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Extending Haiti mission, Security Council backs campaign against gangs

15 February - Extending the mandate of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) by another eight months, the Security Council today endorsed its recently stepped-up campaign against armed criminal gangs and called for the operations to continue.

In a resolution adopted unanimously, Council members agreed to extend the force – comprised of almost 8,400 troops and police – through 15 October to help establish stability in Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere.

The resolution specifically requested that “MINUSTAH continue the increased tempo of operations in support of the HNP [Haitian National Police] against armed gangs as deemed necessary to restore security, notably in Port-au-Prince,” the capital.

Since December, MINUSTAH has undertaken a series of military operations aimed at dislodging the country's gangs from areas that they control and use to terrorize the local population, carrying out kidnappings, thefts, rapes and drug-running activities.

The problem is most acute in the densely populated slum districts of Port-au-Prince such as Cité Soleil and Martissant, where some of the gangs have been operating for years, long before MINUSTAH arrived in 2004.



Last Friday, in the most recent major operation, more than 700 UN troops entered the Boston area of Cité Soleil to try to dismantle the band of a gang chief. While he was able to escape, other members were arrested and large amounts of weaponry and ammunition were seized. One person was killed and two UN peacekeepers were injured.

David Wimhurst, a spokesperson for the Mission, told reporters today that the operations would keep going “until we have really dislodged” the gangs. He said the gangs’ activities in Port-au-Prince were holding the rest of the country hostage, soaking up headlines and deterring outsiders from undertaking investment and development.

“Peacekeeping in Haiti is a Band-aid. The cure to what ails Haiti is development,” he said, noting that whenever MINUSTAH troops or police units enter a former gang area, they establish a presence and encourage the Haitian state to follow so that the area can stabilize and locals’ living standards can improve.

MINUSTAH is conducting military-style operations because the HNP does not yet have close to enough qualified officers to carry out operations or to prepare files against suspects that are of a standard that can be brought before a court.

The situation is made worse by what Mr. Wimhurst described as the “pretty lamentable” state of the Haitian judiciary and penal system. Corruption is widespread among judges, who are paid about \$200 a month, jails are overcrowded and individuals are often detained for months without charge.

But Mr. Wimhurst said Haiti had posted important gains in the past two years, including the successful staging of local elections last year, and that the Mission’s work had to be seen as a long-term project.

He said that MINUSTAH had been the subject of a particularly virulent misinformation campaign orchestrated both inside and outside Haiti by supporters of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

UN peacekeepers have been accused of deliberately targeting civilians and of firing from helicopters during operations, both of which were untrue, he said, adding that MINUSTAH made strenuous efforts to investigate every genuine allegation that its troop had killed or injured a civilian.

He added that, aside from the gang members, locals in Cité Soleil and Martissant were largely supportive of the recent wave of aggressive operations, and had applauded UN troops as they patrolled following last Friday’s operation in Boston.

Unable to visit Darfur, UN Human Rights Council fact-finding team heads to Chad



Ban Ki-moon responds to reporters questions

15 February - After a planned visit to Darfur fell through because of visa problems, the United Nations Human Rights Council’s fact-finding mission on the situation inside the strife-torn region of Sudan has travelled to neighbouring Chad to interview refugees who have fled the war-torn region.

The high-level, five-member team intends to complete its work on the ground by next week, UN spokesperson Marie Okabe said today, in response to press questions at UN Headquarters in New York.

The mission is not going to Sudan as planned because of continued uncertainty over whether members could obtain visas for that country.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today he was disappointed the team could not get into Sudan, and had raised the issue with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir when they met last month on the sidelines of the African Union (AU) summit in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

“He said he would issues visas to the fact-finding mission,” Mr. Ban said. “He said he would have no problem. I am very much disappointed by the decision of the Sudanese Government. I urge again that the Sudanese Government fully cooperates with the unanimous decision of the Human Rights Council.”

The mission, which is headed by Jody Williams, who won the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for her work campaigning against landmines, is expected to present its report on the trip in time for the Council's fourth regular session next month.

The Council established the mission in December to probe the human rights situation in Darfur, which has been beset by countless instances of abuses, among them mass rape, abduction and forced relocation, since fighting broke out between Government forces, allied militias and rebel groups in 2003.

