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Independent probe into Bhutto murder begins work today – UN

1 July - The independent commission charged with examining the facts and circumstances behind the December 2007 assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto formally began its work today, the United Nations said.

The Commission of Inquiry, which has a mandate of six months, will soon make its first visit to Pakistan, although the exact date of that trip has not yet been confirmed, UN spokesperson Michele Montas told reporters today.

The Commission is headed by Ambassador Heraldo Muñoz of Chile, and its other members are Marzuki Darusman, the former attorney-general of Indonesia, and Peter Fitzgerald, a veteran of the Irish National Police who has also served the UN in a number of capacities.

Set up following a request from the Pakistani Government, the Commission will submit a report to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon within six months. Mr. Ban will then share the report with the Government and submit it to the Security Council for information.



Benazir Bhutto was assassinated on 27 December 2007 in Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Latest Iraqi bombing another attempt to incite violence, UN mission says



The aftermath of a suicide bombing in Iraq (file)

1 July - The United Nations mission in Iraq has condemned yesterday's deadly bombing in al-Shourga market in Kirkuk, which killed and injured dozens of people, calling it yet another attempt to stoke up sectarian and ethnic conflict.

The attack is also aimed at "undermining the hopes of the Iraqi people for an improvement in their lives," the mission, known as UNAMI, said in a statement issued today.

The mission "calls on all groups not to respond in the fashion that the killers want them to do: with revenge," it added.

According to media reports, the car bombing took place in a predominantly Kurdish area of the northern city of Kirkuk on Tuesday evening, and led to at least 35 deaths and the wounding of 95 others.

The attack occurred on the same day that United States-led Multinational Forces withdrew from Iraqi cities, leaving security in the hands of the country's own forces.

On Monday, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon spoke out against recent attacks in Iraq, calling on the people of the strife-torn nation to reject attempts to incite further violence as it takes full responsibility for security in its cities.

"The Secretary-General notes that Iraq has been benefiting from an improving security environment, and appeals to the people of Iraq to continue to reject these attempts to incite further violence in the country," his spokesperson said in a statement.

Lack of funding forces UN food agency to reduce operations in DPR Korea

1 July - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) announced today that it is being forced to scale back its emergency operation to reach six million hungry and vulnerable people in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) due to a severe lack of funding.

At a press briefing in the Chinese capital, Beijing, today, the agency said that of the \$504 million needed for the programme, only \$75 million has been received so far.



Amir Abdulla, WFP Deputy Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer, said that the agency is currently reviewing the terms and conditions under which the scheme is providing food to the hungry.

"We need to make sure that any terms agreed to do not compromise our accountability," he said.

WFP's spokesperson in DPRK, Lena Savelli, told UN Radio today that the agency will target its work in only 57 counties out of the 131 where it had originally planned to provide food aid.

"This will bring down the planned number of beneficiaries from 6.2 to 2.27 million," she said, adding that at current levels, WFP has the resources needed to continue this level of operations until October or November.

A joint report by WFP and the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) released last December estimated that nearly nine million people could be hungry due to a shortage in cereals in the DPRK in 2009.

Even with commercial imports, DPRK will face a cereal deficit of over 800,000 tons, according to the FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission, the first such comprehensive mission conducted since 2004.

Climate change, DPR Korea focus of Ban's talks with Japanese leader



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (left) and Prime Minister Taro Aso of Japan hold a press encounter

1 July - Japan's leadership in combating climate change, as well as the situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), dominated today's talks between Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso.

"Such leadership is needed urgently right now if we are to 'seal a deal' in Copenhagen that all the world's governments can agree on," Mr. Ban told reporters in Tokyo that he impressed upon the Prime Minister during their meeting.

Negotiations are expected to conclude in the Danish capital in December on an accord to replace the Kyoto Protocol, whose first commitment period ends in 2012.

Calling climate change "the most crucial issue of the day for humanity," the Secretary-General said he counts on Japan to play a "bold and active role towards this historic objective."

Also discussed was the situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), with both leaders stressing the need for all nations to fully implement last month's Security Council resolution in response to the country's nuclear test in May.

That resolution imposed tougher sanctions on the country, including a tighter arms embargo, and demanded that it "not conduct any further nuclear test or any launch using ballistic missile technology."

The Secretary-General said today that during his meeting with Mr. Aso, he underscored the need to resume dialogue, including through the Six-Party talks, bringing together the DPRK, Republic of Korea, Japan, China, Russia and the United States.

