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Ashraf Qazi named as new UN envoy for Sudan

4 September - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced today that Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, currently his Special Representative in Iraq, will become his new Special Representative for Sudan, where the United Nations is working to relieve the crisis in Darfur and to improve the post-conflict situation in the south of the vast country.



SRSR Ashraf Qazi

Mr. Qazi, from Pakistan, will succeed Jan Pronk of the Netherlands, who left the post last year.

Born in 1942, Mr. Qazi had a long career with the Pakistani diplomatic service before he joined the UN in July 2004, including stints as his country's ambassador to the United States, India, China, Russia, the then East Germany and Syria.

Announcing the appointment in Juba, southern Sudan, during a joint press conference with the President of Southern Sudan, Salva Kiir, Mr. Ban cited Mr. Qazi's diplomatic skills and his lengthy experience in making the selection.

Mr. Ban is currently on his first visit to Sudan to "lock in progress" made so far to end the crisis in Darfur and to observe first-hand the situation on the ground ahead of the deployment of a massive joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping operation.

That force, to be known as UNAMID, will have some 26,000 peacekeepers at full deployment to quell the violence in Darfur. At least 200,000 people have died and more than two million others forced to flee their homes since 2003 in the impoverished region on Sudan's western flank because of fighting between rebel groups, Sudanese Government forces and

allied Janjaweed militias.

In the south, the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) is working to implement the January 2005 comprehensive peace agreement ending a separate north-south civil war that raged for two decades.

Ban Ki-moon welcomes Sudanese move to allow ill Darfurian leader to travel



Ban Ki-moon (L) and President Al-Bashir

4 September - The Sudanese Government has allowed the United Nations to arrange for the travel of a key Darfurian elder and former rebel group figure to Kenya for medical treatment, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced today after meeting with Sudan's President during his visit to the country.

Mr. Ban said the decision by President Omar al-Bashir to allow Suleiman Jamous, a former member of the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM), one of Darfur's many rebel groups, to leave the country will "create conditions conducive to peace negotiations."

Earlier this month, UN and African Union (AU) envoys Jan Eliasson and Salim Ahmed Salim vowed to pursue the case of Mr. Jamous, who had been detained by Sudanese authorities, "in view of the role Mr. Jamous can play in the political process."

Full-fledged peace talks between the Sudanese Government and Darfur's rebel groups are expected to be staged later this year, possibly by as early as next month, in a bid to resolve the underlying issues – including a lack of economic development – driving the conflict that since 2003 has led to the deaths of more than 200,000 people.

Another 2.2 million Sudanese have had to flee their homes because of the fighting between the rebels, Government forces and allied militias known as the Janjaweed. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued warrants for the arrest of two suspects over alleged war crimes in Darfur, and the UN and AU have announced they are setting up a hybrid peacekeeping force (to be known as UNAMID) to try to quell the violence.

Last night, Mr. Ban held a working dinner with Mr. Bashir at the presidential guesthouse in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, before he headed today to Juba in southern Sudan.

There he met with Salva Kiir, the President of Southern Sudan and the First Vice President of Sudan, to discuss the implementation of the January 2005 comprehensive peace agreement that ended the long-running north-south civil war.

"It is crucially important that we implement this comprehensive peace agreement," he said. "For that to be possible, it is again important that leaders of both north and south Sudan, President Bashir and President Kiir, are fully committed and closely coordinate."

Mr. Ban stressed that he was well aware of several remaining issues at dispute, such as demarcation, the redeployment of forces and the status of the area around Abyei, but he hoped "a strong political commitment" from both sides could resolve any impasse.

The Secretary-General also met with key local officials and with some of the staff of the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) that was set up to help implement the comprehensive peace agreement.

In an address to Juba University, Mr. Ban acknowledged that "there is still a long way to go before southern Sudan can fully recover from decades of conflict and insufficient development" and asked the people of the region to "work as hard for peace as you did to uphold the rights of the people of southern Sudan all these years."

Thousands more civilians flee new clashes in eastern DR Congo, UN reports

4 September - Thousands of Congolese civilians are on the move in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) strife-torn North Kivu province, fleeing their homes amid reports of renewed fighting, cases of rape, and rising tensions between Government forces, renegade troops and rebel groups, the United Nations refugee agency reported today.



Displaced people leaving North Kivu

“We fear that the pursuit of a military solution to the problems in North Kivu would further worsen the province's humanitarian crisis through the potential displacement of hundreds of thousands of additional Congolese civilians,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesman Ron Redmond told a news briefing in Geneva.

“We again call on all parties to the conflict in North Kivu to refrain from direct attacks and atrocities against the civilian population, and displaced people in particular.”

Voicing deep concern, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called on the Government and all local stakeholders to persevere in their efforts to bring about a peaceful solution.

