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Ban encourages world leaders to accept Denmark's invite to UN climate summit



12 November - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today strongly encouraged all heads of State and government to accept the invitation issued by Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen to attend the closing days of next month's United Nations climate change conference in Copenhagen.

"The Secretary-General believes that direct head of State and government involvement is essential for governments to reach agreement on the core issues at the heart of a global climate change deal," his spokesperson said in a statement.

The conference, set to begin on 7 December, aims to reach accord on a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, the 1997 pact – part of a larger UN climate change treaty – which has strong, legally binding measures committing 37 industrialized States to cutting greenhouse gas emissions by an average of 5 per cent against 1990 levels over the period from 2008 to 2012.

It will culminate in a summit-level gathering on 17 and 18 December, which Mr. Ban encourages all world leaders to attend.

"The Secretary-General believes it is essential to maintain political momentum at the highest level and from all sectors of society, and is optimistic that an ambitious, fair and effective climate deal can be reached at Copenhagen," the statement read.

DR Congo: amid alleged army atrocities, UN cites civilian protection as top priority

12 November - The top priority for the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the protection of civilians from abuse, be it from the Government forces that it is mandated to support or armed rebel groups, a senior official said today.

“Alas, we are not behind every banana bush,” UN Humanitarian Coordinator Ross Mountain told a news briefing in New York.

He noted that 10 years ago the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had over 40,000 troops to stabilize Kosovo, a territory of 10,000 square kilometres, while the UN mission in the DRC, known as MONUC, is only now moving up from 17,000 uniformed personnel to 20,000 to help bring security to a country of 2.4 million square kilometres.

“Frankly, there’s been extraordinary progress made in us utilizing innovatively the military that we have to do that [protect civilians],” when asked about recent allegations of atrocities committed by the DRC army and police. “Is that adequate? No,” he added, citing army and security sector reform as a major priority.

The issue of such abuse has been raised several times recently, and earlier this month Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Alain Le Roy called for a probe into the targeted killing of dozens of civilians in the DRC’s strife-torn east by military elements.

In October the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Philip Alston, accused DRC troops of killing, raping or mutilating scores of civilians this year in what he called “catastrophic” joint military operations with UN peacekeepers to weed out mainly Rwandan Hutu rebels in the eastern Kivu provinces.

“Quite clearly the exactions that we hear about that are unfortunately at the hands also of the national army as well as the FDLR, the militia, does point to the importance of doing proper reintegration, slimming down the army to a core professional group that can actually protect the population, rather than so often preying on the population,” Mr. Mountain said.

“I think we’ve made enormous strides, but we certainly cannot pretend that we have been able to make sure that exactions by the military or by the other armed groups, the foreign armed groups, are eliminated. If we can reduce them... and I sincerely believe we’ve been able to do a certain amount of that, then we are saving lives.”

Mr. Mountain, who leaves his post this week after serving for five years as Humanitarian Coordinator and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s Deputy Special Representative for the DRC, said that overall he wanted to paint a positive picture when considering the situation the war-torn country was in 10 years ago.

Since then, with MONUC’s help, democratic elections have been held and much of the country is more stable, although vast humanitarian problems remain, with 45,000 people dying each month – 1,500 each day, half of them under the age of five – mostly from preventable diseases and dirty water.

“I’m certainly pleased that the United Nations system in general, and not just MONUC, has contributed significantly to progress, slow, inadequate, but progress over that period of time,” Mr. Mountain said. “This is not an unalloyed story of progress. I repeat, it’s been too slow... certainly those [among 26 million registered] who voted in the elections didn’t vote in a beauty contest, they voted for a better life. It’s been very slow in coming.”

But at least the country is moving in the right direction, he noted. “There needs to be hope that it can continue to progress, it’s not automatic, it’s not irreversible, but it is progress that needs to be sustained through the leadership of the country itself primarily, and the continuing support of the international community. There’s much to be done but it is heading in the right direction,” he added, stressing that he wanted to give a “slightly more upbeat approach” from his vantage point.



