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Female genital mutilation 'not acceptable' in the 21st century – UN envoy on youth

The UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, Jayathma Wickramanayake, speaks at the forum in Banjul, the Gambia. Photo: Alhagie Manka

5 February – Speaking a day ahead of the International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation, the United Nations youth envoy people underscored that the ghastly practice is an aversion to the human rights of millions and keeps them from achieving their full potential.

“This is not acceptable and this is done in the name of tradition, culture, religion or in the name of ensuring that women are to take on subservient roles to the men they will eventually marry,” said Jayathma Wickramanayake, the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, speaking at an international forum in the Gambia on strategies to combat the practice.

“This is not acceptable in the 21st century.”

Globally, over 200 million women and girls are estimated to have undergone some form of genital mutilation and girls aged 14 and younger account for about 44 million of those who have been “cut.”

According to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), although the practice is declining in many countries where it is prevalent, many of these countries also experiencing a high rate of population growth – meaning that the number of girls who undergo genital mutilation will continue to grow if efforts are not significantly scaled up.

The in one of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – agreed to by all UN Member States – has called for eliminating female genital mutilation as well as other harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage (target 5.3).



Countries too have also stepped up their efforts.

For instance, in November 2015, Gambia banned and subsequently criminalized female genital mutilation. Many other African countries also now have legislation that forbids the practice.

In addition to implementing the law, the Envoy on Youth also called on all countries and stakeholders to address any existing gaps in their legal frameworks and reiterated the support from the UN in overcoming the harmful practice.

“History has taught us that human societies can come up with reprehensible social practices – that are justified under false guises – to strengthen the power structures or maintain the status quo for certain groups in society,” she said.

“Luckily we also know that social practice is not static and that it can change as our understanding evolves.”

Marked annually on 6 February, the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female

Genital Mutilation aims to strengthen momentum towards ending the practice which is globally recognized as a violation of the human rights of girls and women as well as perpetuates deep-rooted inequality between the sexes.

Proof of chemical weapons use in Syria should be met with ‘meaningful response,’ UN disarmament chief

5 February – Evidence of the use, or likely use, of banned chemical weapons in Syria should be met with a “meaningful response” within the Security Council, the United Nations disarmament affairs chief said on Monday.

UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu was

briefing the Council on the work being undertaken by the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact Finding Mission (FFM) to look into all allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

“New reports by the FFM are pending. Should they conclude that there has been the use, or likely use, of chemical weapons in any of these alleged incidents, our obligation to enact a meaningful response will be further intensified.”

She said that the complete destruction of the Government’s 27 above-ground facilities should be completed within two months, and added that the FFM was due to submit a report “very soon.”

The majority of allegations involve the use of chlorine gas.

Meanwhile, allegations of chemical weapon use were continuing, she said, “including only this past weekend in the town of Saraqeb.”

According to news reports, nine people have been treated with breathing problems, after a bomb believed to be filled with the toxic gas was dropped on the opposition-held town, in Idlib Governorate.

High Representative Nakamitsu said that the situation made it “abundantly clear our continuing and collective responsibility to ensure that those responsible are held to account.”



Izumi Nakamitsu, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, addresses the Security Council. UN Photo/Manuel Elias

She said that another FFM team has been looking into allegations of the use of chemical weapons by other warring parties, brought to their attention by the Syrian government. She said its report was pending.

Ms. Nakamitsu said that should any of the reports conclude that there had been “the use, or likely use, of chemical weapons in any of these alleged incidents, our obligation to enact a meaningful response will be further intensified.”

“It is my hope, and the hope of the Secretary-General, that such a response will favour unity, not impunity,” she added.

In November last year, the Security Council failed to adopt a resolution to renew the mandate of an international panel investigating the use of chemical weapons in Syria, due to the use of the veto by permanent member, Russia.

Ms. Nakamitsu, also the head of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), told the Security Council that work still remains to be done to fully implement Council resolution 2118 as well as for the international community to have “shared confidence” that the Syria’s chemical weapons programme has been fully eliminated.