A statement issued by his spokesperson said Mr. Ban was “very concerned by the impact of the fighting on local populations and calls on all parties to ensure the protection of the vulnerable. He urges all stakeholders in the region to focus on resolving the underlying causes of the crisis through dialogue,” it added.

In Kinshasa, the DRC capital, the top UN humanitarian relief official, Under-Secretary-General John Holmes, today discussed the situation with the country's Foreign Minister, UN agencies and the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC).

UNHCR reported that over the weekend and yesterday an inter-agency team found large groups of newly displaced people making their way on foot from Rubaya and other Masisi villages towards the town of Sake and the nearby Mugunga site for internally displaced persons (IDPs), 15 kilometres west of Goma, North Kivu's capital.

The newly displaced carried few belongings, mostly packed in bundles on their backs. Many said they left their homes fearing the ongoing military build-up in the area, although they had not witnessed direct fighting. Some have reported cases of rape and killings of civilians by armed men, Mr. Redmond said.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted that overall more than 1 million people in the DRC have been uprooted due to armed confrontations and the presence of armed groups. The majority are in North Kivu (640,000), South Kivu (266,000) and the north-eastern district of Ituri (152,000). Since the beginning of the year, up to 224,000 people have been displaced in North Kivu.

Eastern DRC remains the most violent region in the vast country, where MONUC has overseen the transition from a six-year civil war that cost 4 million lives in fighting and attendant hunger and disease – widely considered the most lethal conflict in the world since World War II – to gradual stabilization, culminating in the first democratic elections in over four decades last year, the largest and most complex polls the UN has ever helped to organize.

UNHCR is discussing the possibility of a new displacement site near Mugunga, which currently has as many as 18,000 people. On Friday, for example, at a school near Mugunga was reported to hold 600 IDPs seeking shelter in over-crowded conditions. “Our team reports there are now more than 2,500 people there,” Mr. Redmond said.

“Unaccompanied children are also among the displaced, as well as parents desperately looking for their children,” he added.

“The full scale of displacement is difficult to gauge as we and other humanitarian agencies face increasingly limited access to many areas in Masisi and Rutshuru districts. We fear there may be many more in areas we cannot reach. A growing number of Congolese are seeking shelter at more than 20 spontaneous IDP sites scattered across the province.”

In a related development, some 10,000 Congolese crossed into Uganda's Kisoro district yesterday evening, saying they were fleeing fighting between the DRC military and renegade troops. By this morning, the majority had already begun returning home. Due to general insecurity in North Kivu, especially at night, such rapid population movements are relatively frequent.

UN rushes aid ahead of anticipated damage wreaked by Hurricane Felix

4 September - The United Nations has begun deploying aid and assistance to the areas in Central America expected to suffer from the destruction that Hurricane Felix – which made landfall in Nicaragua this morning – could leave in its wake.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said that Nicaraguan authorities suspended school in the town of Bilwi and evacuated other local communities, while temporary shelters have been built on higher ground in the area where the hurricane, which has since been downgraded from Category 5, struck. The agency estimates that as many as 50,000 families in the country could be affected by the hurricane.

“What we are really concerned about is the communities further north, because they are very isolated indigenous communities,” said UNICEF Representative in Nicaragua Debora Comini. “The living conditions are very basic and there's no infrastructure to withstand this kind of wind and rain.”

The agency said that warnings and evacuations have been announced in all countries potentially impacted by Hurricane Felix and that pre-positioned water, shelter, water treatment stations and first aid kits are ready if necessary.

Ms. Comini predicted that water and sanitation could be severely affected, and also noted that food distribution will be crucial in the long-term as “many of the crops are likely to be ruined.”

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) announced that it will send emergency teams and that it has enough food stocks in the region to feed 600,000 people for one month.

“Right now Hurricane Felix is a moving target and it's difficult to predict with precision which countries will ultimately bear the impact of its destructive force,” said WFP Deputy Regional Director Gordana Jerger. “The result is that we have to be extremely flexible in our planning and to expect the worst. We just can't take chances.”

WFP is prepared to transport both staff and supplies via air and by land, basing a key operational centre in El Salvador, where the agency's sub-regional logistics base is located, and in Panama, home to its regional office. It is also considering using a ship to transport supplies along the coast of Honduras and Belize.

The region has already been battered by heavy rains and there are concerns that widespread landslides, such as those resulting from 2005's Hurricane Stan, may occur, which could make roads inoperable and impede aid efforts.

WFP fears that Belize City could sustain as much damage as it did by Hurricane Hattie in 1961, which leveled 40 per cent of all buildings. The agency continues to provide assistance to 5,000 people in Belize in the wake of Hurricane Dean two weeks ago, distributing two-month rations of rice, pulses, high energy biscuits, vegetable oil and salt.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) today sent a six-member UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team to Honduras in support of the world body's Country Team and the local Government to coordinate international assistance and assess urgent needs, UN spokesperson Michele Montas told reporters in New York.

