

**In the headlines:**

- One-in-four Iraqi children impacted by conflict, poverty; education key for lasting peace – UNICEF
- Central Africa's iconic mammals threatened by poachers, armed groups – UN environment wing
- More flee Cameroon's English-speaking areas; UN concerned over safety of women and children
- UN chief spotlights potential offered by cooperation among countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan
- Syria: UN rights officials decry 'devastating' impact of surging violence on civilians
- Millions of children's lives hang in the balance as South Sudan conflict grinds on – UNICEF chief

One-in-four Iraqi children impacted by conflict, poverty; education key for lasting peace – UNICEF

Women and children walk through the debris of buildings and vehicles destroyed during intense fighting as they flee for safe areas in Mosul, Iraq. Photo: UNICEF/Romenzi

19 January – More than four million children have been impacted by extreme violence in Iraq, many robbed of their childhood and forced to fight on the frontlines, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said Friday.

"Last year alone, 270 children were killed," said UNICEF Regional Director Geert Cappelaere following a recent visit.

"Some will bear the physical and psychological scars for life due to exposure to unprecedented brutality," he added, pointing out that over one million children were forced to leave their homes.

Today, Iraq hosts one of UNICEF's largest operations in the world, responding with humanitarian and development assistance to the needs of the most vulnerable girls and boys across the country.

Violence is not only killing and maiming children; it is destroying schools, hospitals, homes and roads. It is tearing apart the diverse social fabric and the culture of tolerance that hold communities together.

"In one of the schools that UNICEF recently rehabilitated in the western parts of Mosul, I joined 12-year-old Noor in class. She told me how her family stayed in the city even during the peak of the fighting. She spoke of her fear when she was taking shelter. She lost three years of schooling and is now working hard to catch up, learning English with other boys and girls," Mr. Cappelaere

Poverty and conflict have interrupted the education for three million children across Iraq. Some have never been inside a classroom.

Over a quarter of all children in Iraq live in poverty, with children in southern and rural areas most affected over the past decades.



“As Iraq prepares for elections and the International Summit for Iraq, there is no better moment to prioritize the interests of children, stop the violence and break the cycle of poverty and deprivation,” stressed Mr. Cappelaere.

UNICEF appealed to authorities in Iraq and the international community to end all forms of violence so children and their families can live in safety and dignity; continue providing humanitarian and recovery assistance, including to those in camps and informal settlements; and massively step up immediate and long-term investments in education.

“The children of Iraq, like all children around the world have the right to learn and aspire to a better tomorrow. The children of today are tomorrow’s teachers, doctors, engineers and scientists. Investing in them now is an investment in Iraq’s future,” he underscored.

The International Summit for Iraq, hosted by Kuwait from 12-14 February, offers an opportunity for Iraq and the international community to strengthen commitments to the country’s children – specifically by increasing budgets allocated to supporting children.

“Member States and the private sector should turn financial pledges into concrete commitments for children. This is fundamental for rebuilding a peaceful and prosperous Iraq away from the vicious cycles of violence and intergenerational poverty,” emphasized Mr. Cappelaere.

Central Africa’s iconic mammals threatened by poachers, armed groups – UN environment wing

19 January – Elephants, giraffes, rhinos and other magnificent mammals targeted in wildlife conservation areas of Central Africa are under threat of extinction, caught in the crosshairs of armed groups and highly-militarized poachers, the United Nations environment wing warned on Friday.

“The importance of engaging local communities in fighting poaching, and of enhancing their alternative livelihoods, has now been widely recognized across various national, regional and global fora” said Bianca Notarbartolo of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

“But such commitments have yet to be matched by enough effective implementation,” she added.

UNEP’s warning comes in the wake of the release last month by the non-governmental organization Traffic of a report reflecting the grim reality the negative impact of armed groups on wildlife in Central Africa.

As recently as three decades ago, thousands of elephants strode majestically across the wildlife conservation areas of Central Africa. Today, their population has been decimated, according the 2017 report.

