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Olympic message of peace is universal, UN chief says in Pyeongchang

Secretary-General António Guterres (left) and Thomas Bach, President of the IOC, hold a joint press encounter at the IOC office in Pyeongchang, Republic of Korea. UN Photo/Mark Garten

9 February – As the world comes together for the Winter Olympics, which kicked off Friday in Pyeongchang, Republic of Korea, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres called on everyone to recognize and promote the Games' universal message of peace and tolerance.

“The Olympic spirit allows people to be together, from all over the world, to respect each other, to assert the values of tolerance, of mutual understanding that are the basic elements for peace to be possible,” Mr. Guterres told journalists in Pyeongchang.

Obviously, in the present context, he said, there is a lot of attention for this message of peace in relation to the Korean Peninsula, but the Olympic message of peace is not local.

“It is universal. It’s for the world. It is valued in Korea as it is valued everywhere where we struggle to try to address the many complex conflicts that we are facing,” he said.

The UN chief also extended his appreciation and pride to be at the Winter Olympics and highlighted the cooperation between UN and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), as well as the values for which the IOC and its sister organization, the International Paralympic Committee, stand.

The Winter Olympics opened earlier today (local time) with cultural and artistic performances as well as the customary parade of athletes, which was the delegations from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea under one flag, carried together by a sports person from each team.

Olympic torch ‘a symbol of hope’ – UN General Assembly President

Also today, the opening ceremony saw the conclusion of the long journey of the Olympic Torch that started in November 2017.

In the last leg of its journey, the flame was carried, among others, by Miroslav Lajcak, the President of the UN General Assembly and Thomas Bach, the President of the IOC.

Outlining the commonalities between sport and diplomacy – both about peace and bringing people together – Mr. Lajcak highlighted that the Olympic torch is “probably the best symbol in our times in our world.”

“[It] is a symbol of peace, a symbol of youth, a symbol of sport, communication, a symbol of tradition, a symbol of hope.” he said.

Ahead of International Day of Women and Girls in Science, UN calls for smashing stereotypes



The Female Experimental High School in Herat, Afghanistan, benefits from the Education Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP) whose objective is to increase access to quality basic education, especially for girls. Photo: Graham Crouch/World Bank

9 February – It is time to support and invest in women and girls who want to pursue careers in scientific research, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said in a message to mark the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, observed annually on 11 February.

Mr. Guterres said that although both girls and boys have the potential to pursue their ambitions in science and mathematics, in school and at work, systematic discrimination means that women occupy less than 30 per cent of research and development jobs worldwide.

“We need to encourage and support girls and women achieve their full potential as scientific researchers and innovators. Women and girls need this, and the world needs this, if we are to achieve our ambitions for sustainable development on a healthy planet,” he stated.

The UN chief called for “concerted, concrete efforts” to overcome stereotypes and biases, such as media representations of scientists and innovators as being mainly men.

His concerns are being echoed by two other top UN officials.

In a joint statement on the Day, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Audrey Azoulay, and the Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, stressed that such imagery makes it difficult for girls to believe they can be scientists, explorers or inventors, for example.

They said the future will be marked by scientific and technological progress which “will be the greatest when it draws on the full talent, creativity and ideas of women and girls in science.”

They added that the rapidly growing science and technology sectors are “vital” to national economies.

However, UNESCO data shows only around 30 per cent of all female students in higher education select the so-called STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering or mathematics.

One of the main tools for tackling gender inequality in the sciences is dismantling the barriers to girls and women, at home, in the classroom and in the workplace. This requires a change in attitudes and the challenging of stereotypes, they said.

“We need to tackle biased perceptions amongst teachers, employers, peers and parents of the suitability of girls and young women to learn science – or learn at all – to pursue scientific careers or to lead and manage in academic spheres,” the UN officials stressed.

They went on to stress that: “Tackling some of the greatest challenges of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – from improving health to combatting climate change – will rely on harnessing all talent.”

“That means we need to achieve a significant increase in the number of women entering and remaining in STEM careers.”

In December 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that established the annual International Day to recognize the critical role women and girls play in science and technology communities.

Women and children threatened by sexual violence at refugee reception centres in Greek islands – UN



The overcrowded reception centre in Vathy on the Greek island of Samos. Photo: UNHCR/Yorgos Kyvernitis

9 February – Asylum seekers are reporting sexual harassment and violence at some sub-standard reception centres on Greek islands – where even bathing during the daytime can be dangerous – despite Government measures to address the dire living conditions, the United Nations refugee agency warned on Friday.

“In 2017, UNHCR [the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees] received reports from 622 survivors of sexual and gender-based violence on the Greek Aegean islands, out of which at least 28 per cent experienced [such violence] after arriving in Greece,” UNHCR spokesperson Cécile Pouilly said Friday at the regular press briefing in Geneva.

Women reported inappropriate behaviour, sexual harassment and attempted sexual attacks as the most common forms of such violence.

“The situation is particularly worrying in the Reception and Identification Centres (RIC) of Moria (Lesvos) and Vathy (Samos), where thousands of refugees continue to stay in unsuitable shelter with inadequate security,” she added.

