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More than 300 child soldiers released by armed groups in South Sudan – UN mission

7 February – Some 300 child soldiers, including 87 girls, were formally released by armed groups in South Sudan, the United Nations mission in the country reported on Wednesday, calling on all stakeholders to support the young people on the journey back to their communities and help them build a future for themselves.

“Children should not be carrying guns and killing each other. They should be playing, learning, having fun with friends, protected and cherished by the adults around them,” said David Shearer, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for South Sudan, welcoming the release.

Undertaken in Yambio (south-western South Sudan), it is the first such release in over a year and marks the first phase of the overall programme which will see more than 700 children return back to their communities.

“They will have endured suffering, including sexual abuse. It is vital that they receive the support they need to re-join their communities and that they are welcomed home by family and friends without any sense of stigma,” added Mr. Shearer

At a formal ceremony, the children were disarmed and were provided with civilian clothes as well as medical screenings. In the days to come, agencies, such as the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and local partners will provide them with counselling and psychosocial support as part of the reintegration programme.



A 15-year-old boy, former child soldier on his way to school in a South Sudan town. (file) Photo: UNICEF/Ohanesian

According to UNICEF, the children with relatives in area will be reunited with their families, while others will be placed in interim care centres until their families can be traced. They will also be provided with three months' worth of food assistance and with vocational training and age-specific education services in schools and accelerated learning centres to help reach their full potential.

“Not all children are forcibly recruited. Many joined armed groups because they feel they had no other option,” said Mahimbo Mdoe, the head of UNICEF programmes in South Sudan.

“Our priority for this group – and for children across South Sudan – is to provide the support they need so they are able to see a more promising future.”

Together with UNICEF, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and other UN agencies have been working to bring the release to light.

Given the volatile security situation, the UN Mission deployed peacekeeping troops to escort religious leaders into remote bush areas to make contact and negotiate with the armed groups. It also sent engineers to repair a road between Yambio and a vocational training centre nearby to make sure that the young people can travel safely for training programmes.

Noting in particular, the work of the religious leaders, Mr. Shearer added: “I would like to pay particular credit to religious leaders who travelled into conflict zones and risked their own lives to bring these children to safety.”

However, in spite of this release, some 19,000 children continue to be used by armed forces and groups more than four years after conflict erupted in December 2013. Release efforts have also been also complicated by fighting as the one witnessed in the region in July 2016 that stalled the momentum.

Well-planned and managed cities can drive sustainable development – UN agency chief



Cityscape in Tianjin, China. Photo: Yang Aijun/World Bank

7 February – The head of the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) said on Wednesday that a week-long conference on sustainable urban development that kicked off Wednesday in the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, will open a “global conversation about our cities and human settlements.”

“With its genuine openness and inclusive nature, the World Urban Forum (WUF9) is unique on the United Nations conference circuit,” said Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director of UN-Habitat in her remarks to the opening of the Forum, which runs through Saturday, 13 January.

“It is a chance for stakeholders from all over the world – from ministers, local government and urban planners, to civil society groups, the private sector, academia and the media – to contribute to the global conversation about our cities and human settlements,” she added.

Ms. Sharif called WUF9 a platform where people from all walks of life share their experience of finding homes, jobs and lives in urban spaces around the world and a chance for some of the world’s most marginalized to highlight their experiences in being denied some of the advantages cities pose.

For current and future partners, the UN-Habitat chief saw the Forum as an opportunity to showcase the innovative ideas and solutions to challenges being confronted in urban and rural human settlements – and to learn from experts in the field.

Ms. Sharif maintained that WUF9 is “the ideal platform to debate the contribution that positive urban development makes to

delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular Goal 11, and the New Urban Agenda,” which was adopted in 2016 by the UN conference known as Habitat III.

Recent debates and studies have indeed acknowledged that sustainable urbanization is an essential tool for addressing the global challenges of poverty, exclusion, conflict and climate change.

“The New Urban Agenda comes at a critical moment, when for the first time in history over half of the world’s population is residing in cities,” she said, which, if planned and managed well, can be “the main tool for sustainable development and a solution to many of the challenges our planet is facing today.”

