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Warning that 'peace remains elusive,' UN chief outlines areas for action in 2018

Secretary General António Guterres briefs an informal meeting of the General Assembly on his concerns for 2018. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

16 January – Having taken office with a call for peace to be the watchword of 2017, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on Tuesday said the world instead had “gone in reverse,” and that there are critical areas that need action in the New Year, including climate change, the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, the Middle East conflict, and the Rohingya crisis.

“I took office last year calling for us to make 2017 a year for peace. One year later, we must recognize that peace remains elusive,” the Secretary-General said in his informal briefing to the UN Member States on his top concerns for 2018.

He said that conflicts have deepened and new dangers have emerged, global anxieties about nuclear weapons are the highest since the Cold War, and climate change is moving faster than counter-measures.

Further, inequalities are growing, horrific violations of human rights are ongoing, and nationalism, racism and xenophobia are on the rise, he added, stressing the need for greater unity and courage to “set the world on track towards a better future.”

Noting that it is up to Member States to define the priorities of UN action, the Secretary-General went on to highlight some parts of the world requiring attention.

On the Korean Peninsula, Mr. Guterres reiterated the need to avoid sleepwalking into calamity.

To that end, he welcomed the firm decisions the Security Council has taken in response to nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), while also welcoming the reopening of inter-Korean communication channels, especially military-to-military.

He said he was also encouraged by the decision of the DPRK to participate in the upcoming Winter Olympics in the Republic of Korea.

“We need to build on these small signs of hope, and expand diplomatic efforts to achieve the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in the context of regional security,” he said.

On the broader Middle East region, including Yemen, Syria and Iraq, he said the situation has become a Gordian knot, stressing the need for “disentangling the mess.”

“With so many inter-related flashpoints, the risk of an escalatory cycle is real,” he said.

As for the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, there is no alternative to a two-State solution, he stressed.

The UN chief also stressed the need for pushing back the dangerous tide of nationalism in Europe, and the need for revitalizing the relevant mediation initiatives for Eastern Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia and Transnistria.

A concerted effort is also urgently needed for solutions leading to long-term stability in the Western Balkans, he added.

Turning to the need to reverse the large-scale exodus of Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslims, Mr. Guterres called on the Government to ensure unfettered humanitarian access in Rakhine State, and appealed to the international community to support those who have fled to Bangladesh.

Uneven benefits of globalization

Mr. Guterres stressed the need for promoting a true new deal for fair globalization. “It is not by chance that eight people have as much wealth as the poorest half of humankind,” he said.

The workings of the global economy and international trade are the product of human choices. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a bold vision to build prosperous, peaceful societies for all, leaving no one behind. “This work depends crucially on financing,” he said.

The UN chief also underscored the need to greatly increase ambition in the fight against climate change.

“The year 2016 saw the first rise in CO2 emissions in three years. The past five years have been the hottest period on record,” he said, adding that he will convene a climate summit next year to build momentum among the international community for more ambitious reductions in emissions, as well as adaptation and the much-needed energy transition.

On migration, Mr. Guterres said that it is a positive global phenomenon, and therefore the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is an important task for this year.

Regarding technological advances, he said it is important to reap the benefits of the Fourth Industrial Revolution while guarding against the threats.

Technological advances can help provide answers to many of today’s most pressing challenges, but at the same time, technology can exacerbate inequality.

Mr. Guterres also underlined the needs to strengthen African Union-UN partnership, maintain a strong focus on counter-terrorism, strengthen UN peace operations, and overcome the false contradiction between human rights and national sovereignty.

“Human rights and national sovereignty go hand in hand. The achievement of human rights strengthens states and societies, thereby reinforcing sovereignty,” he said.



Empowerment of women – cross-cutting issue

One cross-cutting imperative, he said, is the empowerment of women.

He said he has launched a roadmap for achieving gender parity at all levels of the United Nations, now reaching full parity in the 44 member UN Senior Management Group.

He also explained how he is taking action on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse against women, and preventing and addressing sexual harassment.

“All our challenges – everything, everywhere, demand an investment of time, money, energy, political capital and more. Member States must assume their leadership,” Mr. Guterres said.

“But everyone, everywhere, can do something to make our world more safe, sustainable and secure,” he said.

Resolve differences peacefully, Security Council to DR Congo political actors



A view of downtown Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Photo: MONUSCO/Myriam Asmani

16 January – Voicing serious concern over the continued political impasse and violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the United Nations Security Council has called upon all political actors to exercise maximum restraint and to address their differences peacefully.

