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UN chief urges Maldives to uphold rule of law amid rapidly unfolding political crisis

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

6 February – Following the declaration of a 'state of emergency' in the Maldives, after which soldiers forced their way into the Supreme Court, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on Tuesday urged the Government to uphold the rule of law and ensure the safety of the people of the island nation.

The UN chief expressed serious concern about the unfolding situation in the Maldives and, in statement issued by his Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric, urged the Government to uphold the constitution and rule of law, lift the state of emergency as soon as possible, and take all measures to ensure the safety and security of the people in the country, including members of the judiciary.”

According to media reports, the security forces arrested the top judge after the declaration of the state of emergency – a development following the Supreme Court decision that ordered the release of convicted opposition leaders and the reinstatement of 12 parliamentarians.

Over the weekend, senior UN officials called on the authorities in the Maldives to fully respect the top court ruling, with Mr. Guterres expressing the continued readiness of the UN to facilitate all-party talks in finding a solution to the Indian Ocean nation's political stalemate.

Syria: UN urges an end to hostilities, warns of grave and deepening humanitarian crisis

6 February – Senior United Nations officials in Syria warned on Tuesday of the dire humanitarian crisis in several parts of the country, calling on warring parties to immediately stop fighting so aid and basic services can reach those in need, and the sick and critically wounded can evacuate.

“The United Nations humanitarian team in Syria warns of the dire consequences of the compounded humanitarian crisis in several parts of the country,” said a statement issued Tuesday by the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and the UN Representatives in Syria.

“In this extreme situation,” the officials called for “an immediate cessation of hostilities lasting for at least one month throughout Syria to enable the delivery of humanitarian aid and services, evacuation of the critically sick and wounded, and alleviation of people’s suffering, to the extent possible, wherever they are.”

In Afrin, the ongoing military operations and the reported blockage of exits by other forces have virtually trapped many civilians preventing them from accessing safer areas, the statement said, noting that so far, 380 families have reached surrounding villages and Aleppo city neighborhoods while thousands of people have been displaced within Afrin.

“As the fighting escalates, the number of civilians affected by violence is bound to increase,” the statement warned.

In Al-Hasakah, an agreement was reached to allow some UN partners to resume their work, after a month in which most humanitarian assistance came to a complete halt. This is a positive first step, but the agreement is only for a period of two months and covers a limited number of partners.

Turning to Ar-Raqqah, the statement noted that the city’s devastation is unparalleled and conditions remain unsafe. Many civilians trying to return home have been killed and injured by unexploded ordinances. Services are absent. Access for humanitarian workers to the city is almost impossible due to unsafe conditions.

In Idlib, the military operations resulted in increased casualties and movement of civilians to safer areas. Some of them have been forced to move several times to escape fighting. With the high concentration of displaced people, the Governorate may not be able to withstand the consequences of renewed fighting.

Foah and Kafraya in Idlib continue to be besieged by non-State armed groups, without access to much needed humanitarian supplies and medical treatment.

In the south, civilians in Al-Rukban camp remain inaccessible to the humanitarian team in Syria. The last time the camp was supplied with food and non-food items was from across the border in early January, the statement said.

Upsurge in Violence in Idlib and eastern Ghouta

Meanwhile, the UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria expressed deep concern over the further escalation of violence in Idlib governorate and in eastern Ghouta.

Over the last 48 hours, the scale and ferocity of attacks has increased dramatically resulting in multiple reports of civilian casualties and airstrikes that have reportedly hit at least three hospitals, including in Ma’aret al Nu’man, Kafr Nabl and Mardikh.



Two boys collect tree branches to make fire wood in Kafar Batna village in Rural Damascus, Syria. Photo: UNICEF/Amer Al Shami

Since the beginning of the year, the increase in violence in Idlib has resulted in another upsurge of internal displacement with over a quarter of a million civilians reportedly fleeing the fighting, according to reports received by the Commission.