In the 1980s, the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s Garamba National Park was home to 20,000 elephants. That number has dwindled to an estimated 1,100 – 1,400 today.

The situation appears even grimmer for the giraffes. In many African societies, the flywhisk, usually made from the animal’s tail, is a symbol of authority. The flywhisk from the Kordofan giraffe is particularly prized, putting this species in danger from poachers and other armed groups. Consequently, only about 40 giraffes remain in the Garamba Park.

Some of the armed non-State groups and militia operating in the restive region include Sudan’s Janjaweed militia, Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army, Central African Republic’s rival Anti-Balaka and Seleka fighters, as well as Sudan’s People’s Liberation-In Opposition and poachers – making conservation a dangerous undertaking.



In recent years poaching levels have soared and three rhinos are killed every day. Photo: UNEP GRID Arendal/Peter Prokosch

Chimpanzees have also not been spared from the onslaught. The population of eastern chimpanzees in eastern the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) has declined by 80 to 98 per cent, mainly because of poaching for bushmeat – attributed to demand for protein, particularly intense around artisanal mining and logging camps.

The dual effect of insufficient nutrition, coupled with mining pollution is likely to exacerbate the threat to the region's biodiversity, resulting in a downward spiral that could jeopardize future livelihoods of numerous local communities.

In May 2016, UNEP and other UN partners launched the Wild For Life campaign, which has been raising awareness, promoting the enactment and enforcement of laws, and increasing support for efforts by local communities to halt the illegal trade in wildlife. Elephants and Rhinos are among the species targeted by the campaign.

“Strengthening the role of local communities in wildlife management should be at the centre of any strategy to combat illegal trade in wildlife and to secure wildlife and biodiversity for the future,” stressed Ms. Notarbartolo.

More flee Cameroon's English-speaking areas; UN concerned over safety of women and children



Cameroonian families seek refuge in Utanga, Obanliku, Nigeria, after fleeing insecurity in English-speaking parts of their homeland. Photo: UNHCR/Elizabeth Mpimbaza

19 January – As swelling numbers of people flee English-speaking areas of Cameroon for Nigeria, the United Nations on Friday expressed concern over the precarious situation of women and children, which make now up about 80 per cent of the approximately 10,000 registered refugees in eastern Nigeria's Cross River state.

“Some of these are boys and girls who fled to Nigeria alone,” William Spindler, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told reporters at the regular press briefing in Geneva, adding that unaccompanied and separated children are particularly vulnerable.

“UNHCR has received numerous reports that children have to work or beg to survive or to help their families,” he added.

Many reported that they were unable to attend school, for lack of time and money. Thousands more are among the population of unregistered Cameroonians in neighbouring states, where some of the children are unaccompanied and vulnerable.

“UNHCR is working with the Nigerian authorities to assist with the reunification of separated children with their families, to provide unaccompanied children with protection services and to restore the basic right of all children to education,” Mr. Spindler said.

Some of the children fleeing to Nigeria told UNHCR that they had been out of school in Cameroon for all of 2017.

“For women, the lack of work combined with the over-stretched reception facilities, creates a higher risk of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly from survival sex,” he continued.

While only a limited number of cases have been recorded, mainly in the Amana community of Cross River state, UNHCR is concerned that many more go unreported or are referred only to community elders.

“Incidents of domestic violence, as well as cases of teenage pregnancies involving girls as young as 14, have also been reported,” the spokesperson elaborated.

In Nigeria's Benue state, two school buildings are serving as temporary refugee accommodations, where women and their families sleep inside communal school halls – deprived of private space and the right to family dignity.

“For them, and for the rest of the population living in temporary tents hastily built next to local residences, sufficient and appropriate shelter is key to ensure adequate registration, systematic aid distribution and reduced protection risks,” Mr. Spindler underscored.

UNHCR and the Nigerian authorities are currently working to identify sites away from the border, where the refugees can live according to international standards.

