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Ban outlines steps to turn promise of 'responsibility to protect' into practice



21 July - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today outlined a series of measures designed to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and related crimes against humanity, stressing "it is high time to turn the promise of the responsibility to protect into practice."

Agreed to by world leaders in 2005, the 'responsibility to protect' – sometimes known as 'R2P' – holds States responsible for shielding their own populations from genocide and other major human rights abuses and requires the international community to step in if this obligation is not met.

"This universal and irrevocable commitment was made at the highest level, without contradiction or challenge. Our common task now is to deliver on this historic pledge to the peoples of the world," Mr. Ban told the General Assembly, as he presented his latest report on the issue.

The proposals contained in the report, which the 192-member Assembly will consider tomorrow, rest on three pillars: State responsibility; international assistance and capacity-building; and timely and decisive response.

"First, the report seeks to situate the responsibility to protect squarely under the UN's roof and within our Charter, where it belongs," said Mr. Ban. "By developing fully UN strategies, standards, and processes for implementing the responsibility to protect, we can discourage States or groups of States from misusing these principles for inappropriate purposes."

The report also asserts that prevention should be “job number one,” and offers a “balanced and nuanced” approach to prevention and protection that utilizes the full inventory of tools available to the UN and its partners, he stated.

In addition, the report proposes engaging Member States in a discussion about how to sharpen UN capacities for early warning and assessment. “When prevention fails, the United Nations needs to pursue an early and flexible response tailored to the circumstances of each case,” said the Secretary-General. “Military action is a measure of last, not first, resort and should only be undertaken in accordance with the provisions of the Charter.”

Lastly, the report seeks to encourage each of the UN’s principal organs to play its distinct and appropriate role under the Charter in developing and implementing the responsibility to protect.

Mr. Ban asked States to let the Assembly do what it does best: to provide the venue for a continuing search for common ground on a multilateral strategy to protect the world’s people from what he described as “massive affronts to human dignity.”

He also urged that the victims of such atrocities and crimes, who number in the millions, not be forgotten. “Those losses have permanently stained the history of the 20th century. Together, in this century, we can chart a different course,” he stated.

“Never forget, too, the complacency and cynicism that often prevented this Organization from acting as early or as effectively as it should have,” he added. “Our publics judged us then, and found us wanting. They will be watching again this week, and they will – rightfully – judge us harshly if we treat these deliberations as politics as usual.”

Arab development held back by lack of human security, UN-backed report says

21 July - A widespread lack of basic elements of human security, such as access to clean water, freedom from hunger, democracy and a robust rule of law, is denying citizens of Arab countries the ability to fulfil their potential, according to a United Nations-sponsored report released today.

The annual Arab Human Development Report noted that human security – which it called a pre-requisite for human development – is being undermined by the region’s unjust political, social, and economic systems, a scramble for power and resources among fragmented social groups and, in some cases, the impact of external military intrusion.



Environmental degradation: toxic effluent flows from this rubbish mountain in Sidon, Lebanon, directly into the sea

“The tendency is to think of security only in military or state security terms,” said Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, Director of the UN Development Programme’s (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Arab States.

But Mr. Al Alim Alsoswa said that the ability of some 330 million people in the Arab world to lead stable lives and achieve their potential is not only threatened by conflict and civil unrest, but “also by environmental degradation, discrimination, unemployment, poverty, and hunger.”

He stressed that only if these sources of insecurity are addressed “will the people of the Arab region be able to make progress in human development.”

The report, which draws on contributions from more than 100 Arab scholars, identifies a series of measures to improve human security, including: guarantees on universal basic rights and freedoms, especially for women; better protection for the environment; tackling poverty and hunger; expanding access to affordable health services; and ending occupation and military interventions, which cause human suffering and erase decades of economic development.

UNDP noted that the report highlighted that in six Arab countries, “there is an outright ban on the formation of political parties, while restrictions on political activities and civic organizations in other countries often amount to *de facto* prohibition.”

“National security measures such as the declaration of emergency law often serve as a pretext to suspend basic rights, exempt rulers from constitutional limitations, and afford security agencies sweeping powers,” it added.