More than 200,000 people have been killed and 2 million others displaced from their homes, and an estimated 4 million people now depend on aid to survive. Last month Mr. Ban called the situation "the largest humanitarian crisis in the world."

Since the mission began its work in Geneva on 5 February, it has held dozens of meetings and interviews with human rights specialists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community representatives, UN staff members, AU officials and others.

Aside from Ms. Williams, the other members of the mission are: Mart Nutt, an Estonian parliamentarian and member of the Council of Europe's European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance; Bertrand Ramcharan, the former Acting and Deputy UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; Patrice Tonda, Gabon's Permanent Representative to the International Organizations in Geneva; and Indonesian Ambassador Makarim Wibisono, President of the 61st session of the Commission on Human Rights. The members are serving in their personal capacity.

UN official lauds US decision to shelter 7,000 of the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees



António Guterres's press conference in Washington

15 February - After a meeting with the United States Secretary of State, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has strongly welcomed twin decisions by Washington regarding the desperate plight of Iraqis: to take in up to 7,000 refugees deemed most vulnerable and to contribute \$18 million for continued humanitarian support.

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High Commissioner António Guterres, however, cautioned that while sheltering refugees can help the most defenceless, it alone is not a panacea. "Resettlement is the difference between life and death, but it is not a solution for all problems and it is not an excuse not to address refugee problems in their global dimensions," he told reporters in Washington, D.C. yesterday after his meeting with Condoleezza Rice and other US officials.

He emphasized that resettlement is a last resort, to be utilized for those with particular needs who can only find safety in a third country, such as at-risk women, children, the elderly and those with health concerns.

The \$18 million contribution made by the US, where more than half of all refugees resettle annually, will be put towards last month's \$60 million UNHCR appeal to allow the agency to continue providing humanitarian assistance in Iraq, where one in six have been forced to flee their homes, and surrounding areas.

"Our commitment to working together to find durable solutions for Iraqi refugees includes providing humanitarian assistance, augmenting the capacity of UNHCR to identify and refer refugees in need of resettlement and committing additional resources to assist internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq," said Paula Dobriansky, the US Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs.

Ms. Dobriansky also said that her country will work closely with UNHCR and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to assist those forced to flee their homes through voluntary repatriation when possible and will also persuade Iraq's neighbouring countries to uphold the principle of first asylum, or the first nation to which people escape.

UNHCR estimates that up to 50,000 people are forcibly moved from their homes within Iraq monthly. It is believed that there are 1.8 million IDPs out of a total population of 26 million, with this number potentially swelling to 2.3 to 2.7 million by the end of the year. An additional 2 million refugees reside outside the country's borders, mainly in Iraq's neighbours such as Syria and Jordan, putting a great strain on the economic, social, education and health infrastructures and resources of these countries.

High Commissioner Guterres also informed US officials of a UNHCR-sponsored donors' conference to be held in April in Geneva to address humanitarian issues posed by the mass displacement of Iraqis.

The US pledged its support for the conference and also to supporting the Iraqi Government in efforts to stabilize the environment to allow refugees to return while reaching out to those in immediate need of assistance.

As Security Council extends DR Congo mission, Ban Ki-moon focuses on mining reform

15 February - Highlighting that the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) continues to pose "a threat to international peace and security in the region," the Security Council today extended the UN mission in the impoverished African country for another two months.

The extension of the mandate of the UN Organization Mission in the DRC (MONUC), which was due to expire today, came as Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called on Congolese authorities to focus on security sector reform and tighten up legislation covering business practices relating to diamond and other mining because too much of the profits of these industries are going to fund armed conflict.



In its unanimously adopted resolution, the Council, citing the fact that DRC continues to pose a threat to international peace and security in the region, extended the mandate until 15 April.

Separately, Mr. Ban makes his remarks in his latest report on the DRC looking at whether or not sanctions should be imposed on the country as a way of cleaning up the mining industry. However, given the uncertainty of whether sanctions would work against such practices, as well as that in December the country swore in its first democratically elected President, the Secretary-General recommends against imposing them.

"While sanctions may inconvenience their targets, the general effect will be to diminish only marginally the general practices they are designed to curtail. In most of the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, they will do little to reduce the use of force in extracting minerals, diminish fraud and encourage responsible corporate behaviour," Mr. Ban writes.