Senior UN official hails Lebanese seizure of refugee camp

4 September - A senior United Nations official welcomed the Lebanese army's full seizure over the weekend of the Nahr el-Bared camp, which has been the scene of months of intense combat with Fatah el-Islam gunmen.

“The Lebanese army has extinguished this serious threat posed by Fatah el-Islam to Lebanon's independence, sovereignty

and stability,” said UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir O. Pedersen said, noting that over 150 Lebanese soldiers died “to uphold these principles.”

“The fight against Fatah el-Islam in Nahr el-Bared was a fight of both Lebanese and Palestinians against terrorism and is a victory for all of Lebanon,” he noted.

The humanitarian obstacles facing Palestinian families displaced by the violence must be tackled, while the efforts must be intensified to rapidly reconstruct the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp and support Lebanese communities affected by the conflict, the Special Coordinator said.

Mr. Pedersen said he gives his full support to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora’s call for a donor meeting in the capital Beirut on 10 September.

He also conveyed the UN’s condolences to the families of the soldiers and civilians killed, and expressed wishes for a speedy recovery to the injured.

Before the fighting began in late May, the camp in northern Lebanon was home to nearly 31,000 people, including about 8,000 classified by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) as special hardship cases.

UN seeks to build on reconciliation efforts in Iraq



SRSG Ashraf Qazi

4 September - The top UN official in Iraq is to explore with the Government and a full range of political leaders the activities that the United Nations can undertake to promote national dialogue and reconciliation following recent political developments.

In a statement issued by the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s Special Representative Ashraf Qazi welcomed the agreement and statements on reconciliation made by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and several political leaders late last month.

He also welcomed the decision by Shiite cleric Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr to suspend the activities of his Jaysh ul Mehdi movement and voiced the hope that these developments would help bring about an environment in which violence could be reduced and progress made in national dialogue and reconciliation.

Mr. Qazi noted that last month’s adoption of Security Council resolution 1770 extending and expanding UNAMI’s mandate “clearly highlights the importance of national reconciliation among Iraq’s different political and ethnic groups.”

Meanwhile, UN agencies are supporting another massive effort to deliver critical polio vaccinations to 4.8 million Iraqi children, even in the country’s remote areas. Almost 20,000 vaccinators will participate in this week’s house-to-house drive, set to last five days.

Their goal is to deliver oral polio vaccine (OPV) to children wherever they live, travelling by boat, car and on foot. Teams will also be working in every vaccination hospital and primary health care centre across the country to immunize children against the highly infectious and incurable paralytic disease that mostly affects the young.

Conflict and insecurity have regrettably made mass campaigns such as this critical to maintain immunity against infectious diseases.

But the challenges facing the campaign from conflict and insecurity are greater than ever. During the last campaign in December only half as many children were immunized in parts of Baghdad and Diyala province as against the national average of 91 per cent.

Reaching the most vulnerable and displaced children this time round is critical, said the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), which is supporting the campaign together with the UN World Health Organization (WHO).



“We are committed to ensure that the most vulnerable children do not miss out,” UNICEF Representative for Iraq Roger Wright stressed. “Over the next week, reaching displaced children and those areas must be given top priority.”

WHO Representative for Iraq Naeema Al-Ghasser praised the efforts of the Ministry of Health and the vaccinators to ensure that a high quality campaign goes ahead. “This is a testament to Iraq’s health workers’ determination to protect children’s health and families in most difficult conditions,” she said.

WHO and UNICEF are helping the Government with planning and management, providing transport for vaccinator teams and assisting the engagement of local communities, as well as providing OPV to re-stock Iraq’s supplies. The European Union provided \$4.25 million to UNICEF and WHO to support the drive.

Syria assures UN it will not forcibly deport Iraqi refugees under new visa system

4 September - The Syrian Government has assured the United Nations refugee agency that it does not intend to forcibly return Iraqi refugees, estimated at some 1.4 million, when it introduces new visa requirements.

In talks at the Foreign Ministry in Damascus, the Syrian capital, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) top protection official Erika Feller was told that the new visa restrictions arose from the fact that Syria’s ability to handle the influx is close to the breaking point.

Ms. Feller, on a mission to Syria to see first-hand the situation of Iraqi refugees, acknowledged the enormous pressure on Syrian society – its infrastructure, economy, security and energy resources – and reiterated the agency’s appreciation for the generosity shown by the Syrian people, UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond told a news briefing in Geneva today.