Pointing to the poverty and hunger despite the comparative affluence in the region, the report said that one in five people live on less than \$2 per day, below the internationally recognized poverty line, but stated that a more accurate estimate would be that 20 per cent of Arabs live in poverty.

Large segments of the population in low-income countries face basic deprivation, reflected in inadequate access to safe water and a high incidence of underweight children, with the number of undernourished people in the region rising from almost 20 million in 1990-1992 to 25.5 million in 2002-2004.

Since 2002 Arab Human Development Reports (AHDRs) have targeted decision-makers and opinion leaders in governments and civil societies, helping build consensus around regional and national development priorities and identify disadvantaged populations and religious groups suggesting policies, strategies and opportunities for investment to benefit them.

As instruments for measuring human progress and triggering action for change, the AHDRs feed into and draw upon the data and analysis of the global Human Development Reports, which promote regional partnerships for influencing change and region-specific approaches to human rights, poverty, education, economic reform, HIV/AIDS, and globalization.

The global HDR was first launched in 1990 and the Human Development Index has become a globally-recognized measure which ranks countries using indicators such as life-expectancy, levels of education and standards of living as its guide.

UN's humanitarian efforts this year face \$5 billion shortfall



Thousands of Somali refugees, like these, continue to arrive in Kenya

21 July - More than halfway through 2009, United Nations agencies and their humanitarian partners face a nearly \$5 billion gap in funding to respond to the most severe crises, with the UN's top relief official warning today that the world's poorest and most vulnerable people have been hardest hit by the global recession.

Of the \$9.5 billion appealed for to cover activities for 2009, less than half has been received to date, leaving a \$4.8 billion gap, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

“It is clear that the global recession puts pressure on the aid budgets of all donor governments, but of course it puts immeasurably more pressure on crisis-stricken people in poor countries,” said Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes.

Only a fraction of the money committed by governments to private financial institutions in the midst of the economic turmoil is needed to ensure that those in need are “getting the best available protection and assistance on time,” he added.

Since the start of the year, the Consolidated and Flash Appeals have been revised upward by \$1.5 billion due to deteriorating humanitarian situations in some areas.

For example, acute food insecurity and the influx of refugees from neighbouring Somalia has driven up funding requirements for Kenya up by almost \$200 million, while the Israeli military operation in Gaza earlier this year has caused needs to increase there by over \$300 million.

Despite the end of more than two decades of fighting between the Government and separatist Tamils in Sri Lanka, humanitarian requirements have surged by more than \$100 million due to the needs of the 285,000 people uprooted by violence.

The UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) – which seeks to speed up assistance to those suffering from natural and man-made disasters as well as support critically under-funded emergencies – has allocated more than \$150 million to 18 appeals.

Mr. Holmes, who also serves as UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, today announced the allocation of a further \$55 million for 11 protracted emergency situations in countries including the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Ethiopia.

More women in Cambodia turning to sex trade amid financial crisis – UN report

21 July - The global financial crisis has led to signs of an increase in Cambodian women entering the sex trade, says a new United Nations report, which recommends strengthening social safety nets and improving job training and placement to help women avoid such dangerous and exploitative work.



The report, prepared by the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP), is based on research conducted in April and May involving 357 women and girls aged between 15 and 49 currently working in the entertainment sector of the capital, Phnom Penh, including in brothels, karaoke bars and massage parlours.

“The objective of this research was to measure increases in human trafficking and exploitation in Cambodia as a result of the financial crisis, specifically, the trafficking of women and girls into the entertainment sector,” UNIAP says in a news release issued yesterday.

The report shows that during the crisis, women have entered the sex trade coming from situations where there have been declining working conditions, such as in the garment sector, where they experienced long working hours and low pay.

The most common reason given by the women and girls for entering the sex trade was “difficult family circumstances,” followed by “easily earn a lot of money, in good working conditions.”

Most massage parlour workers, 57 per cent, found their jobs independently, while 46 per cent of karaoke workers found theirs through friends. Nearly 80 per cent of direct sex workers also found their jobs on their own.

The report also found that 58 per cent of women who entered the entertainment sector before the crisis were in debt, while the same was true of 42 per cent who entered after the crisis.