He also points to a more general concern about possible UN sanctions against the DRC. "Imposing United Nations sanctions now may be perceived as punitive, whether they target State actors or not and whether they are intended to reflect on the capacity of the State to manage its affairs or not," he says. "This might be another reason why United Nations sanctions may not be advisable at the present time."

Instead, Mr. Ban urges the Government to reform the security sector and fight corruption, but particularly to tighten up on investors in the natural resource sector by making sure they adhere to regulations. He calls for the private sector to set better business standards itself, while also recommending setting up a cross-border commission to prevent corruption at the frontier.

"The question remains: what is likely to bring more order to the production and marketing of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's natural resources in a way that will allow greater security for the artisanal miners, less exposure to extortion by armed groups and the assurance of more revenues for the State and its public services?" he writes.

The Government must first and foremost institute security sector reform and improve trust and transparency by monitoring and fighting corrupt practices and taking effective action against violators, the report stresses.

The Secretary-General's report was itself based on recommendations made by the so-called Group of Experts who visited

the DRC late last year to look at the whole issue of sanctions, during which they found that while linkages still remain between armed groups and the exploitation of natural resources, the situation has become ever more complex.

Security Council condemns terrorist bus attack in Iran

15 February - Condemning yesterday's terrorist bus attack in Iran which killed at least 18 people, the United Nations Security Council today called for those responsible for the deadly incident to be brought to justice.



Council President, Amb. Peter Burian of Slovakia

The Council's reaction to the attack on the vehicle carrying Iranian security officers in the south-eastern city of Zahedan came in a statement to the press delivered by the current president of the 15-member body, Peter Burian of Slovakia.

"The members of the Security Council reiterated that no cause can justify the use of terrorist violence," he said. "They underlined the need to bring to justice the perpetrators, organizers and sponsors of this terrorist attack, as with all terrorist attacks."

The Council's words came on the heels of a similar statement issued yesterday by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Both extended condolences to those affected by the attack.

Darfur parties agree violence will not solve conflict, UN and African envoys say



Jan Eliasson addresses meeting in Um Rai, Sudan

15 February - There is general agreement that violence will never resolve the conflict raging in Darfur, envoys from the United Nations and African Union told reporters in Khartoum today following talks in the vast western region of Sudan.

"There is an acknowledgment that there is simply no military solution to the Darfur crisis," said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Envoy, Jan Eliasson. "That's a starting point for the way forward and that is the political road."

Mr. Eliasson and African Union (AU) Special Envoy for Darfur Salim Ahmed Salim have held meetings in Darfur in recent days, including with field commanders of non-signatories to last year's Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), internally displaced persons (IDPs), and representatives of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) as well as a number of tribal chiefs.

Mr. Eliasson voiced hope that talks could soon help reduce the bloodshed. "We have expectations that once this political process starts – and it starts, I hope, now – there should and could be visible signs of a reduction in violence and improvement of the situation on the ground."

The diplomatic push must be reflected in the lives of Darfur's people, he said. "We want to connect the political talks we are embarking on with real progress on the ground."

Describing the grim conditions in the region, where more than 200,000 people have been killed and 2 million others displaced from their homes, Mr. Eliasson said relief personnel were stretched beyond the limit. "The humanitarian workers are exhausted. We heard from them clear expressions of fatigue, of frustration at the situation."

Mr. Eliasson placed responsibility with ending the conflict in the hands of those involved. "This is a Sudanese problem and in the end it will have to be the people of Sudan and their representatives that will have to solve it," he said.

At the same time, he pledged international support. "We will do our utmost to bring this process about and we hope also that all actors, those who follow these developments very closely, those who are engaged in the region will cooperate with us."

The UN envoy issued a stern warning against inaction. "A missed opportunity, again on Darfur – not building on what we

have achieved and not taking the chance now to finally get this conflict behind us – will be a serious mistake,” he said.

Mr. Salim said that in response to reservations about – and even opposition to – the DPA, the envoys are examining “how to overcome some of those difficulties, in order to propel the peace process forward.”

To create an environment conducive to negotiations, he said, it is necessary to reduce violence and preferably achieve a cessation of hostilities.