“So far, she has received assurances that the Government does not intend to forcibly return Iraqi refugees currently living in Syria, estimated at some 1.4 million,” he said, noting that Ms. Feller had expressed hope that the most vulnerable will continue to have access to the safe environment offered by Syria and that there be no forcible return.

She has also highlighted the need for sustained international support to Syria in its efforts to cope with the huge number of Iraqis.

Over the weekend, press reports about the new visa requirements caused great concern among Iraqis in Syria, with a UNHCR hotline for refugees being inundated with calls from people asking how this would affect their situation.

In her discussions, Ms. Feller is seeking to clarify the reports. Although all the officials she has met so far confirmed that there would be a new visa regime, no formal policy has yet been made available to UNHCR. According to Government sources, all Iraqis wishing to enter Syria will have to apply for a visa from the Syrian Embassy in Baghdad.

Syria is the only country not to have imposed strict regulations on the entry of Iraqi refugees. Jordan, which hosts an estimated 500,000 to 750,000 Iraqis, has largely limited access for new arrivals, while other regional countries have tough visa regulations in place.

Ms. Feller, who oversees UNHCR’s protection work for nearly 33 million refugees and other people of concern worldwide, is continuing her efforts to obtain more information on how the visa rules may affect Iraqi refugees, Mr. Redmond said.

Since the beginning of the year, UNHCR has issued two appeals aimed at helping countries in the region to cope with the humanitarian crisis of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fleeing the violence in their homeland. The first commits \$41 million to Syria for humanitarian assistance. The second, launched jointly with the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), seeks over \$63 million to support the education sector.

UNHCR has so far registered a total of 118,000 Iraqis in Syria and expects that figure to reach 200,000 by the end of the year. Many of them are seriously ill and victims of extreme violence and torture. Ms. Feller noted at least 2,000 people

continue to flee their homes in Iraq daily. Tomorrow she is due to continue her mission in Lebanon.

Timor-Leste making progress in overcoming last year's crisis, says Ban Ki-moon



4 September - Despite the recent flare-up of tensions following the announcement of a new Government, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has commended Timor-Leste on overcoming the crisis of last year that led to the bolstering of the United Nations presence in the country which it helped shepherd to independence in 2002.

An indication of that progress is the successful completion of presidential and parliamentary elections with which the Timorese people “once again demonstrated their faith in democratic processes to move beyond internal divisions,” Mr. Ban writes in his latest report to the Security Council on the activities of the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) from 27 January to 20 August.

However, he added, the process leading to the formation of the new Government and the violent disturbances following it “demonstrate that not all divisions have yet been overcome. Continued efforts to strengthen the culture of truly inclusive and participatory democracy based on rule of law and respect for human rights will be essential for the creation of a stable and prosperous Timor-Leste.”

The Security Council created UNMIT in August 2006 to help restore order after fighting, attributed to differences between eastern and western regions, broke out in April and May and led to the deaths of at least 37 people and forced about 155,000 people – or 15 per cent of the population – to flee their homes.

In his report, Mr. Ban says the security situation in the country improved overall during the reporting period but continues to be volatile and subject to sporadic violence, such as that witnessed after the formation of a new Government led by former president Xanana Gusmão following the June elections, which failed to produce a single outright winner.

“Elections are a fundamental step in consolidating democracy, but only an initial one,” he observed, adding that many of the challenges relating to the 2006 crisis remain unresolved, such as the grievances of members of the armed forces, gang violence and the situation of some 100,000 people who remain internally displaced.

Mr. Ban cautions that the Government will face “a delicate balancing act” in addressing more immediate problems stemming from the crisis while guaranteeing public security and ensuring effective socio-economic programmes to tackle issues such as poverty, which continues to be “one of the major causes of instability” in the country.

Other priorities include advancing on justice and reconciliation issues, strengthening the judicial sector and promoting human rights, as well as moving forward with security sector reform, including training of the national police force.

The serious but temporary escalations of violence in the course of this year “serve as a reminder of the fragility of the security situation,” Mr. Ban states. “They also demonstrate that, despite the peaceful conduct of elections and wide acceptance of the results, there is still a need to nurture a culture of non-violence and promote the peaceful resolution of differences.”

UN counts on field commanders in meeting peacekeeping challenges – Migiro



Asha-Rose Migiro

4 September - With more peace operations, and more men and women in the field, than at any other time in the history of the United Nations, Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro today called on field commanders to help the world body meet the “daunting challenges of contemporary peacekeeping.”

Today there are over 74,000 military personnel, from 117 troop-contributing countries, serving in 18 field missions on four continents. This unprecedented surge in UN peace missions has presented the Organization with a number of challenges.

“Member States are asking for enhanced accountability from all of us,” Ms. Migiro told the annual conference of heads of military components of UN peacekeeping operations. “We are being called upon to improve managerial practices, instil better discipline in the field, and reach time-bound mission accomplishments.”