“These reports are extremely troubling, and make a mockery of the so-called ‘de-escalation zones’ intended to protect civilians from such bombardment,” said Commission Chair Paulo Pinheiro.

“The parties to this conflict are failing in their obligations under international humanitarian law, including their absolute obligation to refrain from attacks against medical facilities and personnel,” Mr. Pinheiro added.

Most alarmingly, the Commission has received multiple reports – which it is now investigating – that bombs allegedly containing weaponised chlorine have been used in the town of Saraqeb in Idlib and in Douma in eastern Ghouta.

Mounting attacks in Idlib come at a time when the escalation of violence in eastern Ghouta has also magnified the longstanding humanitarian crisis in that besieged pocket on the north-eastern outskirts of Damascus.

Airstrikes and shelling of areas held by anti-government armed groups has compounded a three-year siege in which nearly 400,000 civilians – including children – have had little access to basic assistance, including food, medicines and life-saving health assistance.

“What is happening in eastern Ghouta is not simply a humanitarian crisis because aid is denied, these sieges involve the international crimes of indiscriminate bombardment and deliberate starvation of the civilian population,” stated Mr. Pinheiro.

‘Protect children and their digital footprint,’ urges UNICEF on Safer Internet Day



A student at St. Francis of Assisi School, and other girls, check their smart phones after classes in the Central Visayas city of Cebu, Philippines. Photo: UNICEF/Estey

6 February – Every half a second, every day, a child goes online for the first time – tapping into all the great opportunities the Internet has to offer, but facing grave risks, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said Tuesday, calling for urgent action to protect them from sexual exploitation, cyberbullying and the misuse of their private information.

“The potential of connectivity makes it easier for children to connect with their peers anywhere in the world [...] is a tool for children’s empowerment and engagement with their communities. However, this connectivity puts them at risk of their private information, access to harmful content, and cyberbullying,” said Sheldon Yett, UNICEF Pacific Representative.

As outlined in *The State of the World’s Children 2017*:

Children in a digital world Worldwide, one-in-three internet users is a child, and yet too little is done to protect them from digital world perils.

“Every day, thousands of children are going online for the first time, which opens them up to a flood of dangers we are just coming to appreciate, let alone address,” said Laurence Chandy, UNICEF Director of Data, Research and Policy.

“While governments and the private sector have made some progress in formulating policies and approaches to eliminate the most egregious online risks, more effort must be made to fully understand and protect children’s online lives,” he added.

UNICEF is working with governments in the Pacific to deliver cyber safety programmes particularly in Tonga and Samoa and provide tips to parents on how to protect their children online.

“Collective action – by governments, the private sector, children’s organizations, academia, families and children themselves – is needed to level the digital playing field and ensure safer internet spaces for children,” Mr. Chandy affirmed.

The report underscores that everyone is obliged to protect children in the digital world, including governments, families, schools and other institutions – with a special note that technology and telecommunication industries have a significant responsibility to shape the impact of digital technology on children.

UNICEF is calling for renewed urgency and cooperation among governments, civil society, UN agencies and, most significantly, the private sector, to put children at the centre of digital policy by coordinating global, regional and national responses; safeguarding children’s privacy; empowering children online through more equitable access and digital literacy; and investing in better evidence about access, opportunities and risks for children online.

“In the time it takes to click on a link, a child somewhere begins creating a digital trail which those not necessarily considering the child’s best interest can follow and potentially exploit,” Mr. Chandy stressed.

“As younger and younger children join the Internet, the need to have a serious discussion about how to keep them safe online and secure their digital footprint becomes increasingly urgent,” he concluded.

Migrant deaths along US-Mexico border remain high despite drop in crossings – UN agency

6 February – The number of migrants losing their lives attempting to cross the United States-Mexico border in 2017 remained high in spite of substantial decrease in the number of arrests along the frontier, the United Nations migration agency reported on Tuesday.