“We have made this point to all concerned, and I would like to say that thus far we have been encouraged by the initial reaction of everybody we met on this issue – the importance of de-escalation of violence - and also by the assurances by all the other parties that they will do the utmost to facilitate the operations of the humanitarian organizations.”

In talks, the factions raised concerns about security and stability, compensation, refugees and IDPs, and development and reconstruction, he added.

Mozambique: UN starts airlifting food to thousands of flood victims



Flooded river in Mozambique

15 February - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has started rescue and food delivery missions with a chartered helicopter in central Mozambique where the worst flooding in years has forced some 85,000 people to flee their homes.

The Mi-8 helicopter, flying from the town of Caia and coordinated by the Government's National Institute for Disaster Management (INGC), delivered 2.5 metric tons of WFP food yesterday and began rescue missions, flying to Cocorico island where 120 people were trapped by floodwaters. The Mi-8 is continuing food delivery today.

WFP and its partners began distributing food aid this week to 2,000 people in temporary accommodation centres in Caia district and to 6,100 people in Mutarara district of Tete Province.

Heavy rains in central and northern Mozambique and neighbouring Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe over the last month flooded the Zambezi, Chire and Rivubue rivers, and officials estimate that as many as 285,000 people may need food and other assistance for the next few months in a worst-case scenario. Flood waters in some areas are nearing levels last seen during the catastrophic floods of 2001.

The INGC said yesterday the situation was under control, but with nearly a month left of the rainy season and continued heavy downpours in neighbouring Zambia and Malawi, the situation could worsen in the weeks ahead. If the government can control outflows from the Cahora Bassa Dam and rains in neighbouring countries decline, flooding on a scale similar to 2001 could be averted.

The Government has deployed troops to evacuate people from the worst-hit areas, but some people have refused to leave their homes, their land and their livestock.

WFP and other in-country humanitarian agencies will soon launch an appeal to support the Government's efforts, including food, air operations for rescue and delivery of relief supplies, and telecommunications to facilitate coordination of the response. Some 40,000 hectares of crops have been lost at a time when they are in their peak growing and development period ahead of the April/May harvest.

So far this year, flooding has also hit Angola, Madagascar, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. WFP has responded across the region, but faces a critical shortfall in funding for all its operations in southern Africa, requiring \$105 million through to the end of 2007.

UN envoy in Iraq visits Turkey to seek regional support for peace efforts



SRSR Ashraf Qazi

15 February - The top United Nations envoy to Iraq visited Turkey today as part of his ongoing efforts to muster regional support to bring stability to the war-torn country, the third such visit he has made in as many weeks.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Representative Ashraf Qazi, who at the end of last month conferred with Syrian officials in Damascus and Saudi leaders in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, met with Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul in Ankara to discuss "the important role the neighbouring states can play in reducing violence and promoting stability" in Iraq.

The two men "stressed the need for greater regional engagement to bolster efforts aimed at promoting dialogue, reconciliation and consensus building in Iraq," the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) said in a statement.

Mr. Qazi's regional tour is "designed to learn the views and perceptions of Governments of the region and explore the different ways these governments can take to help enhance Iraq's stability and regional reintegration," it added.

Haiti: UN peacekeepers turn former gang chief's headquarters into health clinic

15 February - Just days after launching a large-scale security operation to clean up one of Haiti's most notorious hotbeds of criminal gangs, the United Nations peacekeeping mission has transformed the former crime boss's headquarters into a free medical clinic, with clowns to cheer up sick children.



Peacekeepers provide aid to local population

"We are here to help the Haitian people," the commander of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) Brazilian contingent Claudio Barroso Magno Filho said. "And this aid cannot be achieved if there is not first security and peace. That is why our security operations are immediately followed by our humanitarian assistance."

Until last Friday, when the UN launched a 700-troop-strong operation in the Boston area of Cité Soleil, one of Haiti's most crime-ridden neighbourhoods in Port-au-Prince, the capital, Jamaica Base was the headquarters of the gang chief named Evans, who used it to coordinate his activities in a country that has seen a surge in extortion, kidnappings and the recruitment of children into gangs.

Now, doctors and dentists from MINUSTAH's Brazilian contingent tend to local residents at what is today a new community centre. At its inauguration yesterday, Raymond Jean-Baptiste turned up with his seven-month-old daughter, happy for the free consultation. Clowns came too, dancing with the children, and the Brazilian peacekeepers handed out free footballs.