“It could be assumed that the shift in women turning from money lenders to sex establishment bosses for loans may lead to more women being vulnerable to the control tactics and violence that are often thought to be associated with debt bondage,” states UNIAP.

However, it was debts to money lenders, and not debt bondage, that was found to be significantly associated with the worst violence and worst restrictions on freedoms among those surveyed.

The report recommends strengthening social safety nets, designed to meet the needs of families with women who are vulnerable to exploitation and degrading working conditions, as well as linking women who want jobs featuring better working conditions with alternative livelihood training and job placement assistance.

Also recommended is the use of targeted awareness raising and outreach to provide specific, clear information to people who may be vulnerable, for example on how to access social services and training that will lead to jobs, the risks of using moneylenders, and how to qualify for and access safer sources of loans and credit.

Nearly 300,000 uprooted Pakistanis return home to northwest – UN



Displaced women and children rest in the dwelling of a host family in north-west Pakistan

21 July - Almost 300,000 Pakistanis – out of some 2 million uprooted by clashes in the country's northwest – have returned home, the top United Nations humanitarian official said today, hailing the returns as a “positive development.”

Last week, the Pakistani authorities began a programme for internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to some parts of Buner and Swat, among the areas hardest hit by the operations pitting Government forces against militants in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

The returns are “largely individual and spontaneous,” with the Government providing support in some instances, said Wolfgang Herbinger, the acting UN Humanitarian

Coordinator for Pakistan.

Over the past week, some 280,000 people have returned to Swat and Buner, where he estimated that over half those who fled fighting have now returned.

The vast majority of the 2 million people who have escaped the violence are sheltering either in schools and other public buildings, with host families or in rental accommodations.

With the monsoon season set to start shortly, the camps housing a portion of the IDPs are in danger of flooding, and the Government “is making efforts to move people and ask whether they want to return” to their homes, Mr. Herbinger said.

Last week, the top UN humanitarian official underscored the need for returns to be voluntary, with “no obligation to return before people are ready.”

Under-Secretary-General John Holmes, who visited Pakistan earlier this month, stressed the need for proper consultation with the people concerned and to ensure that the right conditions are in place for their returns. “There has to be basic security there... the power needs to be on, the water needs to be running, the police force needs to be there, the local administration needs to be in place.

“The main point is that returns have got to be sustainable,” he stressed, adding that the worst scenario would be if people went back and were then displaced again.

The UN, Mr. Herbinger said today, is “trying to ease” the return of displaced people, with the UN World Food Programme (WFP) providing food in places of return and setting up humanitarian hubs where items will be handed out.

With plans in place for a military offensive in Waziristan, also in north-west Pakistan, the UN, he said, is undertaking contingency plans, planning to set up logistics centres where it believes people might escape to.

In a related development, the UN humanitarian arm announced today that only 43 per cent of the \$542 million required to assist Pakistan, the scene of what is currently the world's fourth largest displacement crisis, has been provided for.

Although support for the most essential needs such as food has been relatively well-funded, Mr. Herbinger voiced concern that given the start of returns, IDPs will need support for the foreseeable future.

“I do not think the international community has given the depth and extent of this humanitarian crisis the attention that it deserves,” he said.

The funds appealed for have increased ten-fold from the original 2009 appeal for Pakistan, launched last November, due to the unravelling humanitarian situation in the South Asian nation's north-west.

Last week, Zill-e Usman, a 59-year-old Pakistani national who had served with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) since 1984, was shot by unidentified gunmen in the Kutcha Gari camp on the border of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in NWFP. Four to five gunmen reportedly opened fire as he was walking back from the camp administrative office to his car during a routine visit to the site.

Top UN officials roundly condemned the killing, with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon strongly condemning the "brutal attack on humanitarian personnel who are working for the well-being of the Pakistani people," according to a statement issued by his spokesperson.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres voiced his outrage at the killing of Mr. Usman, who leaves behind a wife and four children. "There is no justification for attacks on humanitarian workers dedicated to the protection and care of the most vulnerable people," he said.

The slain UNHCR staff member was working on the repatriation of people displaced by a conflict in Pakistan's tribal areas that broke out in August 2008.