"I will spare no effort in facilitating the achievement of verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as well as durable peace and stability in the region and beyond," he told journalists.

On Myanmar – where Mr. Ban is scheduled to visit later this week – he said that he expressed his appreciation for Japan's support for UN efforts in the South-East Asian nation.

He also thanked Mr. Aso for Japan's decision to take part in UN peacekeeping operations' standby arrangement.

This morning, the Secretary-General, who arrived in Japan yesterday, met with Japanese business leaders from the Keizai Doyukai (association of corporate executives) and the Global Compact Japan network, which are striving to usher in a new era of responsible and sustainable business, over breakfast, his spokesperson, Michele Montas, said today.

Following that event, he visited Tokyo University, where he held a lively exchange with students.

Mr. Ban also appeared on a children's news television programme in a bid to reach out to Japan's next generation of leaders, followed by a meeting with Japanese celebrities who serve as UN Goodwill Ambassadors, Ms. Montas said.

Tomorrow, he will leave for Singapore and travel on to Myanmar on Friday for a two-day visit.

The Secretary-General told reporters in Tokyo yesterday that he realized there were concerns about the timing of the visit, given that the trial of Nobel Peace Prize laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is pending.

“It may be the case that the trial may happen during my visit in Myanmar. I am very much conscious of that. At the same time, to find the most appropriate timing has been a challenge for me, too,” he said, adding that he would use the visit to try to “raise in the strongest possible terms” the concerns of the international community about the situation inside Myanmar.

From Myanmar, he will travel to Switzerland, Ireland and Italy, where he plans to attend the summit of the so-called Group of Eight (G8) industrialized nations.

UN and World Bank voice concerns about funding for family planning

1 July - Family planning and other reproductive health services for women have fallen off the development radar of many poor countries, donors and aid agencies, according to the United Nations and the World Bank, which are warning of the impact this will have on already high maternal mortality rates.

New preliminary figures from the World Bank show that official global development aid for health increased from \$2.9 billion in 1995 to \$14.1 billion in 2007, or roughly a five-fold increase in 12 years.

During the same period, aid for population and reproductive health made a more modest increase from \$901 million to \$1.9 billion.

The global economic crisis has compounded the lack of funding for such programmes, thereby jeopardizing the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for maternal health, which is already lagging behind.

“With the financial crisis and the reduction in budgets for health, this goal will be even harder to realize,” Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), said at a meeting at the World Bank, ahead of this year’s World Population Day, observed on 11 July.

“It is not a lack of knowledge that is hindering progress; it is a lack of political will to protect the health and rights of women,” she stated.

UNFPA estimates that more than 500,000 women die each year during pregnancy and childbirth from mostly preventable and treatable medical problems. For every woman who dies, another 20 women suffer injuries and disabilities that can last a lifetime.

Africa has the world’s highest rates of maternal mortality – at least 100 times those in developed countries, the agency adds.

Joy Phumaphi, Vice President for Human Development at the World Bank, said the global economic downturn has become a development emergency for women because they are among the first to suffer when crises strike. But the troubles did not start with the onset of the financial crisis.

“Even before this crisis began, family planning and reproductive health had fallen off the radar of low-income countries, aid donors, and development agencies — with the result that we’ve lost precious time in helping women get access to these vital health services, and helping countries get on a faster track to reducing poverty,” she stated.

Stronger agriculture sector key to brighter future for Africa, Migiro tells leaders

1 July - The United Nations Deputy Secretary-General today highlighted the benefits of investing in agriculture, which she stressed is the key to a brighter future for Africa and its people.

“Since time immemorial, agriculture has been the cornerstone of development in every region, not just in Africa,” Asha-



A UNFPA-supported reproductive health clinic in Hato Chamí, Western Panama

Rose Migiro told participants at the African Union Assembly in Sirte, Libya.

Addressing this year's theme, "Investing in Agriculture for Economic Growth and Food Security," Ms. Migiro said the benefits of such investment were clear.

Agricultural investment creates jobs, can make economic growth more durable, can increase food and nutritional security, and can also have a "profound" impact on social equality, particularly by improving the situation of women, who account for the bulk of smallholder farmers in Africa, she stated.

"By some estimates, a dollar invested in agriculture in Africa has a two or three times greater impact on poverty than the same amount invested in other sectors," said Ms. Migiro. "And yet, until recently, agriculture has often been neglected in national development strategies."

This "neglect" has resulted in high food prices, many higher than the poorest can afford, she said, noting that 265 million people in sub-Saharan Africa currently go hungry – an increase of almost 12 per cent over last year.