They also brought soup and clean drinking water for Boston's residents. "It's above all the lack of drinking water," Brazilian doctor Mario Cesar Furtado Joris said. "Most of the patients have allergies, skin disease or intestinal infections. They are suffering from diarrhoea and malnutrition. All these illnesses are due to a lack of food and drinking water. Moreover the garbage causes allergies."

A woman, about 40 years old, holding some cans joined the line for water. "The situation is already much better, but small time thieves are still here," she said. "At night there are still security problems."

The Boston operation follows a similar strategy that the Brazilians used when they cleaned up another notorious neighbourhood, Bel Air. "The security operations were designed to restore calm and peace in order to allow the return of social activities," Major Barroso said. "At present the Boston area is completely under MINUSTAH's control."

MINUSTAH, set up in 2004 to help re-establish peace in the impoverished Caribbean country after an insurgency forced President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to go into exile, has reported that armed criminal gangs are forcing children to take part in their operations, often under threat of killing them, and using them as human shields in confrontations with the police.

Zimbabwe: 350,000 orphans, vulnerable children to benefit from new UN-backed plan



15 February - Some 350,000 Zimbabwean orphans and vulnerable children will benefit from a new multi-million dollar partnership signed today by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Government and 21 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which aims to increase school enrolment, improve nutrition and provide health care.

"In a complex and difficult environment this is an outstanding agreement between a diverse group of key institutions," UNICEF Country Representative Festo Kavishe said, explaining that donors will fund the UN to support community groups who will execute a Government-coordinated National

Action Plan.

"Combined we are reaching out to hundreds of thousands of orphans across the country, and we are doing it effectively and cost-efficiently," he added of the \$250-million five-year programme.

The agreement, backed by more than \$70 million from donors over five years, enables the NGOs to fund and support a further 150 community-based organizations, allowing the National Action Plan to massively scale-up its help to communities.

Almost one in four children in Zimbabwe, 1.6 million, are now orphaned and this number is growing. HIV and AIDS have dramatically increased children's vulnerability in recent years. Economic hardships have added stress on Zimbabwean families who continue to absorb 90 of the country's orphans.

As most orphans and vulnerable children remain with their larger family, the agreement will ensure that the 171 NGOs and community-based organizations can strengthen the capacity of families to care for them, mobilize and support community-based responses, and ensure access to essential services, including education, health care and birth registration.

Specifically, it the NGOs and community-based organizations to:

- Increase school enrolment of orphans and vulnerable children
- Boost school nutrition programmes
- Increase the number of children with birth certificates
- Greatly improve access to food, health services, water and sanitation
- Protect children from abuse, violence and exploitation

The agreement is powered by the joint financial efforts of the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), New Zealand AID, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the German Government. In all, \$250 million are required.

Ban Ki-moon to pay official visit to Austria next week

15 February - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon will pay a three-day official visit to Vienna next week at an invitation of the Austrian Government, during which he will meet with President Heinz Fischer and Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer.

Mr. Ban's visit from 22 to 24 February will follow his attendance at a meeting in Berlin of the so-called diplomatic Quartet of Middle East peace brokers seeking to reenergize talks between Israel and the Palestinians, the second such meeting this month.



Ban Ki-moon

The Quartet, comprising the UN, Russia, European Union (EU) and United States, has been promoting the so-called Road Map plan for a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace, originally slated for completion by the end of 2005.

During his visit to Austria, Mr. Ban will also confer with Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik and National Assembly President Barbara Prammer, and will meet with the Director-General of the UN Office at Vienna, Antonio Maria Costa, and UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Mohamed ElBaradei.

Millions of Iraqi children benefiting from UN-backed school supplies programme



Baghdad classroom makes use of UNICEF supplies

15 February - Millions of school bags, books, pencils and other essential learning materials are now being delivered to Iraq's primary schoolchildren thanks to a United Nations-backed national school supply drive.

The drive, organized by the Iraqi Education Ministry and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) with support from the European Commission, aims to reach all Iraqi primary schools, bringing basic learning tools to millions of children aged 6 to 11.