In a statement issued to the press on Tuesday, Council members reiterated that effective, swift and timely implementation of the 31 December 2016 Agreement and the recently adopted electoral timeline, are essential for a peaceful and credible electoral process, a democratic transition of power, and the peace and stability of the DRC, as well as in supporting the legitimacy of the transitional institutions.

In that context, the Council underscored the need “to do everything possible to ensure that the elections on 23 December 2018 are organized with the requisite conditions of transparency, credibility and inclusivity, including the full and equal participation of women at all stages, as well as the importance of youth engagement.”

Further in the statement, the Council underscored the need for the Government to swiftly and fully investigate the killing of the two members of the Group of Experts and bring those responsible to justice.

Experts Michael Sharp (United States) and Zaida Catalan (Sweden) were abducted in the DRC on 12 March. Their remains were recovered by peacekeepers from the UN Mission in the country (known by its French acronym, MONUSCO) on 27 March outside the city of Kananga in the Kasai-Central province.

Also in the statement, the members of the Security Council expressed concerns over the humanitarian situation in the DRC and noting that it had reached “catastrophic levels” in some parts of the country, called on UN Member States to scale up funding to urgently respond to the pressing humanitarian needs in the country.

The statement by the 15-member Council follows a briefing it heard by Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, last Tuesday on the political, human rights, security and humanitarian situation in the country.

Nearly every child in war-torn Yemen now needs humanitarian aid – UNICEF

16 January – As the brutal conflict in Yemen nears its grim third anniversary, malnutrition and disease are running rampant in the country and virtually every child there is dependent on humanitarian aid to survive, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said on Tuesday.

“An entire generation of children in Yemen is growing up knowing nothing but violence,” said Meritxell Relano, the head of UNICEF operations in the war-torn country, underlining the gravity of the crisis.

“Malnutrition and disease are rampant as basic services collapse. Those who survive are likely to carry the physical and psychological scars of conflict for the rest of their lives,” she stated.

Since the escalation of violence in March 2015, when conflict broke out between forces loyal to President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and those allied to the Houthi rebel movement, Yemen, already the poorest in the region, has been left on the verge of a humanitarian collapse.

Hospitals, medical facilities as well as water and sanitation systems have been rendered inoperable across large parts of the country, and humanitarian assistance is the lifeline for over three-fourths of the country's population.

Born into War

This dire situation in Yemen, has perhaps had the worst impact on the three million children born in country since the conflict erupted.

In its latest report, *Born into War – 1,000 Days of Lost Childhood*, UNICEF notes that 30 per cent of that number were born premature, another 30 percent had low birth weight and 25,000 died at birth or within the first month of life.

Furthermore, more than half of all children in Yemen lack access to safe drinking water or adequate sanitation, children-under-five represent over a quarter of all cases of cholera and acute watery diarrhoea. An additional 1.8 million children are estimated to be acutely malnourished, including nearly 400,000 severe acutely malnourished children “fighting for their lives” adds the report.

The report calls on all parties to the conflict, those with influence on them and the global community to prioritize the protection of children in Yemen by putting an immediate end to violence and reaching a peaceful political solution.

It also calls for sustainable and unconditional humanitarian across the country and lifting of restrictions on imports of goods into Yemen as well as for sustained and sufficient funding for aid programmes.



With up to 20 people sharing a room, diseases such as measles and respiratory infections are a significant threat in Yemen, especially for children already reeling from malnutrition and dealing with inadequate water and sanitation facilities. Photo: OCHA/Eman

Dire situation for Rohingya children could become 'catastrophic,' as new threats loom – UNICEF

16 January – As the Bay of Bengal region gears up for cyclone and monsoon seasons, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is warning that more than half-a-million Rohingya children already living in "horrific" conditions in makeshift settlements in Bangladesh may face compounded risks of disease and displacement.

"What is already a dire humanitarian situation risks becoming a catastrophe," Edouard Beigbeder, the head of UNICEF programmes in Bangladesh said Tuesday, raising alarm over the impact of the approaching cyclone and monsoon seasons.

"Hundreds of thousands of children are already living in horrific conditions, and they will face an even greater risk of disease, flooding, landslides and further displacement."

According to the UN agency, an outbreak of diphtheria in the camps has already claimed some 32 lives, including at least of 24 children, with more than 4,000 suspected cases reported.

To contain the outbreak and save lives, UN agencies, including UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), and relief partners are working to vaccinate close to 500,000 children against diphtheria.