In a news release, the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) said that US Border Patrol figures show 341,084 migrants were apprehended on the country’s southwestern border in 2017 as against 611,689 in 2016 – a drop of about 44 per cent.

However, 2017 recorded 412 migrant deaths, compared to 398 the preceding year.

“The increase in deaths is especially concerning, as the available data indicate that far fewer migrants entered the US via its border with Mexico in the last year,” said Frank Laczko, Director of IOM’s Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.

According to the UN agency, prolonged exposure to the extreme environments in the border region, where temperatures often top 104 degree Fahrenheit (40 degree Celsius), combined with the difficulty of bringing assistance those in need in remote areas have repeatedly been cited as leading causes of death.

Texas, where 191 migrant deaths were recorded in the last year, is a particular area of concern and the 2017 total represents a 26 per cent increase over the 151 fatalities recorded in the state in 2016, added IOM in the news release.

At the same time, though data on migrant fatalities on the US-Mexico border are more accessible than in many other regions of the world, they remain incomplete and the number of deaths reported by the US Border Patrol, includes only those which agents deal with directly.

“This means that federally reported figures could seriously underestimate the real number of deaths,” said Julia Black, data collection coordinator for IOM’s Missing Migrants Project.

IOM also reported that the “vast majority” of migrant border deaths recorded by the Project occur on the US side of the



Irregular migrants atop freight train, ‘La Bestia,’ which takes them through Mexico towards the United States. (file) Photo: UN Migration Agency (IOM)/Keith Dannemiller

border – though one reason for this may be that coroners, medical examiners, and sheriffs in US border counties are more likely to regularly report data on migrant deaths to the agency’s staff.

Reports of deaths south of the border often surface locally from radio stations and small newspapers, or from social media, the UN agency added, noting that the information on fatalities could come weeks, even months after they occur.

Since the start of the Missing Migrants Project, IOM has recorded 1,468 deaths on the US-Mexico border, including 14 deaths in January 2018.

With rising number of girls at risk, world in 'race against time' to end female genital mutilation – UN

6 February – Female genital mutilation is a violent act that, among other things, causes infection, disease, childbirth complications and death, said the Executive Directors of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in a joint statement for the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Describing FGM as “a cruel practice” that inflicts emotional harm and preys on girls between infancy and age 15, the most vulnerable members of society, the UN agency chiefs called it a “violation of human rights” that perpetuates the low status of girls and women; and a drag on the well-being of communities and economies.

“Yet, it is also something that can be stopped,” UNFPA's Dr. Natalaia Kanem, and UNICEF's Henrietta H. Fore said in Tuesday's statement.

“Around the world, momentum to eliminate female genital mutilation is building. Political will, community engagement and targeted investment are changing practices and changing lives,” they added.

In countries where both agencies work jointly to end FGM, girls are one-third less likely today to undergo the harmful practice than in 1997.

Since 2008, more than 25 million people in some 18,000 communities across 15 countries publicly disavowed the practice, and globally its prevalence has declined by nearly a quarter since 2000.

“This is good for girls and young women themselves; it is also good for their families and communities,” the agency heads stressed.

Girls who are not subjected to the practice tend to grow up to be healthier and have healthier children, they elaborated, pointing out that they are often “better educated, earn higher incomes and are more empowered to make decisions about their own lives.”

The UN agencies also noted that the countries committed to changing the harmful practice reap commensurate benefits.

“This is the good news,” they continued. “Yet, population trends in some of the world's poorest countries where female genital mutilation persists threaten to roll back our progress.”

By 2030, more than one-third of births globally will be in the 30 FGM countries – requiring accelerated progress to protect millions at risk.

“It is unconscionable that these girls should be added to the 200 million women and girls in the world today who have



Six-year-old Asmah Mohamad, who was forced to undergo the painful FGM/C procedure, is comforted by her mother Bedria. © UNICEF/NYHQ2005-2229/Getachew

already endured female genital mutilation. Who already bear the scars, or suffer related complications, or relive harsh memories of pain and betrayal,” they stressed.