"Iraq's parents and teachers have shown unshaken determination to educate their children through years of deprivation, but the current terrible insecurity is testing many to the limit," UNICEF Representative for Iraq Roger Wright said, calling on the international community to provide more support to protect the war-torn country's education system during the current emergency.

"Iraq's education system needs a great deal more investment and attention to survive this time of crisis."

The system is now dangerously vulnerable, with many schools not operating normally. Violence is compounding the corrosive effects of years of under-investment throughout the 1990s, depleting teaching staff and eroding school infrastructure.

The current insecurity is making the choice for families to send their children to school a life-threatening one in some areas. Over 800,000 children may now be out of school according to a recent estimate by Save the Children UK, up from 600,000 in 2004. These children are likely to miss out on their right to education altogether unless they receive urgent support and protection.

Mr. Wright acknowledged the great commitment by the Government to prioritize education even under the most difficult circumstances. In the last two years alone more than 159 damaged school buildings and 800 school water and sanitation facilities have been restored, 30,000 teachers retrained and basic school materials delivered directly to Iraq's children with the support of UNICEF and partners including the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Commission.

"Schools are a symbol of hope to Iraq's families," Mr. Wright said. "We must do everything in our power to keep Iraq's classroom doors open, welcoming and safe for children."

Materials will be distributed both centrally from Baghdad and directly to local governorates, reaching even the most remote schools. Supplies will arrive in classrooms in advance of the second half of the school year.

New UN interactive website seeks to combat world hunger

15 February - The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) today launched an interactive web site aimed at helping to feed the hundreds of million of hungry people around the globe, providing practical information for policy-makers, legal practitioners, civil society members, UN staff, academics and the general public.



“For the realization of the right to food, information is crucial,” FAO Right to Food Unit, Coordinator Barbara Ekwall said. “A right can only be claimed by people who are informed. Rights can only be respected, protected and fulfilled by a country that is aware of its obligations and of means to bring about necessary changes.”

The site includes training materials and an e-learning course, tools to raise awareness of the right to food, and a virtual library containing manuals, technical papers, policy briefs, case studies and publications.

It also features information on the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, which were endorsed by the FAO Council in 2004 and provide practical guidance to countries in their efforts to eradicate hunger by adopting a human rights-based approach.

Development of the web site was made possible with funding from the German government. To accommodate a wide range of users, a low-band, text-only version is also available, and the information can be downloaded to CDs and disseminated locally.

“The right to food web site is an excellent resource and a fine example of internal and external collaboration – from capacity-building activities, such as the e-learning modules... to networking and successful case studies from around the globe,” FAO Knowledge Exchange and Capacity Building Division Director Anton Mangstl said.

Also today, the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), a key project of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), re-launched its website with new content, and design, and improved ease of use, to bring multimedia humanitarian news and analysis covering crises in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Formed in 1995, IRIN enjoys editorial independence from its donors and OCHA. “IRIN has provided a unique and vital service to the humanitarian community and millions of people in need since 1995,” acting UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Margareta Wahlström said. “The new IRIN website – dynamic, modern and flexible – is a key tool for humanitarian advocacy.”

IRIN’s main online audience is the humanitarian community, the media and academia.

In yet another Internet initiative, the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which promotes the integration of developing countries into the world economy, has expanded its efforts to help these States to select statistics and set up effective Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policies.

The Geneva-based agency announced today that it has redesigned its subsite <http://measuring-ict.unctad.org> to better match national statistical offices needs in offering key information on ICT data collection and dissemination. It also includes information on UNCTAD’s advisory missions and training courses.

Ban Ki-moon calls for strengthened partnership with Africa, lauds French efforts

15 February - Reiterating his commitment to support Africa’s efforts to end the violent conflicts on the continent as well as achieve sustainable development, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today called for strengthened partnerships, as he also thanked France for its efforts to assist African countries “at a number of critical junctures.”



Mr. Ban's remarks were delivered by Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Tuliameni Kalomoh at the five-day France-Afrique Summit in the resort of Cannes, which is being attended by French President Jacques Chirac along with a number of African leaders.

"France and Africa have a long and special relationship to which both sides attach great importance. This relationship has enabled France to support Africa at a number of critical junctures," he said, noting France's efforts, in support of the UN and African regional organizations, to resolve "the crises that continue to plague the African continent."