WUF9 is the first major milestone after the adoption of the New Urban Agenda, which lays out the vision for future cities based on the science of urban development providing tools in crucial areas.

Barely three weeks into her tenure as the UN-Habitat chief, Ms. Sharif said it is “an honour and a privilege” that the Forum, which is held every two years in different parts of the world, was being hosted in her native Malaysia, saying “Kuala Lumpur will have the chance to showcase some of its own urban innovations.”

She concluded her statement with the assertion that she looked forward to joining “the global conversation on promoting socially, economically and environmentally sustainable cities for all.”

UNICEF helping to restore health services for children and families returning to war-torn Mosul

7 February – Warning about the “alarming” state of Iraq’s healthcare system, especially in war-ravaged areas in and around Mosul, the United Nations children’s agency has stepped up its support to help the Government provide critical medical services so that children and families affected by violence and displacement can resume their lives.

With less than 10 per cent of health facilities in Iraq’s Ninewah governorate functioning at full capacity, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said that as many as 750,000 children in the governorate are struggling to access basic health services although violence has subsided. Those facilities that are operational are stretched to the breaking point.

“The state of Iraq’s healthcare system is alarming,” said Peter Hawkins, UNICEF Representative in Iraq, who has just completed a visit to the largest hospital in Mosul.

“For pregnant women, newborn babies, and children, preventable and treatable conditions can quickly escalate into a matter of life and death,” he said, warning that medical facilities are strained beyond capacity and there are critical shortages of life-saving medicines.

Three years of intense violence have devastated health facilities in Iraq. Over 60 health facilities have repeatedly come under attack since the escalation of violence in 2014, severely disrupting access to basic health services for children and families.

In Mosul, UNICEF has rehabilitated the pediatric and nutritional wards of two hospital centres, provided refrigerators to store vaccines for up to 250,000 children, and supported vaccination campaigns to immunize all children under five years old. Most health centres in the governorate have also re-started vaccination services for children.

UNICEF says the Reconstruction Conference for Iraq hosted by Kuwait next week is a unique opportunity for the Iraqi



A boy who fled a village south of Mosul, Iraq, receives a measles vaccination from a UNICEF-supported government health worker at an aid distribution in Ibrahim Khalil. Photo: UNICEF/Lindsay Mackenzie

Government and the international community to put children at the heart of reconstruction, including through increased budget allocations to services for children.

Mr. Hawkins said what he saw in the hospitals in Mosul was both “heartbreaking and inspiring,” explaining that the ingenuity and dedication of health workers who are committed to giving newborn children the best possible start in life in the most challenging of circumstances is remarkable.

“They too deserve support so that they can continue to save lives,” he said.

UNICEF is appealing for \$17 million to support rebuilding health facilities for children in Iraq in 2018.

UN releases \$9.1 million to fill 'critical healthcare gaps' in Yemen



A medical worker registers young patients in the small rural village of An-Nassiri, located about 60 km from Al Hudaydah, Yemen. Only 45 per cent of health facilities in the war-torn country are currently functioning. Credit: OCHA/Giles Clarke

7 February – With only 50 per cent of medical facilities fully functional in Yemen, the United Nations health agency is striving to fill a “critical” healthcare shortage and will use a \$9.1 million emergency response grant to assist 630,000 vulnerable people in districts around Sana'a and al-Hudayda.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is working with partners “to fill critical gaps in the provision of basic healthcare, to respond to disease outbreaks, to strengthen disease surveillance, to distribute medical supplies and to deliver life-saving services to mothers and their children,” said WHO Yemen Representative Nevio Zagaria.

The grant from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) will be used to deliver urgent health assistance to 189,000 internally displaced persons and 441,000 people from host communities, including chronically ill people, pregnant and lactating mothers,

severely malnourished children, and injured people.

Assistance will be provided in the form of health services close to where they live, including for general services and trauma; child and nutrition care; reproductive, maternal and new-born care; mental health; and treatment for communicable diseases and life-threatening non-communicable diseases.