World ‘failing to stop the war on children,’ says UNICEF Middle East, North Africa director



On 13 September 2016 in the western part of Aleppo city, Syria, UNICEF representatives speak with displaced mothers and children living in make-shift tents and shelters in the neighbourhood of Majabel. Photo: UNICEF/Ourfali

5 February – Describing January as “a dark month” in crisis-torn Middle East and North Africa, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) director for the region said Monday that the violence has had a devastating toll on children, who were being killed in ongoing conflicts or suicide attacks, or freezing to death as they fled active warzones.

“It is simply unacceptable that children continue being killed and injured every single day,” said Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

In the month of January alone, escalating violence in Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen has claimed the lives of at least 83 children.

“These children have paid the highest price for wars that they have absolutely no responsibility for. Their lives have been cut short, their families forever broken in grief,” he added.

Mr. Cappelaere said that as the Syrian conflict enters its eighth year, intensifying fighting has reportedly killed 59 children in the past four weeks.

Moreover, across Yemen the UN has verified the killing of 16 children in attacks and continues to receive daily reports of more killed and injured children amidst escalating fighting.

Additionally, a suicide attack took the lives of three children in Libya’s Benghazi while three others died playing near unexploded ordnance – a fourth child remains in critical condition after the blast.

Turning to the old city of Mosul in Iraq, a child was killed in a booby-trapped house, and in the Palestinian Occupied Territory, a boy was shot dead in a village near Ramallah.

Furthermore, 16 refugees, including four children, froze to death in a harsh winter storm in Lebanon – fleeing the war in Syria – where many more children were hospitalized with frost bite.

“We collectively continue failing to stop the war on children,” stressed Mr. Cappelaere.

He underscored, “not hundreds, not thousands but millions more children in the Middle East and North Africa region have their childhoods stolen, maimed for life, traumatized, arrested and detained, exploited, prevented from going to school and from getting the most essential health services; denied even the basic right to play.”

Mr. Cappelaere maintained that we have no justification, no reason to accept this as a new normal.

“Children may have been silenced. But their voices will continue to be heard. Their message is our message: The protection of children is paramount under all circumstances, in line with the law of war,” he argued.

“Breaching that law is a most heinous crime and jeopardizes the future – and not just for children,” concluded the UNICEF Regional Director.

UN chief congratulates US, Russia on nuclear arsenal cuts, urges further disarmament



Secretary-General António Guterres. UN Photo/Violaine Martin (file)

5 February – United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on Monday congratulated the United States and Russia on successfully reducing their strategic nuclear forces to the level required by a new bilateral treaty signed in 2010, calling on both sides to engage in the necessary dialogue that will lead to further arsenal reductions.

“The Secretary-General stresses that at a time when global anxieties about nuclear weapons are higher than at any time since the Cold War, efforts in nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control are more vital than ever,” said a statement issued by his Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric.

“These endeavors can play significant roles in building trust and confidence, and preventing, mitigating and resolving conflicts,” the statement added.

Known as “New START,” the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms reduces deployed nuclear weapons to 700 delivery vehicles and 1,550 warheads.

It is a part of a series of bilateral nuclear arms control agreements between the two nations that “have significantly reduced the dangers posed by nuclear weapons and are steps towards the common aspiration of a world free of nuclear weapons,” the statement noted.

Mr. Guterres called on them “to engage in the necessary dialogue that will lead to further arsenal reductions” and “to continue to display the historic leadership across the multilateral disarmament agenda that has proven so valuable to our collective security,” the statement said.

The new Treaty was signed in Prague on 8 April, 2010 and came into force on 5 February, 2011.

Development indicators trending downward for world's poorest countries, UN warns

5 February – The least developed countries (LDCs) – nations categorized as requiring special attention from the international community – will fall short of goals set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development unless urgent action is taken, new United Nations analysis has revealed.

The analysis by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) also highlights that LDC growth averaged five per cent in 2017 and will reach 5.4 per cent in 2018, below the seven per cent growth envisaged by Target One of Sustainable Development Goal 8 on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

In 2017, only five LDCs achieved economic growth of seven per cent or higher: Ethiopia at 8.5 per cent, Nepal at 7.5 per cent, Myanmar at 7.2 per cent, Bangladesh at 7.1 per cent, and Djibouti at seven per cent.