Congolese national army soldiers (file photo)

“It is a country that is enormously rich and the population dreadfully poor.”

Maternal mortality in Eastern Europe, Central Asia halved but still high – UN report



A woman poses with her small children in Kaliab Valley, Tajikistan

12 November - The number of women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia dying from complications in childbirth and pregnancy has been slashed by more than half over the last 10 years, participants at a high-level United Nations gathering in Istanbul heard today.

Despite cutting maternal mortality rates from 51 per 100,000 live births to 24, a recent UN Population Fund (UNFPA) progress report noted that many women in vulnerable groups remain at risk.

In response, decision-makers and government officials from 20 countries attending the UNFPA meeting in Istanbul pledged to step up the fight against needless deaths and suffering resulting from pregnancy and childbirth.

“Women who are poor, young, migrants, refugees and those living in remote rural areas do not have sufficient access to much-needed sexual and reproductive health services,” UNFPA Regional Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia Thea Fierens told delegates at the opening of the two-day meeting on maternal health and universal access to reproductive health.

In a statement of commitment issued late last night, delegates at the meeting recognized that investment in the health and rights of women is “smart” economics and that family planning is one of the most cost-effective investments in reducing the maternal deaths that continue to affect the region.

The UNFPA report said that in the last 15 years, the number of induced abortions has dropped from 1,049 per 1,000 live births to 493, and contraceptive use by women has increased, yet the region still has one of the highest abortion rates in the world.

The report noted that in many countries in the region, there is limited access to modern contraception and other reproductive health products. In addition, the quality of antenatal coverage and skilled birth assistance varies widely depending on whether women live in rural areas, their level of education, their age or socio-economic status.

“Investing in access to voluntary family planning and modern contraception is one of the most cost-effective ways for countries to make progress,” said Ms. Fierens. “Proper access to contraceptives not only saves lives, reduces the number of abortions and promotes equality, it is also a cost-effective investment and sound economics.”

UNICEF urges immediate action to tackle food shortages in Southern Sudan

12 November - The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has called for greater efforts to prevent the food shortages in parts of Southern Sudan, caused by poor rains and made worse by insecurity, from escalating into a deeper crisis.

“Now is the time to act. Everybody needs to do their best to stop this humanitarian emergency, which is already affecting 1.5 million people across Southern Sudan,” Hilde F. Johnson, UNICEF’s Deputy Executive Director, said after her three-day visit to the region.

During her fact-finding mission, Ms. Johnson visited communities in Jonglei State which has been the hardest hit by the food shortages, as well as by increased levels of insecurity.

She also travelled to Malakal, Akobo and Bor, where she visited therapeutic feeding centres and saw for herself the impact



Woman and child at an outpatient therapeutic care centre near Malual Bai, Southern Sudan

of food shortages on mothers and severely malnourished children.

“Children are the most vulnerable to nutritional shocks and they are the first to succumb when there is not enough food in the home or the community,” she noted.

UNICEF has responded to the crisis by providing therapeutic food through its partners which has been used to treat severely malnourished children in 79 therapeutic outreach centres across Southern Sudan supported by the agency.

Ms. Johnson welcomed the immediate response of the World Food Programme (WFP) to the problem, but also called on donors and the Government of Southern Sudan to increase their assistance.

Young people in Chadian refugee camps need hope for better future, says UN official



UNHCR workers interviewing people who fled Central African Republic over the border into southern Chad (file)

12 November - The top humanitarian official in Chad called for urgent attention to be paid to providing a better life for young men and women languishing in camps for refugees and displaced persons, warning that the alternatives for them would be prostitution or violence.

“I think this is the time for us as the international community to look into this phenomenon,” Michele Falavigna told a news conference in New York.

Mr. Falavigna, who took up his post as UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Chad about three months ago, said that while there is an obligation to protect and care for refugees, it is also vital to offer young men and women growing up in camps the hope for a decent life.