The gathering brings together field commanders with senior managers and staff at UN Headquarters to discuss concerns facing field missions, troop-contributing countries and relevant departments such as the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the newly established Department of Field Support.

“Together, you should identify the strengths and weaknesses of our current peacekeeping system, and determine areas needing additional impetus,” Ms. Migiro told participants.

She pointed out that today’s multidimensional, integrated operations support a whole host of post-conflict needs, including institution building, disarmament and demobilization of combatants, human rights protection and reconstruction.

“We should all be proud of these achievements,” she stated. At that same time, she noted that it was also important to address “our failings,” referring to allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct levied against UN peacekeepers in recent years.

In that connection, she stressed the need to ensure that all peacekeepers exercise the highest standards of integrity and ethical behaviour. “The upstanding behaviour of the vast majority of United Nations staff and uniformed personnel should not be undermined by the small number of individuals who engage in acts of sexual exploitation and abuse.”

“We need your help in ensuring that your forces are fully aware of all relevant codes, rules and regulations of the United Nations,” she added.

Kosovo: top UN envoy voices solidarity with anti-crime demonstrators



Joachim Rucker

4 September - The top United Nations envoy to Kosovo today voiced solidarity with demonstrators in the capital, Pristina, who marched against crime in response to last week’s murder of a police officer in the Serbian province administered by the world body since 1999.

“The murder of Kosovo Police Officer Triumf Riza is a heinous crime and a terrible tragedy,” said Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s Special Representative Joachim Rucker. “Indeed, his death has united Kosovo’s people against crime like no other event that I have witnessed here.”

He characterized Mr. Riza, 28, as a “fearless officer, whose service was exemplary,” and staff from the UN Mission in Kosovo, known as UNMIK, participated in today’s rally.

The Kosovo police force has already apprehended suspects in his murder, and Mr. Rucker expressed confidence that the



guilty will be brought to justice. He appealed for the community's support and for anyone with information regarding the case to come forward.

UN-backed report spotlights obstacles faced by Afghan returnees



Pumping water

4 September - Many Afghans returning to their homeland face a number of major challenges, including a lack of employment, health care, education and housing, according to an assessment carried out with the support of the United Nations refugee agency.

The findings are contained in "Economic and Social Rights in Afghanistan II," the second report of its kind by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).

The vast majority – over 85 per cent – of the more than 11,000 Afghans interviewed listed job opportunities, access to safe drinking water, improvement of health and education facilities, and housing as their top priorities for the future.

"Despite all efforts made by the Government, this report shows that Afghanistan needs more time to reach sustainable reintegration for those who have come home," said Salvatore Lombardo, UNHCR's representative in Afghanistan.

In particular, the study found chronic food shortages among those interviewed, and more than half said they did not have access to safe drinking water, while 60 per cent were living on less than \$1 a day.

One third of respondents said their children were not attending school, with distance and security concerns cited for girls and the need to work for boys.

The lack of housing was not only a key obstacle for those choosing to return but also a main cause of dissatisfaction after their homecoming.

In response to the findings, the AIHRC is urging the Afghan Government to focus more on the situation of vulnerable groups, including returnees who have to rebuild their lives after spending years in exile.

"Full integration of returnees and a permanent peace closely and directly depend on the realization of economic, social and cultural rights," stated AIHRC Chair Sima Samar.

Funding shortfall threatens UN family reunions for Western Sahara refugees



4 September - Threatened by an almost 50 per cent shortfall in funding, family reunion visits and other confidence-building measures connecting Sahrawi refugees in camps in Algeria and their relatives in the Western Sahara Territory risk coming to a halt next month, the United Nations refugee agency warned today.

In January, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) appealed for nearly \$3.5 million to continue the family visits and telephone services initiated in 2004 for some 90,000 Sahrawi around Tindouf in western Algeria, where they sought shelter from the conflict between Morocco and the Frente Polisario independence movement, which contest the Western Sahara territory, a former Spanish colony.

But only a little over half that amount has so far been funded, UNHCR spokesperson Ron Redmond told a news briefing in Geneva.

Sahrawi refugees started arriving in Algeria in 1976 after Spain withdrew from the area and fighting broke out over its control, while others stayed in the Western Sahara and today families remain separated. UNHCR has introduced several measures to build confidence between the two groups and to re-establish contact between families.

UNHCR gives Sahrawis the possibility of five-day visits with relatives and loved ones, reuniting many of them after 32 years of separation and contributing significantly to relieving the trauma and suffering of the Sahrawi people.

Since they started in March 2004, some 154 visits have taken place involving 4,255 people, mainly women. An additional 14,726 people have registered and are waiting to take part in the programme.