UN blue helmets conduct election training for hundreds of DR Congo police officers

21 July - More than 500 Congolese police officers have received training in ensuring security for upcoming local, urban and municipal elections, the United Nations peacekeeping operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) announced today.

In the latest round of instruction, the UN mission (MONUC) and the Congolese National Police (PNC) trained 555 officers in the town of Kisangani last week.

MONUC reported that it has now trained some 6,965 Congolese policemen in several towns across the DRC, and plans on extending the programme to over 76,000 personnel in total.

There are three separate courses used for training different categories of policemen:

the management of queues in front of polling stations, intervention and arrest for police in charge of voting station security; teaching personnel working in the area of information gathering; and evacuation preparedness for reserve policemen, MONUC said.

Between 2005 and 2007, MONUC police trained PNC personnel who successfully ensured the security of the presidential and parliamentary elections in the DRC monitored by the UN.

UN committee discusses new forms of discrimination against women

21 July - The United Nations committee which monitors compliance with the international convention on eliminating discrimination against women is 30 years old this year, but as it meets this week at UN Headquarters in New York, it is considering some very modern problems.

"We're asking countries about the impact of the financial crisis on their basic social services, including women's salaries and women's unemployment," says the chair of the committee, Naela Mohammed Gabr. She adds that committee is also considering the "scourge" of trafficking in women, and the impact on women of diseases including outbreaks of influenza.



“Don’t worry, there will still be plenty of work for us in another 30 years’ time,” Ms. Gabr laughs. “There is no ceiling for improvement in the human situation.”

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has various means of influencing countries’ behaviour, including the publication of its observations, with recommendations to be followed up.

All the committee’s findings go to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, and form part of the Universal Periodic Review process, which involves a review of the records of all 192 UN Member States once every four years. Ms. Gabr believes that a good report is “important for the image and credibility of each country.”

Ms. Gabr believes that sooner or later, all Member States will join the Convention, including the United States, which has signed but not ratified it. She hopes the new US administration will move to ratify it soon. “The issue is that they will join, with or without reservations,” she said, adding that even some countries that had joined the Convention without reservations did not have a perfect record of implementation. “The issue is that the US should and will join,” Ms. Gabr said.

At this week’s meeting, the committee’s 22 independent experts will review the situation of women in Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Denmark, Guinea-Bissau, Laos, Japan, Liberia, Spain, Switzerland, Timor-Leste and Tuvalu.

Growing insecurity in Somali capital hampering aid access, UN warns

21 July - Aid workers are finding it increasingly difficult to gain access and provide assistance to residents of the Somali capital because of the worsening conflict there, the United Nations refugee agency reported today.

This week’s scheduled distribution of 4,000 aid kits in Mogadishu and surrounding areas had to be postponed because of security concerns, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesman Ron Redmond told journalists in Geneva.

The looting by militants of UN facilities in Baidoa and Wajid yesterday has meant assistance efforts in those areas have also ground to a halt.

“We again appeal to the warring parties in Somalia to respect basic international humanitarian and human rights principles and to guarantee the safety and security of the civilian population as well as for the humanitarian workers trying to help the victims,” Mr. Redmond said.

The UN’s top humanitarian official, John Holmes, warned yesterday that aid workers in Somalia – and many other countries – are coming under increasingly violent attack.

Today Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement through his spokesperson condemning the looting.

“Such acts target the whole gamut of UN peace and humanitarian operations in Somalia,” the statement noted. “The UN is providing life-saving support to people in need throughout Somalia, and will continue to do all it can to help the country emerge from decades of violence.”

An estimated 223,000 residents have now left Mogadishu since early May, when the Al-Shabaab and Hisb-ul-Islam militant groups launched attacks against Government forces in the capital. In the past fortnight alone, about 20,000 people have fled their homes.

The newly displaced join another 400,000 Somalis packed into the Afgooye corridor, a congested strip of land that runs southwest from Mogadishu and is packed with makeshift shelters.

Mr. Redmond said non-governmental organizations (NGOs) trying to operate in the Afgooye area say they are overstretched



A group of displaced Somalis at a food distribution centre

and unable to cope with the latest influx.