“The international community should strengthen its support to LDCs in line with the commitment to leave no one behind,” Paul Akiwumi, Director of UNCTAD’s Division for Africa, Least Developed Countries and Special Programmes, Mr. Akiwumi said.

“With the global economic recovery remaining tepid, development partners face constraints in extending support to LDCs to help them meet the Sustainable Development Goals. Inequalities between the LDCs and other developing countries risk widening,” he said.

Relying on commodities

The analysis contends that too many LDCs remain dependent on primary commodity exports.

While international prices for most primary commodity categories have trended upwards since late 2016, this modest recovery barely made a dent to the significant drop experienced since 2011, particularly in the cases of crude petroleum and minerals, ores and metals.

In 2017, LDCs as a group were projected to register a current account deficit of \$50 billion, the second-highest deficit posted so far, at least in nominal terms.

In contrast, non-LDC developing countries registered current account surpluses, so did developing countries as a whole and developed countries.

Projections for 2018 suggest that the current account deficits of the LDCs are expected to grow further, making worse possible balance-of-payments weaknesses.

Aid levels

Special foreign aid commitments for LDCs amounted to \$43.2 billion, representing only an estimated 27 per cent of net aid to all developing countries – a 0.5 per cent increase in aid in real terms year-on-year.

This trend supports fears of a levelling-off of aid to LDCs in the wake of the global recession. In 2016, only a handful of donor countries appear to have met the commitments under Target Two of Sustainable Development Goal 17.



Olivia Nankindu, 27, surveys the fruits of her labor in the waning afternoon sunlight on her farm near Kyotera, Uganda. Photo:Stephan Gladieu/World Bank

Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom provided more than 0.20 per cent of their own gross national income to LDCs, while the Netherlands met the 0.15 per cent threshold.

“This analysis signals a clarion call for action,” said Mr. Akiwumi. “The international community needs to pay increased attention to their commitments toward LDCs.”

The analysis was presented to UNCTAD member States at a meeting of its governing body in Geneva, Switzerland, on 5 February.

Amid ‘difficult reality’ in Middle East, two-state solution more important than ever – UN chief



Secretary-General António Guterres (second left) addresses the 2018 opening session of the General Assembly's Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

5 February – International consensus on a two-State solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be eroding “at a time when it is more important than ever,” Secretary-General António Guterres said on Tuesday, calling the ‘question of Palestine’ one of the longest unresolved issues on the agenda of the United Nations.

“We must face today’s difficult reality,” Secretary-General António Guterres told the opening of the 2018 session of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, which was created by the UN General Assembly in 1975 to seek and end to the Israeli occupation and ensure the achievement of a two-state solution in the Middle East conflict.

“Negative trends on the ground have the potential to create an irreversible one-state reality that is incompatible with realizing the legitimate national, historic and democratic aspirations of both Israelis

and Palestinians,” he added.

After decades, “convergence and global consensus could be eroding, making effective concerted action more difficult to achieve,” he stressed, noting “illegal” settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank as “a major obstacle to peace.” “It must be halted and reversed,” he maintained.

Moreover, the humanitarian and economic situation in Gaza remains dire, with predictions by the UN Country Team in the Occupied Palestine Territory that unless concrete action is taken to improve basic services and infrastructure, it will become unliveable by 2020.

“Yet,” the UN chief continued “Gaza remains squeezed by crippling closures and a state of constant humanitarian emergency” as two million Palestinians struggle daily with an electricity crisis, chronic unemployment and a paralyzed economy – amid an unfolding environmental disaster.

The latest funding shortfall in the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) will further impair critical services and threaten the human security, rights and dignity of five million Palestine refugees across the Middle East.

“I appeal to the generosity of the international community not to let that happen,” implored Mr. Guterres, adding “Reconciliation is a key step in reaching the larger objective of a Palestinian State and lasting peace.”

He reiterated his commitment to supporting the parties’ efforts to a two-State solution.