Ms. Migiro called for giving agriculture the attention it deserves, including by ensuring that all African countries have a national agricultural development strategy, and that they fulfil their pledges to raise agricultural spending to 10 per cent of their national budgets.

Donors, working with Africa's farmers, will also need to step up their support, she added. The Secretary-General's Africa Steering Group estimated that an increase in annual agricultural aid – from its current levels of \$1-2 billion per year to \$8 billion – would allow Africa to meet the goal of halving extreme poverty, one of eight globally agreed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

"This is a great deal of money, but some perspective is in order. Against the trillions in liquidity marshalled to combat the financial crisis, increased aid to African agriculture is eminently feasible," said the deputy UN chief.

While stressing the need to boost Africa's agricultural sector and ensure food security, she also highlighted the "daunting" challenges to peace and political stability faced by some nations on the continent.

"We must act resolutely together to end the scourge of violence and conflict that still bedevils our beloved continent," she stated, touching on the situations in Somalia, Sudan and Madagascar, among others.

Two Chadian tribal groups agree to co-exist peacefully following UN initiative



1 July - Two tribal communities in eastern Chad have agreed to end a long-running feud and live peacefully together under an initiative co-sponsored by the United Nations peacekeeping mission to the country.

MINURCAT, the UN mission to Chad and the neighbouring Central African Republic (CAR), and local authorities in the town of Adre brought together members of the ethnic Zaghawa and Massalit communities yesterday to formalize the end to their feud.

The meeting took place as part of an Intercommunity Dialogue launched last month, according to a press release issued by MINURCAT. That initiative is a joint effort between the mission, the European Union and Chadian authorities and is aimed at promoting dialogue between different groups to reduce tensions and foster a culture of tolerance.

The agreement at yesterday's meeting in Adre means members of the Massalit community can return to their original settlements, and both groups have committed to living peacefully side by side with their countrymen.

UN agency announces start of clinical trial for river blindness drug

1 July - The United Nations health agency today announced the launch of a clinical trial in three African countries for a drug that could help eliminate the debilitating illness commonly known as river blindness, which threatens over 100 million people across the continent.

The development of the drug, moxidectin, is being conducted through a collaboration of the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, which is executed by the World Health Organization (WHO/TDR), and Wyeth Pharmaceuticals.

Moxidectin is being investigated for its potential to kill or sterilize the adult worms of *Onchocerca volvulus* which cause onchocerciasis – also called river blindness because the blackfly which transmits the disease breeds in fast flowing rivers, and blindness is the most incapacitating symptom of the disease which also causes debilitating skin disease.

Currently, river blindness is controlled by ivermectin, which has contributed to significantly controlling the disease in endemic countries.

But ivermectin kills the *O. volvulus* larvae and not the adult worms, which means that annual treatments for an extended period of time, at least 11 to 14 years, are required to ensure disease control.

If moxidectin kills not only the larvae but also sterilizes or kills the adult worms, it has the potential to interrupt the disease transmission cycle within around six annual rounds of treatment, according to WHO.

The clinical trial will take place over the next two and a half years and involves 1,500 people at four sites in Ghana, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Murder of another Filipino journalist prompts UNESCO condemnation

1 July - The head of the United Nations agency tasked with defending press freedom today deplored the recent murder of a radio commentator in the Philippines, the fourth such killing of a journalist in the Asian country this year.

Crispin Perez, who hosted a morning programme on Radio DWDO in the central Philippine province of Western Mindoro, died on 9 June near his home in San Jose after being stabbed by an unknown attacker who later fled on a motorcycle.

Mr. Perez had also worked as a lawyer and was a former governor of Western Mindoro.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) condemned the killing and called for an immediate investigation.

Koïchiro Matsuura, the Director-General of UNESCO, said in a press statement that he was deeply concerned that so many Filipino journalists had paid with their lives for “exercising the fundamental human right of freedom of expression.”

Mr. Matsuura stressed that it was essential for democracy that citizens had the right to be informed in an independent way on what was going on in their country.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) says Mr. Perez is the fourth journalist in the Philippines to be killed in 2009, and only last month Mr. Matsuura deplored the murder of a newspaper reporter near the capital, Manila. Another two journalists



A patient's eyes being tested at a research centre set up in Liberia for the clinical trial of a new drug for river blindness



have been wounded this year in separate incidents but survived the attacks.

DR Congo: UN mission speaks out against latest prison break



Prison conditions throughout the DRC are well below international standards

1 July - The United Nations peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has deplored the second prison break in the country in less than one month.