“We are also establishing offices in the towns of Calabar and Adikpo to better provide assistance and protection to the women and children,” he said, noting that support includes food, basic relief items, water and sanitation facilities.

Since mid-2017, Cameroon’s Anglophone regions have seen demonstrations as tensions have mounted over what the country’s English-speakers see as discrimination against them in favour of the majority French-speaking population.

UN chief spotlights potential offered by cooperation among countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan

19 January – The threats of violent extremism and transnational organized crime in Afghanistan reverberate across Central Asia and the world and countering them cannot be the responsibility of one country alone, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said Friday, urging regional and multilateral cooperation, based firmly on human rights.

“Regional cooperation offers opportunities to address common concerns, including counter-terrorist financing, improving border security, fostering dialogue with religious institutions and leaders, and countering human trafficking and drug smuggling,” said the Secretary-General, briefing a Security Council meeting on building regional partnership in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Convened by Kazakhstan in its capacity as the President of the Security Council for the month of January, the ministerial-level debate was chaired by the country’s Foreign Minister, Kairat Abdrakhmanov.

The debate was addressed by other senior ministers from the region, including: Abdulaziz Kamilov, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan; Erlan Abdyldaev, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan; Sirodjidin Aslov, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan; and Hekanat Khalil Karzai, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan. The day-long session will focus on the link between security and development and the need to integrate the economies of Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbours.

“With greater regional cooperation and investment, Central Asia and Afghanistan have the potential to become symbols of dialogue, peace, and the promotion of contacts between cultures, religions and civilizations,” Mr. Guterres continued.

The Secretary-General also highlighted significant opportunities for intra-regional trade and said that even “modest” improvements can result in substantial gains for all the people of the region.

In that context, he noted ongoing recent intensification of cooperation between Central Asian governments on water resources through bilateral water commissions and agreements.

“These developments hold important lessons for Afghanistan, where water-dependent farming and agriculture make up nearly half the economy,” he said, noting also developments in energy cooperation and projects on strengthening trade and transport connectivity.



Secretary-General António Guterres (left), alongside Kairat Abdrakhmanov, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, briefs the Security Council on building regional partnerships in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Credit: UN Photo/Manuel Elias

Mr. Guterres went on to underscore the importance of sustainable development to enable communities and societies flourish and fulfil their potential and in that context, urged Governments to make education, vocational training and jobs “an absolute priority” in national and regional development cooperation.

Inclusive and sustainable development, he underlined, is vital to preventing and ending conflict, and in sustaining peace.

“Only by addressing the root causes of crisis, including inequality, exclusion and discrimination, will we build peaceful societies resilient to terrorism and violent extremism,” added the Secretary-General.

Concluding his remarks, Mr. Guterres also spoke of the work of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in supporting the region and countries.

“The entire UN family stands ready to assist in promoting greater cooperation and integration among the countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan, toward achieving the goals of peace, sustainable development, stability and security,” he said.

Syria: UN rights officials decry ‘devastating’ impact of surging violence on civilians



A street in Douma, Eastern Ghouta, Syria. Photo: UNICEF/Amer Al Shami

19 January – Concerned over the devastating impact of escalating violence in Syria, where dozens of people in eastern Ghouta have been killed in recent airstrikes, and schools and hospitals are being deliberately destroyed, senior United Nations officials have underscored the obligation on all parties to the conflict, and the international community, to protect civilians from atrocity crimes.

“We cannot stand by silently in the face of indiscriminate violence and violations of international human rights and humanitarian law,” said Adama Dieng the UN Special Adviser on Prevention of Genocide, and Ivan Simonovic, the UN Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, in a statement issued Thursday.

“We urge all stakeholders, including the Security Council, to condemn this violence, and we urge the parties to the conflict to ensure that basic principles of humanitarian law are protected, in particular with regards to proportionality and distinction.”