Mr. Ban also highlighted his own experiences in Africa, including last month's attendance at the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, as well as visits to other countries on the continent where he was struck both by the "enormous potential," but also the "huge challenges" that lie ahead.

"I had constructive meetings with a large number of African leaders, to whom I reaffirmed that, under my stewardship, the United Nations will give high priority to Africa," Mr. Ban said in a speech that also stressed the importance of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of globally agreed targets that aim to deal with a host of social ills – including eradicating extreme poverty – by 2015.

"I am determined to do everything possible to support Africa's own courageous efforts to end violent conflict, to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and to be a full and effective partner in international affairs," the Secretary-General pledged.

"In these efforts, it is encouraging to know that France remains a strong partner, as it is across the spectrum of United Nations concerns. Let us strengthen that spirit of partnership – and of solidarity with Africa's people."

Young people must not continue to be neglected, says UN rural development arm



15 February - New development programmes are necessary to minimize the growing youth crisis, often ignored by policymakers, in the world's poorest countries, experts said at a meeting of the United Nations International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) held in Rome.

Young people account for half the population in many of the world's poorest countries, particularly in Africa, yet the meeting's panelists in Wednesday's round-table discussion said that they have been neglected as a social category in poverty reduction schemes.

Some experts pointed to the urban bias in development policies of the past 30 years that have prevented rural areas from prospering from market economies due to lack of infrastructure and investment.

Often for youth in poor rural areas, where employment options are limited, their transition into adulthood is accelerated, thus making it imperative to meet their educational, health and skills training needs.

Education and training, especially in agriculture, is particularly key, and rural youth are impeded by a lack of access as well as low-quality schooling.

In a separate IFAD meeting today, experts called for enhanced measures for poor rural farmers to allow them to access "value chains," or activities such as processing and marketing that bring goods from production to consumption, and allow them to better compete against powerful large retailers. Without such actions, efforts to reduce poverty could be undermined.

Such initiatives have taken place successfully in countries such as Colombia, where farmers themselves realized that without innovation and new markets for their products, they would not be able to survive.

“They went from being passive actors to active actors who also recognized that their own change would affect a whole chain of actors,” said Maria Oliva Lizarazo, Director of the IFAD-backed Rural Microenterprise Development Programme.

Red triangle with skull and crossbones is for danger – new UN radiation symbol



15 February - A skull and crossbones, a running person and radiating ionizing waves, all on a deep red triangle, joined other more common warning symbols today as part of a United Nations effort to reduce needless deaths and serious injuries from accidental exposure to large radioactive sources such as food irradiation and cancer therapy equipment.

The new symbol will not be visible under normal use, but only if someone attempts to disassemble a device that is a source of dangerous radiation. It will not be located on building access doors, transportation packages or containers.

“We can’t teach the world about radiation but we can warn people about dangerous sources for the price of a sticker,” UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) radiation specialist Carolyn Mac Kenzie said of the symbol launched by her agency and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), a worldwide federation of national standards bodies.

The new symbol is aimed at alerting anyone, anywhere, to the potential dangers of being close to a large source of ionizing radiation and will supplement the decades-old three-cornered trefoil, which looks like an electric fan and has no intuitive meaning, and little recognition beyond those educated to its significance.

“I believe the international recognition of the specific expertise of both organizations will ensure that the new standard will be accepted and applied by governments and industry to improve the safety of nuclear applications, protection of people and the environment,” IAEA Radiation, Transport and Waste Safety Director Eliana Amaral said.

The symbol is the result of a five-year project conducted in 11 countries and was tested with different population groups – mixed ages, varying educational backgrounds, male and female – to ensure that its message of “danger - stay away” was crystal clear and understood by all.

Developed by human factor experts, graphic artists, and radiation protection experts, it was tested by the Gallup Institute on 1,650 people in Brazil, Mexico, Morocco, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, China, India, Thailand, Poland, Ukraine and the United States.

The symbol, intended for IAEA Category 1, 2 and 3 sources defined as capable of death or serious injury, including food irradiators, teletherapy machines for cancer treatment and industrial radiography units, will be placed on the device housing the source as a warning not to dismantle it or get any closer.

Many manufacturers plan to use the symbol on new large sources. Strategies to apply the symbol on existing large sources are being developed by the IAEA.