“CERF funding will provide additional resources help make our work possible at a time of great need for the people of Yemen,” said Mr. Zagaria.

With only half of health facilities fully functional, 16.4 million people in Yemen require assistance to ensure adequate access to healthcare, with 9.3 million in acute need. Ongoing outbreaks of cholera and diphtheria have underscored the impacts of a failing health system.

Bangladesh ‘fully committed’ to UN peacekeeping as vital element of global peace and security – UN Force Commander



Major General Mohammad Humayun Kabir of Bangladesh, Force Commander of UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) shaking hands with a female peacekeeper. Photo: UNFICYP

7 February – UN peacekeeping is a “very important component” of keeping the world safe and secure, and Bangladesh remains “fully committed” to contributing men – and increasingly women – to serve.

That’s according to Major General Mohammad Humayun Kabir of Bangladesh, who is currently the Force Commander of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus, which goes by the acronym UNFICYP.

Maj. Gen. Humayan began his long and distinguished UN career in the hostile environment of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR), in Bosnia, serving in the capital Sarajevo, which was besieged by Bosnian-Serb forces during the mid-1990s.

He also served as a Military Observer with the UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), from

2002 to 2003.

He has served as Brigadier General and Director of Military Operations for the Bangladesh Army, and is currently Commandant of his country’s Military Academy.

Highlighting Bangladesh’s commitment to foster women peacekeepers and police, and increase the numbers who serve by 2020 and beyond, he told UN News from his base in Cyprus that it was “virtually impossible” to protect civilians who rely on UN peacekeeping missions around the world, without the participation of women.

He said there were 157 Bangladeshi women peacekeepers currently serving, and more than 1,400 had been deployed throughout the world in total over the years, including an all-female Bangladeshi Formed Police Unit that served in Haiti between 2015 and 2017.

“Personally, I believe that it’s very important that you have gender parity, particularly the participation of female peacekeepers,” he said.

He added that in today’s modern “multi-dimensional” peacekeeping missions focussing on civilian protection, “your situational awareness is much better and naturally your performance will also be better.”

He said that majority-Muslim Bangladesh was committed to having what he called a “female engagement platoon” in every mission where they contribute troops and police.

Maj. Gen. Humayan said there was widespread public support for women playing an active role in public service across a wide range of sectors.

Women officers began serving in the Bangladeshi Army back in 2003.

He also praised the “tremendous” support that Bangladeshi blue helmets receive at home, for their work across ten peacekeeping missions, as it currently stands.

“The Bangladesh Government is always more than willing to make sure that the contingents who are deployed; they are properly trained, properly equipped so they are fit for purpose – fit for the mission.”

He said that despite suffering the loss of 135 peacekeepers on active duty over the years, Bangladesh was proud of the fact

that it is consistently among the top three troop-contributing countries, or TCCs.

“Bangladeshi people are aware of what kind of contributions” are being made each day, “ensuring peace and stability in the global perspective, and I think they are very proud of us.”

Kosovo: Despite differences, potential for trust among political leaders remains, Security Council told



Zahir Tanin (on screen), Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), briefs the Security Council. UN Photo/Loey Felipe

7 February – Even though significant differences persist between political leaders in Kosovo, the potential for trust and more forward-looking decision-making to address the challenges there should not be underestimated, a senior United Nations official told the Security Council today.

“I am convinced these leaders have a broader understanding of the nature of the challenges that need to be overcome, and equally, not to continuously postpone action to another day,” said Zahir Tanin, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Kosovo and the head of the UN Interim Administration Mission there (UNMIK), on Wednesday

Briefing the Council via a video-link, the senior UN official also informed Council members of new strategy of the European Union (EU) for the Western Balkans, launched on 6 February, and said it is

“the most ambitious and far-reaching framework for engagement” since 2003.

“2018 can present a new momentum for this dialogue, and as the EU High Representative herself highlighted yesterday, the dialogue could be positively concluded, given sufficient will from the leaders, and adequate encouragement from the international community,” he added.