The worst impact of fighting has been felt in eastern Ghouta (near the capital, Damascus) and Idlib (in the north-west of the country) – both designated as de-escalation areas under the Astana process, were “civilians should expect a minimum level of safety,” added the statement.

However, since mid-November 2017, the estimated 393,000 people in eastern Ghouta have been subjected to airstrikes, shelling and bombardment on an almost daily basis by Government forces and their allies. Rockets fired by armed opposition groups in eastern Ghouta into residential areas of Damascus have reportedly further aggravated the situation.

In southern Idlib and northern rural Hama, where fighting between government forces and armed opposition groups – which control a majority of the Idlib governorate – has escalated since December, over 200,000 civilians have been displaced and numerous people have been killed.

In addition to civilians, medical facilities too have come under attack.

Between 3 and 10 January, at least four health care facilities and two education facilities have reportedly been attacked, added the statement.

In the statement, Mr. Dieng and Mr. Simonovic, underscored that indiscriminate attacks or those directly target civilians or civilian objects are a violation of fundamental principles of international humanitarian law.

“All actors involved in the conflict in Syria have an obligation to ensure that these fundamental principles are respected,” underscored the statement.

Across war-ravaged Syria, more than six million people are internally displaced, many displaced multiple times, and more than five million Syrians have been forced as refugees in other countries.

At the same time, estimates indicate that more than half of the country’s basic infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed, and over 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, as a result of the seven-year conflict – now longer than World War II.

Millions of children's lives hang in the balance as South Sudan conflict grinds on – UNICEF chief



In South Sudan, UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta H. Fore (left) and UNICEF Head of Nutrition Joseph Senesie (in blue) speak with patients at Al Sabbah Hospital, where UNICEF is implementing a nutrition programme, in Juba, the capital. Photo: UNICEF/Prinsloo

19 January – Following a two-day visit to conflict-ravaged South Sudan, where a quarter of a million children are severely malnourished and at imminent risk of death, the head of the United Nations children’s agency has said only an end to hostilities can bring back hope and safety to the children and young people there.

“I have just spent two days in South Sudan where I saw first-hand how four years of a man-made conflict have left children sick, hungry and on the brink of death,” Henrietta H. Fore, the Executive Director of the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), said Thursday in the capital, Juba, as she wrapped up her visit.

She said the impact of the relentless violence has been devastating. She recalled meeting a mother who had to walk for days to get treatment for her malnourished baby. Recounting another grim incident, Ms. Fore said she had spoken with a young boy who was

forced to join an armed group at the age of 10.

At the same time, she said, she saw “signs of hope” emanating from the families experiencing the horror.

“UNICEF and other aid agencies are working on the ground in some of the most dangerous conditions to provide children and young people with their basic needs. This is no small feat,” she said, describing South Sudan “the most dangerous place in the world for humanitarians” as 28 aid workers were killed last year alone.

Forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and his former Vice-President Riek Machar, have been battling for the past five years, turning what began in 2013 as a political rivalry into all out conflict that, according to the UN relief wing, has left some seven million people in need of assistance and protection, and forced more than two million to flee to neighbouring countries.

Ms. Fore noted that the fighting shows no sign of abating and the humanitarian needs are massive: 2.4 million children have been forced to flee their homes. More than a quarter of a million children are severely malnourished and at imminent risk of death. Over 19,000 children have been recruited into the conflict. At least one in three schools has been damaged, destroyed, occupied or closed. More than 1,200 cases of sexual violence against children have been documented.

“The numbers go on and on. Together they equal an entire generation of young people denied the opportunities they so desperately need to contribute to building their society,” she said.

As the dry season approaches, the needs – and threats – will only continue to grow.

“Only an end to hostilities can bring back hope and safety to the children and young people of South Sudan. Until then, we need unconditional, sustainable access from parties to the conflict and more resources from donors,” she said. “Without these, the lives and futures of millions of children in South Sudan will continue to hang in the balance.”