In recent weeks, UNHCR also received suggestions from Moroccan authorities that Sahrawi refugees and their relatives be allowed to attend funerals and weddings. A small number of Sahrawis on both sides may also be allowed to undertake pilgrimages to Mecca, pending the availability of funds.

UNHCR has 24 staff in Laayoune in the territory and 23 in the Tindouf camps.

Sierra Leone: UN envoy praises agreement between presidential candidates

4 September - The senior United Nations envoy to Sierra Leone has welcomed the agreement of the leaders of the country's two major political parties on measures to try to calm rising tensions ahead of this Saturday's presidential run-off election.

Victor Angelo, the Secretary-General's Executive Representative in Sierra Leone, issued a statement praising the agreement yesterday, a day after the President, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, brought together the two presidential candidates for talks.



Ernest Bai Koroma of the All People's Congress (APC) and incumbent Vice-President Solomon Berewa of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), who are vying to replace Mr. Kabbah in the run-off poll, signed a communiqué on Sunday stipulating the measures reached.

Mr. Angelo congratulated Mr. Koroma and Mr. Berewa for their agreement and Mr. Kabbah for his "timely initiative" amid mounting international concern at the tensions inside the West African nation.

"The historic meeting between the two leaders... marks an important milestone in the collective efforts to foster an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity that had characterized the first round of the ongoing national elections," Mr. Angelo said.

The 11 August presidential and parliamentary elections were Sierra Leone's second since the end of the decade-long civil war in 2002, and the first since the withdrawal of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) in December 2005. The mission has been replaced by the UN Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL).

Mr. Angelo urged all Sierra Leoneans to show patience and tolerance for the work of the National Electoral Commission and the country's security agencies to ensure that the run-off election reaches a peaceful and successful conclusion.

'Extremely serious' locust infestation in Yemen worsens in August, UN reports

4 September - The locust infestation in Yemen, already termed "threatening and extremely serious" last month, worsened during August as immature swarms of the crop-devouring insects formed in the interior and moved into the central highlands, with the possibility that they may now invade neighbouring countries, the United Nations warned in its latest update.



Locust

Some swarms remained in the interior where another generation of breeding is likely to occur while a few others moved to southern Oman, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported, in what has been called the worst locust infestation in Yemen in nearly 15 years.

The swarms in the highlands are expected to reach the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coast where they will mature and lay eggs. A few swarms could also reach coastal areas in Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, Sudan and northern Somalia where good rains fell during August, FAO said.

There is also a slight risk that a few swarms could reach the Indo-Pakistan border during the first half of September. Elsewhere, heavy rains and flooding occurred in the interior of Sudan and Eritrea where locust numbers are expected to increase.

Good rains fell and ecological conditions were favourable in the northern Sahel region of West Africa bordering the Sahara, FAO noted.

UN envoy on children and armed conflict begins visit to Côte d'Ivoire

4 September - The United Nations human rights envoy tasked with protecting the rights of children caught up in armed conflict today began a visit to Côte d'Ivoire to assess the situation in the divided West African country.



Special Representative
Radhika Coomaraswamy

Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, will focus particularly on the follow-up of action plans aimed at releasing children from armed groups and reintegrating them into their communities, UN spokesperson Michele Montas told reporters.

Ms. Coomaraswamy will also examine the issue of sexual violence against children in the aftermath of the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire, which has been split between the Government-controlled south and the Forces Nouvelles-held north since 2002.

The Special Representative was invited to Côte d'Ivoire by the Government, Ms. Montas added.

The UN peacekeeping mission to the country (known as UNOCI) is helping to implement a disarmament process in Côte d'Ivoire as part of a peace deal signed by the country's leaders in Ouagadougou, capital of neighbouring Burkina Faso, in March.

The pact calls, among other steps, for: creating a new transitional government; organizing free and fair presidential elections; merging the Forces Nouvelles and the national defence and security forces through the establishment of an integrated command centre; dismantling the militias, disarming ex-combatants and enrolling them in civil services programmes; and replacing the "zone of confidence" separating north and south with a green line to be monitored by UNOCI.

Last year, a report from the UN Secretary-General found that Côte d'Ivoire was one of at least 12 countries where children are recruited to serve as either government soldiers, rebel gunmen or militia members.

New UN report underscores ties between poverty and productivity

4 September - A new report by the United Nations International Labour Organization (ILO) released today highlights the linkage between poverty and labour productivity, noting that limited investment in training and skills is diminishing opportunities to lift people out of poverty.



"Productivity is the cornerstone for poverty alleviation," Lawrence Jeff Johnson, ILO's Chief of the Employment Trends Team, said at a press briefing at UN Headquarters in New York today of the report, entitled "Key Indicators of the Labour Market," also underscored the linkage between poverty and productivity.