“There is a lack of adequate shelter, sanitation facilities and clean drinking water. The situation has grown worse following recent torrential rains. The lack of sufficient latrines poses a major health risk.”

The widespread insecurity means aid workers are struggling to deliver humanitarian assistance from the port of Mogadishu to the Afgooye corridor.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that it is especially concerned about deadly outbreaks of acute watery diarrhoea, which is on the rise again around Mogadishu after two years of decline.

WHO is working with its NGO partners to provide cholera kits, oral rehydration sachets, aqua tabs and chlorine, and transport communication sets in a bid to contain the outbreaks of diarrhoea and cholera.

Two of Mogadishu’s four functioning hospitals are admitting only war-wounded patients and trauma patients for emergency surgery, which is adding to the burden for other facilities.

In the Bakool region, which is home to at least 300,000 people, several health facilities – including a hospital in the town of Xudur – have had to be closed because of insecurity and hostility towards aid workers.

A spokesperson for the World Food Programme (WFP) said that the agency was committed to helping Somalis and was continuing its operations, despite yesterday’s attack by looters.

Top UN envoy urges restraint after recent incidents in southern Lebanon



UNIFIL troops at work observing Section 83 near the Blue Line on the border between Lebanon and Israel

21 July - A top United Nations official has called for restraint following recent incidents in southern Lebanon, including the wounding of several of the world body’s peacekeepers during an investigation into an explosion at an arms cache last week.

Fourteen soldiers serving with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) were reportedly injured, and some UN vehicles damaged, on Saturday when protesters tried to stop the investigation in the area of Khirbat Silim.

“We really need now to lower the temperature, to try and address the issues and not see any escalation which would be bad for 1701 and for Lebanon,” Michael Williams, the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, said following his meeting yesterday with Prime Minister

Fuad Siniora.

Security Council resolution 1701, which helped to end the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbollah, called for renewed respect for the Blue Line separating the Lebanese forces and Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), the disarming of militias and an end to arms smuggling, among other elements.

Last week UN spokesperson Marie Okabe told reporters that the incident of the explosions constitutes a serious violation of resolution 1701, notably with regards to the provision that there should be no presence of unauthorized assets or weapons in the area of operation between the Litani River and the Blue Line.

“Clearly there were violations of 1701,” said Mr. Williams, who discussed the incidents in a series of meetings over the past two days with senior Lebanese officials. In addition to Mr. Siniora, he also met with Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, and with Assembly Speaker Nabih Berri.

After his meeting with Mr. Hariri, the Special Coordinator stated, “Any resolution from time to time faces many tests and challenges. There have been some testing incidents in recent days.”

“I take this opportunity to call on all parties to renew their commitment and to exercise the utmost restraint.”

Mr. Williams also called again on Israel to put an end to its air violations of the Blue Line, which he said Lebanon is subject to “on a daily basis.”

Rule of law focus of UN-backed training in Caribbean



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

21 July - The United Nations has helped train nearly 90 officials of Caribbean Community (CARICOM) nations on the consolidation and advancement of the rule of law, a top priority of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The three-day workshop last week in Kingstown in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines brought together 17 men and 69 women serving with their nations’ foreign affairs and justice ministries, as well as judges and attorneys general.

Convened by CARICOM and organized in collaboration with the UN Treaty Section of the Office of Legal Affairs (OLA), the gathering touched on international treaty law, participation in multilateral treaties and how the UN can assist CARICOM nations implement treaties on the domestic level.

Earlier this month, Mr. Ban hailed the cooperation between the UN and CARICOM in tackling the various crises impacting the region and the world at large, including the global financial turmoil and climate change.

“In the current daunting international environment, our partnership is more important than ever,” he said in a message to the heads of government meeting of the regional body in Georgetown, Guyana.

CARICOM nations, the Secretary-General said, which are highly vulnerable to external shocks and among the most indebted in the world, are especially affected by the economic and financial crisis.

Greater efforts needed to help refugees outside Iraq, says senior UN official

21 July - A senior official with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has pressed Iraqi authorities to do more to include refugees living outside the country’s borders in its national reconciliation process.