The incident happened last Friday at the Aru Central Prison in north-eastern Ituri province, Madnodje Mounoubai, spokesperson for the UN mission, known as MONUC, told reporters.

Underscoring how prison conditions at Aru and throughout the DRC are well below international standards, MONUC reiterated its call on Congolese authorities to both improve conditions and bolster security in penitentiaries.

Late last month, nearly two dozen female inmates were raped during an attempted prison break in the North Kivu capital of Goma.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that incident “is a grim example of both the prison conditions and the level of sexual violence that plagues the DRC,” appealing to the Government “to bring to justice those who have committed these crimes and, more generally, to renew efforts to bring an end to the impunity too often enjoyed by perpetrators of sexual violence.”

MONUC is helping to restructure the DRC’s prison system by helping the Ministry of Justice consider how to restructure prison administration.

A 10-day workshop currently under way in the capital, Kinshasa, has brought together 50 representatives of Government, academia and civil society, as well as one dozen UN experts.

Harriet Solloway, who heads MONUC’s Rule of Law section, said that escapes and mutinies, as well as illness and death, occur regularly, owing to insufficient and often unqualified personnel.

“It is rare for prisons to have a maintenance and operational budget for the prisoners,” she said, with prisons themselves dilapidated.

UN tribunal for Rwandan genocide transfers nine prisoners to jail in Benin



ICTR staff outside Headquarters in Arusha, Tanzania

1 July - The United Nations tribunal set up to try those responsible for the worst crimes committed during the Rwandan genocide in 1994 has announced that it has transferred nine prisoners to Benin to serve the remainder of their jail sentences.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), based in Arusha, Tanzania, said in a statement issued yesterday that the prisoners were transferred at the weekend from the UN Detention Facility in Arusha to Benin, where they were later moved to a prison in the capital city of Porto-Novo.

The nine convicted criminals – nearly all of whom were given lengthy sentences – are Georges Rutaganda, Gerard Ntakirutimana, Juvenal Kajelijeli, Emmanuel Ndindabahizi, Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza, Aloys Simba, Juvenal Rugambarara, Athanase Seromba and François Karera.

Mr. Rutaganda, Mr. Ndindabahizi, Mr. Seromba and Mr. Karera are all serving life terms for their crimes, while Mr. Kajelijeli was sentenced to 45 years in prison and Mr. Barayagwiza to 32 years. Both Mr. Ntakirutimana and Mr. Simba were given 25-year jail terms, while Mr. Rugambarara is serving an 11-year sentence.

The ICTR was set up by the Security Council in the wake of the genocide, in which an estimated 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and Hutu moderates were killed, mainly by machete, during a period of less than 100 days starting in early April 1994.

Georgia: UN envoy reports progress during latest round of international talks

1 July - The United Nations envoy to Georgia and his European co-chairs led talks today as part of the continuing international discussions aimed at preventing an outbreak of renewed violence following last year's deadly conflict in Georgia.

Johan Verbeke, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Georgia, and representatives of the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), took part in today's round of the Geneva International Discussions. The UN and the two other organizations are co-chairs of the discussions.



Later Mr. Verbeke told reporters that today's discussions had achieved a concrete result, with the Abkhaz side – which has previously committed to a mechanism designed to prevent and resolve incidents as they arise – indicating that it would now move towards the implementation stage.

As a result a first consultative meeting is scheduled to take place in Gali under UN auspices on 14 July.

The participants in the discussions also agreed to meet again on 17 September in Geneva.

Pakistani returnees receive first food rations from UN agency

1 July - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has started providing regular food rations to families returning home to tribal areas in Pakistan's northwest that they had fled after the upsurge in violence in the region over the past year.

Monthly rations are being distributed from a hub in the Bajaur area of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), WFP reported today, and enough supplies have been pre-positioned to feed 2,000 families.

The agency said the distribution process is being closely coordinated with local authorities and is taking place through a local partner non-governmental organization (NGO).



WFP has reached more than two million IDPs since fighting resumed in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province in May 2009

Wolfgang Herbinger, WFP's country representative in Pakistan, said the agency was "providing a lifeline to those who have been forced to abandon their homes due to heavy fighting.

"We began to feed them at the start of this crisis when they fled their villages, and for those who feel ready to go back to their homes, we're providing the assistance they need to bring stability back to their lives."

Only small numbers of the estimated 2 million people who have fled their homes as a result of deadly fighting between Government forces and militants in north-western Pakistan have begun to return to their former villages.