But lack of medical services and limited water and sanitation facilities in many settlements, combined with overcrowding, and growing risk of heavy rains and storms could complicate the situation even further.

Diphtheria

Diphtheria is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Corynebacterium diphtheria*. The illness has an acute onset and is fatal in 5-10% of cases, with a higher mortality rate in young children.

"Unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene conditions can lead to cholera outbreaks and to Hepatitis E, a deadly disease for pregnant women and their babies, while standing water pools can attract malaria-carrying mosquitos. Keeping children safe from disease must be an absolute priority," Mr. Beigbeder added.

Since 25 August, widespread violence in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state has forced over 650,000 members of the Rohingya community to flee their homes and seek shelter across the border in Bangladesh. A number of UN agencies, together with humanitarian partners and the Bangladesh Government have been providing them with life-saving support.

Choice to return home should be that of refugees themselves – UNHCR

Meanwhile, amid reports of discussions between the Governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar concerning the return of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said that the returns should be voluntary.

"UNHCR underscores the importance of the dialogue between the two States at the core of which is the right of refugees to voluntarily return home," a spokesperson for the UN agency told the press at a regular briefing in Geneva, Tuesday.

The spokesperson, Andrej Mahecic, also informed the media that some Rohingya refugees told UNHCR staff that, before considering return to Myanmar, they would need to see "positive developments" in relation to their legal status and citizenship, the security situation in Rakhine state, and their ability to enjoy basic rights back home.



A seven-year-old Rohingya girl carries a pot of water to her family's makeshift shelter after filling it at a hand operated water pump at the Bormapara makeshift settlement in Ukhia, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo: UNICEF/Sujan

“To ensure that the refugees are heard and their protection guaranteed in Bangladesh and on return in Myanmar, we are willing to be part of these discussions,” added Mr. Mahecic.

He also underscored that the comprehensive implementation of the recommendations made by the Kofi Annan-led Rakhine Advisory Commission is essential to ensure sustainable return.

These stress the importance of ensuring peace and security for all communities in Rakhine state, reducing communal divisions, and achieving solutions for the legal and citizenship status of Muslim communities, added the UNHCR spokesperson.

He also underlined the need for urgent and unhindered access across Rakhine state for UN agencies and its partners to assess the situation, provide support to those in need who and to help with rebuilding efforts.

Syria: Uptick in violence exacerbates already dire situation, says UN food relief agency



Inter-agency convoy to Duma, east Ghouta in the buffer-zone crossing the conflict line. Photo: OCHA/Ghalia Seifo (file)

16 January – On top of the already-desperate conditions in Syria’s war-ravaged East Ghouta and north-west Idlib governorate, a violence upsurge is intensifying insecurity, the United Nations food relief agency said Tuesday.

“Since the end of last year, airstrikes have destroyed numerous civilian buildings, killing hundreds of people in both places and, in the case of Idlib, displacing some 100,000 people,” said UN World Food Programme (WFP) Senior Communications Officer Bettina Luescher at the regular press briefing in Geneva.

In Idlib, armed clashes between Government forces, their allies and opposition armed groups have intensified, with insecurity also spreading to parts of northeast Hama, western rural Aleppo and southern Idlib – forcing 100,000 people to abandon their homes near the frontline and move towards safer areas. Conditions in Idlib are dire, with many displaced people forced to stay out in the open during the winter period.

“WFP had assisted a total of 70,000 displaced people in Idlib in December and January with ready-to-eat, five-day rations; [and] there were plans to distribute additional ready-to-eat rations in the coming days,” Ms. Luescher said, adding that WFP had prepositioned over 27,000 rations in Idlib and Aleppo, and that emergency supply shipments from Turkey were also ongoing.

WFP and partners are also conducting needs assessments there.

Fighting continues in the besieged enclave of Eastern Ghouta where nearly 400,000 people are living in dire conditions suffering severe food, fuel and drinking water shortages.

“A total of 417,000 people were currently living under siege in Syria, with the largest proportion of them in besieged areas of Eastern Ghouta, where almost 400,000 people lived,” Ms. Luescher continued, adding: “WFP access to Eastern Ghouta had been severely restricted for the past five years, allowing only a trickle of aid to reach families in need.”

In 2017, WFP had helped to deliver food assistance for 110,000 people in 13 parts of the enclave.

She called ending the seven-year conflict “the single greatest priority,” noting that it continues to push “ever-more people into hunger and misery.”

WFP appealed to all parties to protect civilians, respect humanitarian principles and allow the safe delivery of food to families in need, no matter where they were.