L. Craig Johnstone, Deputy High Commissioner for UNHCR, is halfway through a five-day visit to Iraq, where he is meeting with officials and is assessing the agency’s operations for returnees, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

During his talks yesterday with Vice-President Tarek Al-Hashimi, as well as the Minister of Human Rights and Minister for Migration and Development, UNHCR spokesperson Ron Redmond said that Mr. Johnstone stressed that “while the Government had quite naturally focused in the last few years on the situation inside the country, it was now time to increase contacts with refugee communities outside Iraq and to begin fostering a climate of confidence in the future in terms of security, political assurances and protection.”

This, the Deputy High Commissioner said, could pave the way for refugees to return voluntarily, but he also acknowledged that due to insecurity in some areas, “we are not there yet.”

He also commended the Iraqi Government for its compensation package for returnees and IDP families.

However, Mr. Johnstone underscored that greater efforts – including the provision of land for returnees – are crucial since the situation in Iraq will no be resolved “until the plight of displaced people and refugees has been resolved.



Iraqi refugees try to earn a living in the Sayyida Zeinab market in Damascus, Syria

Shelter, he pointed out, is also crucial in laying the groundwork for the return of uprooted people.

UNHCR and its Iraqi partners have rehabilitated 5,000 homes for returnees and IDPs, with another 20,000 to be refurbished by the end of this year, Mr. Redmond told reporters in Geneva.

“The Deputy High Commissioner pledged that UNHCR will help in every way it can, particularly with respect to shelter because we accept the notion that people cannot return if they do not have safety and a home to return to,” the spokesperson said.

Currently, there are still more than 1.5 million Iraqis living outside the country, mostly in Syria and Jordan, with a further 2 million others displaced within Iraq.

Justice key to ensuring human rights for all Afghans – UN envoy



Kai Eide, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan

21 July - The top United Nations envoy to Afghanistan today called for strengthening the country’s justice system, which he stressed is fundamental for ensuring the rule of law and respect for human rights.

“The lack of proper access to justice leads to daily violations of human rights and to an atmosphere of impunity,” Kai Eide, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative, said at a human rights conference held in the capital, Kabul.

“Laws are of critical importance. However, they will only be effective in protecting the individual if the mechanisms for enforcement exist, including a well functioning justice system,” he added.

Mr. Eide, who also heads the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), noted that the price for failing to improve the justice system – as well as strengthening the police – include lack of respect for rule of law, human rights violations, corruption and lack of economic development.

Addressing the atmosphere of impunity also means tackling the crimes of the past, he said. “If we fail to address past violations of human rights, then we will not be able to ensure future respect for human rights.”

The Special Representative said that while the country has made “significant” achievements in recent years and enabled millions to live a better life, much more remains to be done. The ongoing conflict and poverty are two factors which hamper the development of human rights in Afghanistan.

“Both hold the development of human rights back. But both also make a broadly based fight for human rights all the more critical,” said Mr. Eide.

Another issue that hampers development is the violence against women and their marginalization in society, he said. “No society has successfully developed and put poverty and misery behind without engaging the entire population – male and female.”

While applauding the recent signing by the President of the Law on the Elimination of Violence against women, Mr. Eide said the challenge now will be to secure approval by Parliament and then ensure its enforcement. Also vital is for men to stand up more firmly against violence and discrimination, and for the mobilization of women, as well as political, religious and community leaders.

On women’s participation, he noted that there are more female candidates standing for next month’s provincial council elections than during previous polls, and said he hoped there would be more than one female member of the new government to be formed later this year.

“The problem is not a lack of competence. The problem is a lack of access,” he stated. “The fact that the Afghan Parliament has one quarter female members is a significant achievement. And it will gradually also have an impact on other government institutions.

“However, the participation of women should not depend on Constitutional provisions only, but reflect an understanding of the need to bring women more fully into public life.”

Mr. Eide added that the 20 August presidential and provincial council elections must be “credible, inclusive and fair. We need elections, where all Afghans can cast their ballots. And we need elections, where each candidate can campaign in an atmosphere of fairness.”

In this regard, he voiced support for the conclusions of the Media Commission which today expressed concern about violations in the electoral process, particularly the interference of Government officials in favour of one candidate or another.

“In the heat of the campaign nobody must forget that these elections are about more than who will win. They are about the legitimacy and the credibility of the governing institutions.”