If not then the young women and girls may join prostitution rings, while the young men will “find a Kalashnikov” and join a gang or armed group, he added.

Eastern Chad is suffering from a spill-over from wars in neighbouring Sudan’s Darfur region and the Central African Republic (CAR), as well as its own rebel conflict and crimes committed in the country by heavily armed bandits.

The region is host to some 300,000 refugees from Darfur, 120,000 from CAR, as well as around 150,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Chad.

Mr. Falavigna voiced hope that 2010 would see a greater increase in returnees within Chad, noting that returns to ancestral lands is now possible, following consultations held between the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), other UN bodies, and local and traditional authorities.

He added that efforts would be made to provide incentives for the CAR refugees to return to their homes, including economic assistance for agriculture and livestock, micro-credit, and assistance in dealing with issues of the right to land.

A UN peacekeeping mission, known as MINURCAT, is in place to protect refugees and other civilians in Chad and CAR.

Speaking in the Chadian capital of N’Djamena today, the head of MINURCAT, Victor da Silva Angelo, highlighted the work being done by the mission in Chad, including supporting the protection of refugees, IDPs and civilians in danger, facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance and working to create favourable conditions for reconstruction and development in eastern Chad.

He also commented on developments in CAR and the wider region, in his speech to the 29th ministerial meeting of the UN Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa.

UN-backed Global Fund awards \$2.4 billion to fight killer diseases over next two years



TB patient signs a register after taking his medication

12 November - The United Nations-backed Global Fund today announced that it has approved new grants worth \$2.4 billion to projects aimed at fighting AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria in low-income countries over the next two years.

This latest round of grants bring the Global Fund's overall commitment to combating the three diseases – which estimates say kill over 4 million people each year – to more than \$18.4 billion for 144 countries since it was created in 2002.

“These grants enable countries around the world to address some of the main problems they are struggling with every day,” said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Chair of the Global

Fund Board of Directors.

“These grants are based on the countries’ own needs and priorities and they are therefore a particularly effective source of financing,” added Dr. Ghebreyesus.

The Fund also approved the roll-out of a \$216 million pilot scheme to reduce prices for effective malaria medicines for nine African countries and Cambodia. The initiative has been funded with contributions from UNITAID, the United Kingdom and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

“We are seeing a tremendous demand for funding,” said Global Fund Executive Director Michel Kazatchkine.

“Countries are showing that they are able to effectively turn large amounts of money from donors into prevention, care and treatment of AIDS, TB and malaria, which in turn will save millions of lives,” added Mr. Kazatchkine.

Yet, he warned that without a significant boost in contributions to the Global Fund from donor countries, “we may not be able to continue approving such amounts of financing and see continued progress in health in the coming years.”

The Fund’s Board also decided to reform its financing process from a grant-by-grant model to continuous funding streams for countries which will now have to manage the grants, resulting in a more simplified reporting system and allowing more long-term planning for individual countries.

Central Asian States seek ways to emerge from economic crisis at UN forum



SECRETARY
JAP
ESCAP Executive Secretary Noeleen
Heyzer

12 November - Government officials from Central Asian and neighbouring countries, international organizations and financial institutions pledged at a United Nations-sponsored forum today to cooperate in developing the best strategies for an early regional recovery from the global economic crisis.

“While economic stimulus packages and other special budgetary measures are important for reviving the economy, regional economic cooperation could be another driver of growth,” Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), told the meeting in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

“There are enormous opportunities to promote intra-regional trade and investment in this region. SPECA provides an excellent framework for addressing a broad range of regional connectivity issues,” she said, referring to UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) Economic Forum, comprising Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The main challenges faced by the region in the short- and medium-term remain multifaceted, including the geographical disadvantage of being landlocked with small domestic markets.

The Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), Jan Kubis, commended the comprehensive anti-crisis policy measures taken by SPECA governments for greatly helping to alleviate economic and social pain in the region caused by the crisis.