“A two-State solution is the only way to achieve the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and secure a sustainable solution to the conflict,” concluded the Secretary-General.

UN calls on Maldives to respect Supreme Court decision, says 'ready' to help ease political impasse

3 February – Following the Maldives' Supreme Court decision ordering the release of convicted opposition leaders and the reinstatement of 12 parliamentarians, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has expressed the world body's continued readiness to facilitate all-party talks in finding a solution to the Indian Ocean nation's political stalemate.

“The Secretary-General takes note of the important ruling by the Supreme Court” and calls on the Government to respect it, said a statement issued overnight by his Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric.

“The Secretary-General reiterates his belief in finding a solution to the political stalemate in the Maldives through all-party talks, which the United Nations continues to stand ready to facilitate,” the statement added.



Aerial view of Malé, the capital of the Maldives. Photo: Nattu

On Friday, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) also urged the Government of the Maldives to fully respect the Supreme Court decision, which also overturned the conviction of former President Mohamed Nasheed and ordered to retry his case.

“We are concerned by what appears to be an initial heavy-handed reaction by security forces in the capital Malé against people celebrating the Court's decision,” Spokesperson Rupert Colville told reporters at a press briefing in Geneva, Switzerland, urging them to show understanding and restraint, and to act in full accordance with international laws and standards governing the policing of protests and other forms of public assembly.

“We also urge all those celebrating, or protesting, to do so in a peaceful fashion,” he added.

UN, African Union voice concern over protracted political crisis in Guinea-Bissau



Secretary-General António Guterres (at podium, right) and Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, address the press following the signing of a Joint UN-AU Framework for Enhancing Partnerships on Peace and Security in 2017 (File). UN Photo/Manuel Elias

3 February – The top leaders of the African Union and the United Nations on Saturday expressed concern over the prolonged political crisis in Guinea-Bissau, condemning the recent actions taken by the national authorities to prevent a political party from holding its conference.

“The Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, express concern over the protracted political crisis in Guinea-Bissau despite the multiple opportunities offered to the main political stakeholders to arrive at a consensual arrangement,” said an AU-UN joint statement.

“They condemn the recent actions taken by the national authorities to prevent the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde (PAIGC) from convening and holding its Party Congress, including the directive given to national security services to evacuate

and shutter the party's headquarters,” it added.

Mr. Faki Mahamat and Mr. Guterres called on all relevant authorities to strictly adhere to international human rights and

humanitarian law and to immediately remove all restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly, political participation and freedom of speech.

They fully endorsed the recent decisions on Guinea-Bissau taken by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on 27 January and endorsed by the AU on 29 January.

They also supported the measures being taken by ECOWAS against “political obstructionists” in the country, welcoming the communiqué issued by the ECOWAS ministerial mission that visited Guinea-Bissau on 31 January and 1 February.

Further, they reiterated their endorsement of the centrality of the Conakry Agreement of 14 October 2016, which, inter alia, provides for the appointment of a consensual Prime Minister, and called on the main political stakeholders to faithfully and urgently implement this Agreement, as well as the ECOWAS Roadmap to which they have all signed up to.

Mr. Faki Mahamat and Mr. Guterres reaffirmed their commitment to continue to closely follow all political developments and to support ECOWAS in its efforts to ensure a swift resolution of the protracted crisis in Guinea-Bissau, and stand ready to employ additional measures, should the situation warrant it.

According to the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA), Guinea-Bissau has been plagued by chronic political instability since gaining independence in 1974.

The DPA provides support and oversight to the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office for Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS), a special political mission first established in 1999 following a two-year civil war in the country. Since mid-2016, the Mission is headed by the Secretary-General's Representative, Modibo I. Touré.

The main priorities of UNIOGBIS are to support efforts to consolidate constitutional order, further political dialogue and national reconciliation, encourage security sector reform, and promote respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The mission has provided assistance in several national elections, including during the legislative and presidential elections in April and May 2014, and has again been mandated by the Security Council to work closely with national authorities as well as the United Nations country team in support of the timely conduct of legislative and presidential elections in 2018 and 2019, respectively.