Meanwhile, the Secretary-General’s Deputy Special Representative has called for safe passage for humanitarian aid, as the worsening security situation continues to shrink the area of operations available to relief agencies.

“Humanitarian actors have come under attack, have died, and supplies have been prevented from reaching urgently needed beneficiaries,” Robert Watkins told a news conference in Kabul today. “We appeal to those parties to allow humanitarian access into those areas so that all in the country can benefit from this international aid.”

Last month alone saw at least four security incident targeting humanitarian workers in the country, according to the UN which, along with its partners, is trying to assist millions around the country made vulnerable by natural disasters, lack of access to basic social services, increasing food insecurity and the ongoing conflict.

“Because of the security problems in the country, we are not able to access all the people that require assistance – so the issue of accessibility is at the top of our agenda,” said Mr. Watkins, who leads the Mission’s relief, recovery and reconstruction pillar.

UN experts offer help in investigating killings of rights defenders



Natalia Estemirova

21 July - United Nations independent human rights experts today said that they stand ready to assist Russian authorities in carrying out an independent investigation into the recent string of murders of human rights lawyers, journalists and defenders, including the killing last week of Natalia Estemirova, a prominent activist looking into alleged rights abuses in Chechnya.

The seven experts acknowledged that Russia’s leaders have expressed outrage and have pledged that all necessary steps will be taken to apprehend and punish those behind the killing of Ms. Estemirova.

“However, these assurances will be worth little unless the authorities take steps that go beyond what has been done in the past, which has all too often led to a cycle of impunity,” they said in a press release issued in Geneva.

Ms. Estemirova, who worked for the non-governmental organization (NGO) Memorial, was kidnapped on 15 July near her home in the Chechen capital, Grozny, and her body was found in neighbouring Ingushetia later in the day with two bullet wounds to the head and chest.

The slain activist had worked for many years to promote human rights in the North Caucasus, having received numerous awards. Those included the Anna Politkovskaya Prize from the Nobel Women's Initiative, which was named for the Russian journalist and outspoken human rights campaigner who was killed in 2006, with whom Ms. Estemirova had worked.

She had also worked alongside Stanislav Markelov, a human rights lawyer who was killed after having given a press conference in Moscow on 19 January.

"We offer our assistance to the Russian authorities in light of the failure to effectively and impartially investigate the killings and attacks on a number of human rights defenders in recent years and to prosecute and bring the perpetrators to justice," the experts, who serve in an unpaid capacity, said.

Bringing an end to impunity would deter further violence and harassment against rights defenders, they added.

Last week, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay called for a thorough and independent investigation into Ms. Estemirova's killing.

Ms. Pillay welcomed the announcement that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has ordered a high-level investigation, urging authorities "to do all they can to ensure that the perpetrators are prosecuted and brought to justice."

Ms. Estemirova's death – the latest in a series of killings or attacks against rights activists, journalists and lawyers in the country – "sadly underlines once again the need for governments to do much more to protect human rights defenders," Ms. Pillay said.

For his part, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he is appalled and saddened by Ms. Estemirova's "heinous" killing, calling on authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice "to send a strong and unambiguous message that the targeting of human rights will not be tolerated," according to a statement issued by his spokesperson.

"The Secretary-General expresses his solidarity with human rights defenders around the world who work courageously and selflessly each and every day, in defense of basic rights and freedoms," it added.

The Russian Government, the seven rights experts stressed today, is responsible under international human rights law to ensure the protection of human rights defenders "against any violence, threats, retaliation, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a result of their human rights work."

The seven experts behind today's press release are: Philip Alston, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Frank La Rue, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Manfred Nowak, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; Margaret Sekaggya, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Leandro Despouy, Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers; Yakin Ertürk, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences; and Santiago Corcuera Cabezut, Chairperson-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

Disease killing fish in Zambezi River risks spreading to other parts of Africa, UN warns



Fishing on the Zambezi River in Zambia

21 July - A deadly disease devastating fish stocks in Africa's Zambezi River basin and threatening the livelihoods and access to food of millions of rural people could soon reach other parts of the continent, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned today.