He noted that the SPECA Project Working Group on Knowledge-based Development, which started operations last November, was an important initiative of both ESCAP and ECE to promote economic modernization and knowledge-based development in Central Asia.

“This new SPECA Project Working Group is mandated to support the further integration of member countries into the global economy by promoting innovation and knowledge-driven development,” he said.

Participants discussed how external shocks were aggravated by the combined water, energy and food crisis, reviewing individual as well as collective policy responses to emerging challenges. The meeting also considered how knowledge and innovation could contribute to successful economic recovery and, in the longer term, reduce the vulnerability of Central Asian economies to fluctuations in energy and commodity prices.

The Forum was jointly organized by ESCAP and ECE in cooperation with the Kyrgyz Government within the SPECA framework.

More urgent H1N1 treatment needed for at-risk groups with flu symptoms, UN warns



12 November - Immediate H1N1 antiviral treatment for people in at-risk groups with flu symptoms is vital for saving lives, according to updated United Nations guidelines released today, calling for greater urgency than earlier recommendations.

But otherwise-healthy people with only mild illness should not receive antivirals nor should they be used as a preventive measure for such people.

At-risk groups include pregnant women, children under two, and people with underlying conditions such as respiratory problems. Others who have persistent or rapidly worsening symptoms such as difficulty breathing and a high fever lasting beyond three days should also be treated with antivirals, and people who have already developed pneumonia should be given both antivirals and antibiotics to combat bacterial infections.

“These medicines, antivirals and antibiotics, if used in a timely manner, can help save lives,” UN World Health Organization (WHO) global influenza officer Nikki Shindo told a news conference in Geneva. “We have heard that doctors involved in caring for very sick patients in intensive care units regretted that the patients arrived too late and even the most sophisticated medical procedures could not save their lives.

“We asked what could have been done differently to avoid the tragic outcomes. All of them answered, without exception, that things may have been very different if they had been treated with an antiviral drug earlier,” she added, stressing that people not in the at-risk groups and with only a typical cold need not take antivirals.

The pandemic virus can cause severe pneumonia even in healthy young people, though rather minor in proportion, and the virus can take life within a week. “The window of opportunity is very narrow to reverse the progression of the disease,” Dr. Shindo warned. “The medicine needs to be administered before the virus destroys the lungs.

“In the initial guidance, we took a more conservative approach because we had almost no experience with regard to the effectiveness of the antiviral medicine in this disease, and also we were aware that access to the influenza medicine was very limited. Now, we have gained knowledge in effectiveness, safety of the medicine and we have also contributed to the global

availability of the medicine.”

Noting that WHO is supporting developing countries to face an upsurge in cases, Dr. Shindo said States should decentralize the distribution of antivirals and ensure that general practitioners have access to these medicines so that patients do not need to visit a hospital to get them, leaving hospitals freer to treat the most severe cases.

WHO has a stockpile of antivirals to bolster supply in resource-poor countries. In May, at the beginning of the pandemic, it shipped antivirals to 72 countries, and more recently to Afghanistan, Mongolia, Belarus and Ukraine. Additional supplies will soon be sent to Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan.

High-speed Internet gap between rich and poor widening, UN official warns



12 November - While the “digital divide” between rich and poor countries may be shrinking overall, the gap is widening between the developed and developing worlds in the availability of broadband or high-speed Internet, a crucial tool for achieving economic and social goals, a top United Nations official said today.

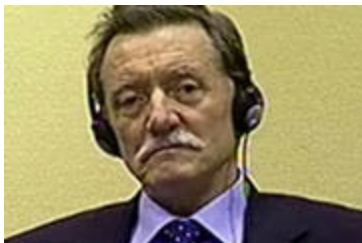
“Australia, for example, a country with 21 million people has more broadband subscribers than the whole of Africa [a continent with nearly 900 million inhabitants],” UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyoo Akasaka told the fourth World Electronic Media Forum in Mexico City.