Some 5,500 people are in these centres, which is double their intended capacity. Reports of sexual harassment in Moria are particularly high.

“In these two centres,” Ms. Pouilly continued, “bathrooms and latrines are no-go zones after dark for women or children, unless they are accompanied. Even bathing during daytime can be dangerous. In Moria, one woman told our teams that she had not taken a shower in two months from fear.”

Identifying and helping survivors is hampered by a reluctance to report assaults out of discrimination concerns, stigma and retaliation, helplessness and insufficient trust to open up – including to UNHCR and medical and mental health experts from national services. Therefore, the actual number of incidents is likely to be higher than reported.

Over the past weeks, the authorities have accelerated transfers to the mainland, slightly reducing overcrowding, but crowded conditions continue to hinder outreach and prevention activities.

“Insecurity is another problem,” the spokesperson stressed. “Although there are police patrols, these remain insufficient, particularly at night, and don’t cover extended areas adjacent to the RICs, where people stay in tents without any security presence.”

Conditions are also building frustration among people, leading to a difficult and tense security environment, further raising

the risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

While UNHCR welcomes Government measures to reduce the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, further steps must be taken to protect those in reception centres, including children, women and men.

Ms. Pouilly listed the steps, which involved gender separation – including separate shelters and secure and well-lit wash areas; improved conditions and services; greater police presence – with additional policewomen; more lighting in public areas; increased mainland transfers to ease overcrowding; additional staff dedicated to deal with the issue; and enhanced awareness-raising activities.

Exposure to sexual and gender-based violence worsens the already precarious experience of those fleeing war-torn countries and crossing sometimes dangerous territory to reach a safe haven.

“UNHCR will continue to work with and remains ready to support the Government to strengthen its operational response and build capacity, to prevent sexual and gender-based violence and to identify and refer survivors of [such violence] to appropriate services and shelters,” Ms. Pouilly concluded.

Yemen: Raging violence displaces more than 85,000 civilians, says UN refugee agency



Rahaf, 8, and her two-year-old brother Ahmed have been displaced from Taizz governorate since the beginning of the conflict. Photo: UNHCR/Mohammed Hamoud

9 February – Surging violence across Yemen has resulted in the displacement of more than 85,000 people in just the last 10 weeks, the United Nations refugee agency reported Friday.

Yemen is the world’s largest humanitarian crisis with more than 22 million in need, fuelled by ongoing conflict, a breakdown in public services and a collapsing economy.

“We are particularly concerned for those that remain in areas close to hostilities in Taiz and Hudaydah governorates,” said Cécile Pouilly, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told reporters in Geneva, Switzerland.

“As a result of prolonged fighting in those two governorates, conditions continue to deteriorate, exposing people to violence and disease without access to basic services,” she added, noting that the agency was “alarmed” as hundreds of people are forced to flee their homes each day, due to increasing military operations, particularly on the west coast.

Most of those displaced in these two governorates are trapped inside their homes or in caves as ground clashes, aerial bombardment and sniper fire rage around them.

In addition to new displacements from those fleeing the coast, UNHCR is also observing a spike from other frontline areas, including Yemen’s border governorates.

Meanwhile, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has launched an appeal for \$96.2 million to fund its 2018 response for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

“Three years of conflict have inflicted suffering on millions, affecting every Yemeni – man, woman or child,” said William Lacy Swing, the UN migration agency’s Director General, from its headquarters in Geneva.

“With armed conflict ongoing, a stalled peace process and an economic blockade, Yemen is in the grips of a devastating protracted humanitarian and developmental crisis,” he added.

Syria: Life 'living nightmare' for children in East Ghouta, UNICEF chief warns

9 February – Following reports that dozens of children have been killed in violence this week alone in Syria, a senior United Nations official on Friday stressed the need for unconditional evacuations of sick and wounded children from East Ghouta and other sieged areas.

“The violence shows no sign of abating,” said UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Executive Director Henrietta H. Fore in a statement. “For children who remain trapped under siege and under wanton, heavy violence across Syria, life is a **living nightmare**. They are struggling just to stay alive.”

Violence is intensifying in several parts of Syria, and in East Ghouta alone, hundreds of children are in urgent need of medical evacuation, she said, noting that four years of siege have crumbled health and other basic services and over the past few months, malnutrition has increased five-fold.



Children fetch water in the town of Douma in the East Ghouta area of Rural Damascus, Syria. Photo: UNICEF/Bassam Khabieh

Evacuation of sick children 'not a bargaining chip'

“Children, wherever they are in Syria, must have access to healthcare. The evacuation of sick and wounded children from besieged areas should be a given, not part of bargaining efforts,” she warned.

“I am heartbroken by what the children of Syria continue to suffer because of actions taken by adults – actions that show total disregard for the protection, safety and wellbeing of children,” she added.

Protection of children must be paramount at all times, and schools, hospitals and playgrounds should be places of safety, never targets, she stressed, calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities in Syria.