The most affected country is Zambia, covering two-thirds of the basin's almost 1.4 million square kilometres, with over 2,000 villages and some 7,000 people now at risk of hunger as fish is a major source of income in many rural districts and the cheapest source of protein,

said FAO.

The disease, called Epizootic Ulcerative Syndrome (EUS), is caused by a fungus forming deep lesions on fish and results in high mortality rates.

Although fish infected with EUS do not normally pose a threat to humans, the ugly lacerations render them unmarketable, threatening some 25 million people dependent on agriculture or fishing and fish farming in the Zambezi River basin with serious economic loss.

“If not properly contained there is the risk of the disease spreading to other countries surrounding the Zambezi River as well as river systems in the region,” said Rohana Subasinghe, FAO Senior Fishery Resources Officer.

Indications are that EUS, which was first confirmed in Africa in 2007, is spreading both upstream and downstream of the Zambezi and risks taking hold in other parts of Africa, FAO said in a news release.

Since 2007, FAO has bolstered defenses in the seven Zambezi River basin countries – Angola, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe – against the disease, with measures including basic diagnosis, targeted surveillance and aquatic animal health management.

In cooperation with the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), FAO is establishing a programme to strengthen institutional and human ability for managing aquatic animal health in the wild in the affected Southern African countries.

EUS, now present in at least 24 countries worldwide, first appeared in Japan in the early 1970s and then spread to Australia and much of Asia, while the United States was hit in 1984.

FAO said that controlling EUS in natural waters is an impossible task, but in fish farming operations a number of simple biosecurity measures – preventing possible carriers getting into water bodies or fish ponds, removing dead fish and improving water quality – can minimize its spread.

Ending river blindness possible with commonly-used drug, finds UN study

21 July - Eliminating river blindness is feasible with ivermectin, a commonly-used drug that has contributed to significantly controlling the disease in endemic countries, according to evidence published today in a United Nations study.

Over 37 million people, mostly in poor, rural African communities are infected with onchocerciasis, which is often called river blindness because the blackfly which transmits the disease breeds in rivers. Blindness is the most debilitating symptom of this public health threat which also causes skin disease.

Published today in the open-access journal PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases are the results of a study showing that treatment with ivermectin stopped further infections and transmission in three specific areas of Mali and Senegal where the disease has been endemic.

Previously, it was thought that elimination of river blindness was only possible in the limited, isolated areas in the Americas where the disease is endemic, according to a news release issued by the UN World Health Organization (WHO), which collaborated with the health ministries of the two countries in carrying out the study.

“This evidence is an historic milestone – it has far-reaching implications for the fight against this disease. Prior to this study we did not know if we would ever be able to stop treatment,” said Uche Amazigo, the Director of the African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC).



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

APOC is charged with implementing control of the disease across Africa, where more than 99 per cent of cases are found.

Merck & Co., Inc. – the company that discovered and manufactures ivermectin – agreed in 1987 to donate the drug free of charge to countries where river blindness is endemic, resulting in the treatment of over 60 million people in 26 African countries in 2008.

While this enabled the control of river blindness in Africa, it has not been clear whether it could also be used to eliminate infection and transmission to the extent that treatment with ivermectin could be safely stopped, said WHO.

The agency noted that ivermectin kills the larvae but not the adult worms of *Onchocerca volvulus*, the parasite that causes the disease, so annual or biannual treatments are required to prevent resurgence.

The study shows that after 15 to 17 years of six monthly or annual treatments, only a few infections remained in the human population.

“Transmission levels were below predicted thresholds for elimination, so treatment was subsequently stopped in test areas and follow-up evaluations after 1.5 to two years showed that no further infections or transmission occurred,” stated WHO.

“Although further studies are needed to determine to what extent these findings can be extrapolated to other areas in Africa, the principle of onchocerciasis elimination with ivermectin treatment has been established,” it added.

Earlier this month, WHO announced the launch of a clinical trial in three African countries for the drug moxidectin, which is being investigated for its potential to kill or sterilize the adult worms of the parasite that causes river blindness.

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 development of the drug is being conducted through a collaboration of the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, which is executed by WHO and Wyeth Pharmaceuticals.

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