The focus of WFP's relief work remains those people living in camps or with host communities, and so far the agency has been able to reach 100,000 people each day through a series of humanitarian hubs and distribution points.

In total, the agency has provided rations to about 1.5 million people since the start of last month, and it says it has enough supplies to last another two months despite a steep funding shortfall.

Western Sahara: UN envoy wraps up regional visit



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (right) meets with Christopher Ross, his new Personal Envoy for Western Sahara (file photo)

1 July - The Secretary-General's Personal Envoy who is trying to help broker a political solution regarding the status of Western Sahara has wrapped up a visit to the region which took him to Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Spain.

This was Christopher Ross' second trip to the area since he was appointed to the position this January.

Yesterday, he met with the Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos in the country's capital, Madrid, on the last leg of a trip which also took him to Algiers and Tindouf in Algeria; Nouakchott, Mauritania; and Rabat, Morocco.

Morocco holds that its sovereignty over Western Sahara should be recognized, while the Frente Polisario's position is that the Territory's final status should be decided in a referendum that includes independence as an option.

Several rounds of UN-led talks held last year resulted in the parties agreeing to continue negotiations in good faith towards a solution to the issue.

The envoy said he was "optimistic about an upcoming informal meeting intended to pave the way for a fifth round of negotiations," UN spokesperson Michele Montas told reporters in New York today.

Such a meeting would "make an important contribution to the search for a resolution to the conflict, which has gone on too long and is hindering the work which needs to be done on regional integration," she added.

The UN mission, known as MINURSO, tasked with organizing a referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara and monitoring the ceasefire between Morocco and the Frente Polisario, has been in place since September 1991.

Racism not just a right-wing phenomenon, UN expert says after visit to Germany



Special Rapporteur Githu Muigai

1 July - Germany needs to change its view of racism from one associated only with right-wing extremists to a broader definition that realizes that racism occurs in everyday life, particularly towards migrants, a United Nations independent human rights expert said today.

Githu Muigai, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, wrapped up a 10-day visit to Germany by praising the country for the progress it has made in recent year in combating racism.

Yet, in a statement issued in Berlin, he said that more needed to be done, especially in ensuring that migrants are better integrated into German society.

"In view of the new challenges facing Germany in the 21st century, there is a need to shift from a more circumscribed view of racism as associated to right-wing extremism to a broader understanding of the problem that takes into account the difficult challenges of integration and the recognition that racism occurs regularly in everyday life," he said.

Mr. Muigai said that he was therefore encouraged by the open acknowledgement by authorities that Germany is a country of migrants and that migrants make a positive contribution to society.

He also warned that despite the high awareness in Germany of the threat posed by right-wing extremism, groups based on

this ideology have demonstrated enduring resilience and thus need constant vigilance.

But Mr. Muigai welcomed the establishment of a federal anti-discrimination agency and the adoption of equal treatment laws, and called for the anti-discrimination framework to be more made more active.

He also called for more resources to be devoted to the agency so that it can be more independent and robust.

“The legal and institutional frameworks play a key role in the fight against racism, not only by providing victims with the possibility of seeking remedies, but also by demonstrating to society that racism and discrimination are unlawful and will bring swift consequences.

The Special Rapporteur, who serves in an unpaid and personal capacity and reports to the Human Rights Council, also welcomed local anti-racism initiatives he saw in action in cities such as Stuttgart, Nuremberg and Leipzig, and he called for them to be replicated across the country.

UN rights expert concerned at restriction of lawyers' freedom in Cambodia



1 July - A United Nations independent human rights expert today voiced concern at attempts to curtail lawyers' freedom to effectively represent their clients in Cambodia, with criminal charges being leveled recently against attorneys in the South-East Asian nation.

“To be able to represent their clients effectively, lawyers should not be subject to threats or intimidation, nor should they be targeted for prosecution or disciplinary action merely for having acted in the interests of their clients,” said Leandro Despouy, the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers.

“Lawyers play an important role as defenders of human rights and must be free to represent their clients as they see fit in accordance with professional standards and the rule of law.”

Last week, he said, a lawyer, working for an opposition member of the National Assembly who alleged that she has been defamed by the country's Prime Minister, was himself charged with criminal defamation and could be expelled from the Cambodian Bar Association.

This January, he added, defense lawyers representing defendants at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) – the UN-backed tribunal trying Khmer Rouge leaders accused of mass killings and other crimes three decades ago – were threatened with legal action by Cambodian judges for having called for corruption allegations at the tribunal to be properly investigated.