Further in his briefing, Mr. Tanin stressed the importance of solving the 16 January assassination of one of Kosovo’s most prominent Serbian politicians Oliver Ivanovic.

Identifying those responsible and holding them accountable would prove another important test of the Kosovo institutions, he added.

The senior UN official also spoke of recent examples of cooperation between Pristina and Belgrade, including in the immediate aftermath of the Ivanovic murder and subsequent Kosovo visit of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.

“It is important to note that the leaders in Belgrade and Pristina have reacted to this event in a prompt and responsible manner,” he said

Mr. Tanin also informed the Security Council of ongoing challenges in ensuring the rule of law; strengthening the role of women and youth in politics, responding to the economy and social conditions in Kosovo; and building trust between its communities, and underscored the importance of strong political will and unity to overcome the obstacles.

Let Olympic Flame 'shine as a beacon to human solidarity,' UN says ahead of Pyeongchang Games



The United Nations and the Olympic flags are raised at headquarters shortly before the torch ceremony (June 2004). UN Photo/Evan Schneider

7 February – This week the world will gather in PyeongChang, Republic of Korea, for the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, unified in what United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres called “the Olympic Spirit: in solidarity; mutual respect; and friendly competition.”

“The Olympics and Paralympics showcase the best of the world’s athletic achievements, and the best of humanity,” Mr. Guterres said in a message Wednesday ahead of the opening of the Games, which open on 9 January.

The ancient Greek tradition of the *ekecheira*, or ‘Olympic Truce,’ began in the eighth century B.C., and serves as a hallowed principle of the Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) renewed this tradition in 1992 by calling upon all nations to observe the Truce.

Emphasizing the Truce’s fundamental message that “our common humanity can transcend political differences,” the UN chief said: “This ideal has more resonance than ever on the Korean peninsula,” calling on all parties to conflict to observe the Olympic Truce during the 2018 Games.

Mr. Guterres concluded: “Let the Olympic Flame shine as a beacon to human solidarity. Let the Olympic Truce help spread a culture of peace.”

On 13 November last year, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that urged Member States to observe the Truce individually and collectively throughout the period from the seventh day before the start of the Olympics until the seventh day following the end of the Paralympics.

The Assembly also expressed its expectation that “Pyeongchang 2018 will be a meaningful opportunity to foster an atmosphere of peace, development, tolerance and understanding on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.”

In a statement on 9 January, UN Secretary-General António Guterres welcomed the decision of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to send a delegation to the Olympic Winter Games.

Maldives: Democracy under ‘all-out assault,’ warns UN rights chief



High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

7 February – The declaration of the state of emergency in the Maldives by President Abdulla Yameen and the resulting suspension of constitutional guarantees have undermined the checks and balances necessary in any functioning democracy, the United Nations human rights chief warned Wednesday.

“The suspension of several functions of the judiciary and Parliament, and the restrictions on a series of constitutional rights, create a dangerous concentration of power in the hands of the President,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said in a statement release by his Office (OHCHR).

The state of emergency, which allows a government to perform actions normally not permitted, was declared on 5 February in

response to a Supreme Court order to release and retry nine political leaders, and to reinstate 12 suspended opposition parliamentarians.

Effective, for 15 days, the emergency declaration suspended Parliament's authority to remove the President and the top court's jurisdiction to determine disputes concerning removal of the President. In addition, the entire criminal procedure code has been suspended.

"President Yameen has, to put it bluntly, usurped the authority of the State's rule-of-law institutions and its ability to work independently from the executive," Mr. Zeid said.

"The Maldives have seen in recent years attacks on political opponents, on journalists, on civil society and human right defenders, and what is happening now is tantamount to an all-out assault on democracy," he warned.

Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was arrested on charges, including attempting the overthrow of the Government, and two Supreme Court judges, including the chief justice, have also been detained.

Following the arrest of the two judges, the remaining three judges on Tuesday overturned the Court's previous unanimous ruling ordering the release and retrial of the nine political leaders.