“Nobody – not the girls, their families or communities – benefits economically or socially in unequal societies where such violence against girls is accepted,” argued the UNICEF and UNFPA chiefs.

They maintained that FGM rates can drop rapidly when the issue is taken on by governments, communities and families; when social norms are confronted, village by village; when medical professionals jointly refuse to perform it; when laws make it a crime – and authorities enforce them; when access to health, education and legal services ensure sustainable change; and where girls and women are protected and empowered to make their voices heard.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize that female genital mutilation undermines progress towards a more equal, just and prosperous world, and target by 2030 its elimination.

Given the rising number of girls at risk, both agencies call it “a race against trends.”

With increased investment, redoubled political commitment, greater community engagement and more empowered women and girls, the agency heads upheld, “it is a race that can be won. And because it can, it must.”

“It is high time to eliminate female genital mutilation from the face of the earth forever. It is a task for all of us, and for our common future,” the statement concluded.

For his part, Secretary-General António Guterres called FGM “a gross violation of the human rights of women and girls.”

“Without concerted, accelerated action, a further 68 million girls could be subjected to this harmful practice by 2030,” he warned in his message marking the Day.

The UN chief pointed out that while several countries with strong political engagement have seen success, the progress is not enough to keep up with population growth, and without immediate action, the number of cases will continue to rise.

“Sustainable development cannot be achieved without full respect for the human rights of women and girls,” he upheld, reiterating SDG 5's target for FMG elimination.

He said that together with the European Union, the UN has launched the Spotlight Initiative, a global, multi-year undertaking that aims to create strong partnerships and align efforts to end all forms of violence against women and girls, including female genital mutilation.

“With the dignity, health and well-being of millions of girls at stake, there is no time to waste,” underscored the Secretary-General. “Together, we can and must end this harmful practice.”



Over 14,000 farmers in rural Nepal to benefit from new UN project



Farmers transplant rice seedlings in a paddy field in Dhading district, central Nepal. Photo: IFAD/Anwar Hossain

6 February – Thousands of family farmers are expected to benefit from a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiative in Nepal that uses an innovative approach to build both the farmers’ capacities as well as add value to their products.

Being implemented in partnership with the Government of Nepal, the Cooperative Market Development Programme aims to establish and operationalize cooperative market chain of fruits and vegetables to increase farmers’ income and other livelihood opportunities.

“This [partnership] will directly benefit thousands of Nepali farmers over the next five years, through crucial support in modernizing their production and market chain,” said Renaud Meyer, the UNDP Country Director for Nepal.

“The active engagement and financing from the Ministry [of Cooperatives and Poverty Alleviation] shows strong commitment, leadership and ownership of the programme,” he added.

According to UNDP-Nepal, the Programme focuses on six districts near the country’s capital, Kathmandu, which despite having a number of farmers’ cooperative groups, are plagued by poor infrastructure, lack of transport and storage facilities, inadequate access to market information as well as regulatory and institutional bottlenecks.

In addition to improving infrastructure, the initiative also aims to enhance quality, quantity and consistency of the supply of fruits and vegetables as well as train farmers on employing better techniques, as well as building their marketing and institutional capacity.

In all, about 14,000 farmers and their families are expected to benefit from the initiative, which is also expected to contribute to the South Asian country’s implementation of Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2 on ending poverty in all its forms, and ending hunger and achieving food security, respectively.

Liberia: UN mission farewell ceremony honours last departing police and military personnel



Photo: UNMIL

6 February – After 14 years of serving in the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), an official farewell ceremony was held on Tuesday in the capital, Monrovia, to honour the last departing Police and Military personnel serving there.