He stressed that enhanced broadband connectivity can improve access to life-saving health care and information, provide opportunities for skills development and lifelong learning, lower costs for business, and connect farmers to markets, migrants to their families, and citizens to their governments.

“A person in a developed country is on average 200 times more likely than someone in a least developed country to enjoy high-speed access to the Internet,” he said, noting that in the case of Internet use, more than half of the developed world population is now online, compared to only 15 per cent in developing countries.

At the start of this year, there were about 4 billion mobile subscriptions worldwide. “Mobile phones have become one of the most equitably distributed ICTs (information and communication technology),” Mr. Akasaka said. “This is good news. But while the ‘digital divide’ between rich and poor may be shrinking, it is still a major concern.”

UN war crimes tribunal reduces sentence of convicted former Bosnian Serb general



Dragomir Milošević

12 November - The Appeals Chamber of the United Nations tribunal set up to deal with the worst crimes committed during the Balkan wars of the 1990s today cut four years off the 33-year sentence imposed on a former Bosnian Serb army general who commanded much of the siege of Sarajevo.

Dragomir Milošević, who is not related to the former Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, was convicted in 2007 by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), based in The Hague.

He was found guilty on five counts of murder, inflicting terror and committing inhumane acts during a campaign of sniping and shelling, which resulted in the injury and death of a large number of civilians in the Bosnian capital during the second half of the 1992-1995 siege.

The Appeals Chamber ruled today that, “whereas the evidence cited in the Trial Judgement does not support a finding that Milošević planned and ordered the sniping incidents, his command responsibility for having failed to prevent and punish the

said crimes committed by his subordinates has been established beyond reasonable doubt.”

The Chamber upheld the majority of the Trial Chamber’s convictions for ordering the shelling of the civilian population in Sarajevo during the 15-month period, while also granting Mr. Milošević’s appeal in part and reducing his sentence from 33 to 29 years’ imprisonment.

The Prosecution’s request that Mr. Milošević, who is in his late sixties, be sentenced to life imprisonment was dismissed in its entirety.

Ban urges countries to strengthen protection of civilians from cluster bombs



Cluster bombs

12 November - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today urged States to remain focused on strengthening the protection of civilians from the inhumane and indiscriminate impact of cluster munitions, in a speech to the parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).

The CCW – which entered into force in 1983 – comprises a framework convention and four protocols, which ban or restrict the use of various types of weapons that are considered to cause unnecessary suffering or that affect either soldiers or civilians indiscriminately.

In a message delivered in Geneva by Sergio Duarte, United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Mr. Ban described the treaty as an “indispensable element” of today’s humanitarian, disarmament and arms control machinery.

“The CCW can also help us to respond to the humanitarian challenges posed by advancements in weapons technology,” he noted, adding that this is particularly relevant with regard to cluster munitions.

“I urge you to remain focused on strengthening the protection of civilians from the inhumane and indiscriminate impact of these weapons, and to be guided in your efforts by the high standards embodied in the Convention on Cluster Munitions,” said Mr. Ban.

Adopted in May 2008, the Convention on Cluster Munitions prohibits the use, production, transfer, and stockpiling of these weapons, which were first used in World War II. Cluster munitions contain dozens of smaller explosives designed to disperse over an area the size of several football fields, but often fail to detonate upon impact, creating large de facto minefields.

The failure rate makes these weapons particularly dangerous for civilians, who continue to be maimed or killed for years after conflicts end. Some 98 per cent of victims are civilians and cluster bombs have claimed over 10,000 civilian lives, 40 per cent of whom are children.

Mr. Ban also commended the 110 States that have acceded to the CCW to date, and urged all countries that have not yet done so to follow suit.

He added that he is encouraged by the efforts of States parties to increase the number of CCW signatories, including wider adherence and participation among developing countries and States affected by mines and explosive remnants of war.