Further, Mr. Despouy noted, in June 2007, attorneys representing indigenous communities in Ratanakiri Province, involved in a land dispute with a businesswoman with ties to the Government, were threatened with criminal charges and disciplinary action for having allegedly “incited” communities to file a suit to reclaim their land.

The expert cautioned that these recent moves against lawyers seem to indicate a worrying new trend which could have a chilling effect on the legal profession, expressing his support and encouragement for the Bar Council and its President “in their efforts to strengthen the legal profession in Cambodia and to defend lawyers against attempts to undermine their independence.”

In a press release, Mr. Despouy, who reports to the Geneva-based Human Rights Council in an independent and unpaid capacity, underscored that Cambodia's obligations under international law, as laid out in the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, say that “lawyers should not be identified with their clients or their clients' causes as a result of discharging their functions.”

Greater efforts needed to rid Iraq of landmines, says UN report

1 July - A new United Nations report warns that Iraq may not be able to meet its obligations under an international treaty to rid the country of the deadly scourge of anti-personnel landmines, and calls for greater efforts to ensure a safe environment for the population.

Iraq acceded to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, also known as the Ottawa Treaty, in 2008. In doing so, it committed itself to destroy stockpiled mines in four years and to clear minefields in 10 years.



However, a joint report by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), released today with the Iraqi Ministry of Environment, raises concerns that the country is unable to meet its treaty obligations.

"After decades of war and conflict, Iraq has become one of the world's most contaminated countries in terms of landmines and unexploded remnants of war, impacting the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis," said Paolo Lembo, UNDP's Country Director for Iraq.

"Unfortunately, with the Government's current capacities and resources, it is unlikely Iraq will be able to meet its obligations under the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty, as it will take decades to clear all mines and unexploded ordnance," he stated.

The report, "Overview of Landmines and Explosive Remnants of War in Iraq," points out that some 20 million landmines and 2.6 million cluster bomblets are contaminating more than 1,700 square kilometres of Iraq's land, including oil fields and farmlands.

"These unexploded remnants of war are affecting more than 1.6 million Iraqis in some 4,000 communities by significantly impeding both their own and their country's economic recovery," the agencies said in a joint news release.

Since 2008, around 20 square kilometres have been cleared by national and international demining organizations and nearly 276,700 people have received mine-awareness training through UNICEF-supported activities.

According to UNICEF, around 1 million Iraqi children are at risk of being injured or killed by mines and unexploded ordnance. In addition, 2,000 children have been maimed or killed by cluster bomblets since 2003.

"Iraqi children have the right to grow up in a safe environment without risk to their well-being and lives as much as any other child in the world," said Sikander Khan, UNICEF's Iraq Representative. "More action to clear mines and other unexploded ordnance is urgently needed so all Iraqi children can grow up without fear of this hidden enemy and be assured of a safer and better future."

Top UN officials urge donors to help Africa weather food crisis

1 July - As more than 300 million Africans – or about one third of the continent's population – face chronic hunger, donors must honour their pledges to help boost agriculture, which is the key to ensuring food security, top United Nations officials say.

Some 21 African countries now depend on food imports, leaving their populations highly vulnerable to increases in the global prices of such staples as rice, wheat, corn, and cooking oil, according to the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which devoted a meeting of its governing board yesterday to the issue of Africa's food crisis.



"Africa has been hit very hard by several crises – food, finance, fuel – without causing these crises," UNCTAD Secretary-General Supachai Panitchpakdi told the meeting in Geneva. "Africa is an innocent bystander."

He warned that Africa's food crisis may not get the attention it needs since much of the focus in recent months has been on the global financial turmoil, and the impact of that could be severe.

"There may be much less financing just when African farmers need to plant and harvest more," he noted. "I've heard that in some regions, farmers can't plant because they can't get credit... and financing for trade has been lacking. All this has to be remedied."

Some \$22 billion has been pledged to boost agriculture in Africa, but so far "only a few billion have been delivered," he noted. Donor countries that have pledged to increase their assistance must make good on their commitments, despite the current economic slump, he added.

"This must happen this year, because later will be too late," said Mr. Supachai, who called for a "green revolution for Africa of the sort that has occurred in Asia."

Managing the efforts of the UN in response to the food crisis is the Coordinator for the Global Food Security Crisis and Avian and Pandemic Influenza, David Nabarro, who told the meeting that the conditions that created the 2008 food crisis are still present.

He added that with effective, well-funded policies, Africa can both feed itself and contribute to combating hunger elsewhere in the world.