“Today, Liberia is a success story and classical example of a post conflict nation that has emerged stronger than ever before, the country is indeed a symbol of hope for other nations engulfed in conflicts and wars” said Force Commander Major General Salihu Zaway Uba, who heads UNMIL’s Military component – that includes Nigeria, Pakistan and Ukraine personnel.

In 2003, UNMIL began with 16,475 uniformed personnel. Since that time, 61 contingents from various countries have served there. At Tuesday’s farewell ceremony 404 Military and 285 Police personnel were honoured.

According to the Major General, the Mission’s military and police have taken greater stride towards strengthening peace and



security, rule of law and governance, among others in Liberia.

Police Commissioner Simon Blatchly Heads the Formed Police Unit, which is composed of Nigerian and Chinese personnel.

The Force Commander stated that it was not all roses particularly for the military, which had the highest fatalities of 138 personnel, while the police lost 21 persons.

“As we are closing, the memory of those 159 persons and others in the Mission will continue to live in our minds, we will continue to pay special tribute to them and those who contributed to peace and security in Liberia” said the Major General.

On behalf of Police Commissioner Blatchly, the Force Commander expressed their profound appreciation to the uniformed component of UNMI, saying “As individual units and contingents, you have done remarkably well to keep the flags high, we are proud of your endeavours as significant contribution to peace in Liberia.”

Without urgent funding, Burundi risks becoming a ‘forgotten crisis’ – UN refugee agency



Burundian refugees collect water at Lusenda camp, South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Photo: UNHCR/Colin Delfosse

6 February – Warning that Burundi could become a “forgotten crisis,” with the number of people struggling for survival increasing by the day, United Nations agencies together with aid partners on Wednesday launched a funding appeal to keep the humanitarian situation from deteriorating further.

“Food rations [are] cut in many of the neighbouring countries,” said Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, adding that vulnerable groups, including women, who have already been exposed to violence cannot be provided with the necessary support.

Since 2015, over 400,000 refugees and asylum seekers have fled the small central African landlocked nation, escaping human rights abuses, political uncertainty, and deteriorating humanitarian situation.

Over 60 per cent of that number have fled to Tanzania (254,000 refugees) and several thousands to Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Uganda.

Furthermore, with the volatile situation persisting, there are fears that the total number of refugees could rise to 450,000 by the end of 2018. Humanitarian efforts to assist those in need, however, also remain constrained due to severe lack of funding.

The \$391 million Burundi Regional Refugee Response Plan includes targeted response in those four countries along with the resources needed in each context.

Fully funded, some 430,000 vulnerable persons will benefit from the Plan through 2018.

The common thread is ensuring that the majority of the displaced living in refugee camps (about 85 per cent), are provided with food, shelter and education as well as protection from sexual and gender based violence.

“For the moment, the conditions are still fragile, so support to host countries continues to be a priority that I hope the world will not forget,” added Mr. Grandi.

Funds will also go towards strengthening social services, livelihood opportunities, protection and restoration environment as well as providing documentation and training for government officials on refugee status determination.

UNHCR ‘not encouraging’ refugee returns at this time

According to Catherine Wiesner, the Regional Coordinator for the Burundi situation at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over the last few years, some Burundian refugees have decided to return home, and are seeking to re-establish their lives in their communities.

They, however, are facing considerable economic pressures and food insecurity.

“At this stage, UNHCR and partners are not promoting or encouraging refugee returns to Burundi,” said the UNHCR official, noting that the agency is working with the relevant Governments to assist those who indicate they have made a free and informed choice to return voluntarily, to do so in safety and dignity.

“We are also reiterating our appeal to Burundi’s neighbours to continue to uphold their international responsibilities and commitments to receive asylum-seekers at their borders and offer protection to those who need it,” she added.

An outbreak of violence in Burundi in April 2015 and, later, a political crisis along with deterioration in security and humanitarian environment has pushed the country deeper into crisis and continues fuel the exodus of its populations, some of whom have been displaced as far as to South Africa and Kenya.