Tens of thousands of Somali women and children benefit from UN health initiative



Internal Displaced People (IDPs) in Afgooye, Somalia

12 November - At least 83,000 Somali children and women benefited from the Child Health Days Campaign carried out with United Nations support in the Afgooye corridor, which hosts displaced people who fled their homes owing to the violence in the capital, Mogadishu.

The 30-kilometre stretch of road west of Mogadishu is the world's most densely populated settlement for internally displaced persons (IDPs), who live in harsh conditions and lack even the most basic social services, according to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The five-day campaign, carried out with the support of UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO) and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), reached at least 46,000 children under-five and 37,000 women of child-bearing age with critical health services, including vaccinations, vitamin supplements and hygiene education.

"Our joint success in implementing this large-scale outreach in the Afgooye area is a testament to how we can make a difference in Somalia even in the most difficult of circumstances," said Rozanne Chorlton, UNICEF Representative in Somalia.

"Afgooye corridor is one of the locations in Somalia where humanitarian access is very challenging, but it is also where the impact of such an intervention is extremely critical due to the high density of population," she added.

The large-scale campaign was made possible, despite poor infrastructure and lack of appropriate health facilities, thanks to the efforts of more than 200 vaccinators and 300 health workers.

The Child Health Days were launched in Somalia in December 2008 reaching over one million children under five and 800,000 women across the country during the first round. It is repeated every six months to help promote child survival and boost immunization rates, in addition to promoting demand for public health services among communities.

Fighting since early May between Government forces and Al Shabaab and Hisb-ul-Islam has displaced around 160,000 IDPs in the strife-torn country, where around 3.7 million people – or about half the population – are dependent on humanitarian aid due to the combined effects of conflict, drought, high food prices and the collapse of the local currency.

New UN projects seek to speed up progress on global anti-poverty goals



12 November - Ninety new United Nations development projects will be launched over the next three years, a top official said today, to help achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed at slashing a host of social ills, including extreme hunger and poverty, infant and maternal mortality, and lack of access to education and health care – all by 2015.

"This is an incredible opportunity to think more strategically about how, working together, we can accelerate progress on the MDGs and the other goals which loom large in nations' development strategies," UN Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator Helen Clark told the UN World Food Programme (WFP) Executive Board in Rome, where a UN summit on food security is to take place next week.

"Prior to the recession, we could point to significant progress on a number of the Millennium Development Goals. Now

there is well justified concern that hard-won progress towards the MDGs will be reversed. As this Executive Board is only too well aware, that is already the case on the goal to reduce hunger.

“In 2007, just before the global food crisis hit, the number of chronically hungry people in developing countries stood at around 850 million. [The UN Food and Agriculture] FAO believes that number will exceed one billion this year.”

In Madrid on Tuesday, Miss Clark and Spanish Secretary of State for International Cooperation Soraya Rodriguez signed a multi-year agreement for close to €400 million for UNDP projects aimed at reducing poverty and tackling climate change, as well as achieving the MDGs and fostering democratic governance, conflict prevention and recovery, and peacebuilding.

“This development partnership agreement tells us that Spain is no ordinary donor,” said Miss Clark. “Spain is a country which is a partner in every sense in development. It vigorously participates in debate about the direction of development and about what the multi-lateral agencies should be focusing on, and it adds a tremendous amount of value to us as a partner.”

UN humanitarian chief to visit Sri Lanka next week

12 November - The United Nations humanitarian chief will undertake a mission to Sri Lanka next week, the world body announced today.

The 17 to 19 November visit will be the fourth this year for Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes, who previously travelled there in February, April and May.

The UN has been closely monitoring the situation in Sri Lanka, where more than 270,000 people were staying in closed camps after hostilities between the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in May.

In recent months senior UN humanitarian and human rights officials have voiced concern over the safety of these internally displaced persons (IDPs), which according to recent estimates by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) now number about 163,000.



UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes (right) speaking with IDPs in Vavuniya, Sri Lanka, on 27 April 2009