rights defenders in Viet Nam should 'never be treated as criminals,' says UN rights office**

28 July – The United Nations rights office expressed concern today over the intensifying crackdown in Viet Nam against human rights defenders who have questioned or criticized the Government and its policies.

Noting that last Tuesday, well-known activist Tran Thi Nga was sentenced to nine years’ imprisonment and five years' house arrest for so-called “anti-State propaganda” for comments posted online, Liz Throssell, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) expressed “serious concerns about the severity of the sentence and the conduct of the trial, which does not appear to have met due process standards.”

“Human rights defenders should never be treated as criminals who are a threat to national security,” she told reporters at the regular bi-weekly news briefing in Geneva.

In accordance with provisions of article 88 of Viet Nam’s Penal Code, Tran was kept in incommunicado detention for some six months – from her arrest in January until a few days before the trial. Tran was not allowed adequate time to prepare her defence, the trial lasted just one day and her family and friends were denied entry to the courtroom, according to the UN rights office.

Tran Thi Nga's sentence comes less than a month after Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, a prominent blogger known as 'Mother Mushroom,' was jailed for 10 years, also under article 88, following similarly flawed judicial proceedings.

OHCHR pointed out that over the last six months, at least seven other human rights defenders have been arrested and face prosecution, several dozen are currently detained, and two have been deported or sent into exile abroad. Many others have been intimidated, harassed and brutally beaten.

The UN Human Rights Office and international human rights mechanisms have repeatedly denounced article 88 of the Penal Code, along with several other provisions of the Code, as being in breach of international human rights law.

“The Vietnamese Government's failure to address the concerns of the international community about restrictions on fundamental freedoms raises doubts about its commitment to protect and promote human rights,” stressed Ms. Throssell.

“We urge the Vietnamese authorities to immediately release all those detained in connection with their exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, and to amend the overly broad ill-defined laws that are used – under the pretext of national security – to crack down on dissent,” she stated.