Although productivity in East Asia has doubled in the last 10 years, the United States remains the global leader by a

considerable amount in terms of labour productivity per person employed in 2006, the report noted.

South Asia, Central and South-Eastern Europe (non-European Union countries) and the Commonwealth of Independent States have all seen their productivity rise in recent years.

In South and East Asia, Mr. Johnson pointed out that the ILO has seen a marked decrease in the “working poor,” which he defined as “those individuals that are working but are unable to earn at least \$2 a day for themselves and for their families.”

However, the situation is different in sub-Saharan Africa, where there has been only “moderate” growth in productivity, he said. “The only asset the poor have is often their labour. And if we are to reduce poverty, we need to improve productivity,” Mr. Johnson said, adding that bolstering skills and labour could play a key role.

The report also said that the productivity gap between the industrialized region and most others remains wide, even as productivity levels have been on the rise over the past decade worldwide.

In an ILO press release, the agency stated that an increase in productivity is largely due to firms better utilizing capital, labour and technology, and thus limited investment in training and skills, equipment and technology could lead to an underutilization of the world’s labour potential.

“The huge gap in productivity and wealth is cause for great concern,” said Juan Somavia, ILO Director-General. “Raising the productivity levels of workers on the lowest incomes in the poorest countries is the key to reducing the enormous decent work deficits in the world.”

The report found the US has increased its productivity growth over most other developed economies, with \$63,885 of value added per person employed in 2006, followed by Ireland (\$55,986), Luxembourg (\$55,641) and Belgium (\$55,235).

But the report stated that Americans work more hours per year than workers in most other nations with developed economies, and thus Norway has the highest labour productivity level when measured as value added per hour worked.

UN health agency urges more investments, services for mental health disorders

4 September - With up to half of all people with severe mental disorders worldwide and a vast majority of mild or moderate cases not receiving any treatment, the United Nations health agency today appealed to countries to increase their investment and support for necessary services.



“This topic should matter to everyone, because people living with mental disorders in low- and middle-income countries are systematically locked out of the benefits of development that are open to others,” UN World Health Organization (WHO) Assistant Director-General for Non-communicable Diseases and Mental Health Catherine Le Galès-Camus said.

“When not addressed, mental disorders deprive people of opportunities to escape from poverty and deny them a voice to claim their rights,” she added.

Even when treatment is available, it is often delivered in institutional settings which in many countries are associated with stigma and human rights violations, WHO noted.

“The reasons for this bleak situation are clear: mental health services are being starved of both human and financial resources,” the agency said in a news release, pointing out that a majority of countries in Africa and South-East Asia spend less than 1 per cent of their health budget on mental health.

Low-income countries have an average of 0.05 psychiatrists and 0.16 psychiatric nurses per 100,000 people (about 200 times less than in high-income countries) and those extremely low rates make it impossible for satisfactory services to be

delivered.

“The current situation means that people with mental illnesses are at best ignored and at worst actively discriminated against in many countries,” WHO Director of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Benedetto Saraceno said. “We can only improve the services available to people with mental disorders if there is a major and rapid increase in investment in this area.”

Estimates show that the money required to deliver a core package of mental health care is approximately \$2 per person per year in low-income countries and \$3-4 in lower-middle income countries. This package, based on treatment of mental disorders in primary health care and in community-based facilities would increase the treatment coverage to 80 per cent for severe mental disorders and 25-33 per cent for less severe ones.

These targets are currently the best attainable level for most low- and middle-income countries given the current poor infrastructure and scarcity of human resources for mental health care, WHO said.

Secretary-General backs efforts for more innovative forms of finance for development



Ban Ki-moon

4 September - Finding new flows of development finance is crucial if the world is to meet its ambitious series of anti-poverty goals by the target date of 2015, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has told a meeting of an international group of rich and poor nations set up to promote more innovative ways of financing.

In a video message to the meeting of the Leading Group on Solidarity Levies to Fund Development, held in Seoul, Mr. Ban noted the continuing funding gap in the campaign to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

“Closing this gap is essential if we are to alleviate extreme poverty, fight diseases and achieve the other development targets,” he said. “It is vital that the momentum be maintained and that new funding initiatives be encouraged.”

The world’s nations agreed in 2000 to work towards the MDGs, a set of eight targets for ameliorating major social and economic ills.

In his message today, Mr. Ban cited the air ticket solidarity levy, the international finance facility for immunization and the advanced market commitments pilot programme as recent examples of creative alternatives in the area of financing for development.

He told the Leading Group that their gathering “provides a unique opportunity to take stock of the progress made to date in these and other initiatives. It also allows you to exchange experiences and lessons learned as we move forward in achieving the internationally agreed development goals.”

Established last year, the Leading Group has at least 40 member countries and observer members, and includes both developed and developing nations.

Human rights situation in northeast Uganda shows improvement – UN

3 September - The human rights situation in Uganda's Karamoja region has improved significantly over the last four months, with a “marked reduction” in human rights violations, road ambushes and the circulation of illegal arms, the United Nations said today.

In its latest report on the situation in Karamoja – an area in northeast Uganda inhabited by close to 1 million people – the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) highlighted the “improvements in the security and human rights situation in the area as well as advances made by the national army, Uganda Peoples' Defense Forces (UPDF),

in conducting disarmament operations.”

Cattle raids and subsequent retaliation by armed Karimojong, however, rank as the highest recorded violence inflicted on the population during the period covered by the report, 1 April to 12 August.

In its previous report released in April, OHCHR voiced concern over escalating violence against civilians in Karamoja where almost 70 people have been killed since last November.

It was also concerned over a “climate of fear and insecurity” in the area where armed Karimojong have reportedly killed seven UPDF soldiers, eight civilians and almost 300 cattle.

The follow-up report issued today in Geneva calls on the authorities to hold perpetrators accountable and to adopt a national response to combat impunity.

Ban Ki-moon kicks off first visit to Sudan

3 September - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon arrived in Sudan today to “lock in progress” made so far to end the crisis in the country's strife-torn Darfur region and observe first-hand the situation on the ground ahead of the deployment of a massive joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping operation.



Ban Ki-moon with FM Akol on arrival in Khartoum

Mr. Ban's visit comes just weeks after the Security Council authorized a hybrid force, which will have some 26,000 peacekeepers at full deployment, to quell the violence in Darfur, where at least 200,000 people have died and more than two million others forced to flee their homes since 2003 because of fighting between rebel groups, Sudanese Government forces and allied Janjaweed militias.

“I want to see for myself the plight of those we seek to help, and the conditions under which our peacekeepers in Darfur will operate,” Mr. Ban told an audience of civil society representatives upon arriving in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum.

In a speech to the UN Association in Sudan on Monday evening, Mr. Ban outlined the reasons for his visit –which will also include stops in neighboring Chad and Libya – stating that his goal is to “lock in the progress we have made so far. To build on it so that this terrible trauma may one day end.”

Mr. Ban said he also wanted to try to strengthen momentum towards a lasting political resolution. “I want to see us begin a new and conclusive round of peace negotiations as soon as possible,” he stated.

During his visit, the Secretary-General will meet with President Omar al-Bashir and other senior leaders, in addition to First Vice-President Salva Kiir in southern Sudan, and opposition representatives.

He stressed that any real solution to Darfur's troubles requires sustained economic development and solutions that go to the root causes of the conflict. “But we cannot effectively address development issues until there is a peaceful environment in Darfur and a political solution to the conflict,” he added.

With regard to economic and social development, Mr. Ban emphasized the need for money for new roads and communications, as well as health, education, sanitation and social reconstruction programmes. In addition, he stressed that more needs to be done if Sudan is to be on track to meet the set of global anti-poverty targets known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), stating that “there can be no solutions to Sudan's political problems without sustainable economic development.”

“As for human rights, we have only to look around us to see how far Sudan has to go in upholding human rights and protecting people from suffering,” the Secretary-General added.

Noting that justice is an important part of building and sustaining peace, he emphasized that “a culture of impunity and a legacy of past crimes that go unaddressed can only erode the peace.”

Mr. Ban urged those gathered to do their part to ensure an immediate end to violence and a rapid political solution, stating that "ultimately, it is you who will carry forward the work of building a lasting peace in Sudan."

In addition, "I urge you to think of the United Nations – and me, personally – as your friend, always by your side. I urge you to do everything you can to advance our common cause – building a better Sudan, and a better world, for yourselves and for future generations."

UN envoy speaks out against attacks in Nepalese capital



Special Representative Ian Martin

2 September - The top United Nations envoy to Nepal today condemned a series of bomb blasts which struck Kathmandu, resulting in a number of casualties.

"The United Nations expresses its condemnation of the bomb attacks which have killed and injured Kathmandu citizens," Special Representative of the Secretary-General Ian Martin said in a statement.

"The Nepalese have shown a great capacity to resolve difficult issues through peaceful dialogue, and I have no doubt that acts of terror will discredit whatever cause they are claimed to promote," said Mr. Martin, who is also head of the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN).

According to media reports, at least two people were killed and more than two dozen others injured following three blasts that took place aboard a minibus packed with commuters, at a bus stop in the busy city centre and outside army headquarters.

The attacks came just days after the Special Representative appealed for an end to violence ahead of November's Constituent Assembly elections.

Late last year, the Government and rebel Maoists signed a peace accord ending a decade-long armed conflict that killed some 13,000 people in the Himalayan nation.