



In the headlines:

- Ban voices sympathy to family after UN staffer's remains found in Lebanon
- Sri Lanka: top UN official welcomes recent releases of displaced from camps
- Kidnappings, attacks threaten to undercut UN-AU efforts in Darfur – Ban
- UN still concerned over access to civilians displaced by Yemen conflict
- New UN energy report says 1.5 billion people worldwide live in darkness
- Bosnia needs continued support amid political impasse, Security Council told
- Military action alone will not defeat scourge of piracy, Secretary-General says
- Paper football signed by UN chief fetches over \$200,000 at charity auction
- Ban lauds new report on ways to boost development cooperation with Africa
- New policy centre and trust fund in Seoul mark shift in UN-Korean relations
- UN-backed demobilization process begins in North Darfur
- Number of researchers rising globally but women still in minority – UN report

More stories inside

Ban voices sympathy to family after UN staffer's remains found in Lebanon

23 November - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today expressed his sympathies to the family of Alec Collett, a staff member of the United Nations agency assisting Palestinian refugees who disappeared 24 years ago and whose remains have now been found in Lebanon.

Mr. Collett, a former British journalist, was on assignment for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) when he was abducted by armed men near Beirut Airport in 1985.

In a statement issued by his spokesperson, Mr. Ban voiced his appreciation for the role played by the relevant authorities in the United Kingdom and in Lebanon to resolve this matter after so many years, and for the work done by the UN Department of Safety and Security in helping to determine what happened to Mr. Collett.

“Although he is saddened by Alec Collett’s death, he hopes that the actions taken to find his remains can provide a measure of comfort to his loved ones,” read the statement.

Mr. Ban also restated the UN’s commitment to assist Mr. Collett’s family in the days ahead.



Elaine Collett (left), wife of Alec Collett, gives Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon a memorial pin on 25 March 2008

The UN Staff Union, in a statement, noted that Mr. Collett's fate "symbolizes the fate of too many staff members who have just 'disappeared' or have been detained for long periods while serving the Organization."

It added that 25 March – the day of Mr. Collett's abduction – will continue to be observed as the International Day of Solidarity with Detained and Missing Staff Members, to draw global attention to the risks faced throughout the world by the media, and staff and peacekeepers of the UN and other relief agencies.

Sri Lanka: top UN official welcomes recent releases of displaced from camps



Under-Secretary-General John Holmes speaks with some resettled IDPs in northern Sri Lanka, 18 November 2009

23 November - The top United Nations humanitarian official, who just returned from a three-day visit to Sri Lanka, today praised the swift discharge in recent weeks of many of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had been confined to makeshift camps for several months.

By the time the Government declared an end to its military operations against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May, over 300,000 IDPs were in camps in northern Sri Lanka.

"When I was in Menik Farm [the largest IDP camp] at the end of last week, the number of people there was less than half of what it had been at the end of the hostilities," Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes told reporters in New York

Mr. Holmes said that less than 135,000 IDPs now remain in that camp, with up to 3,000 people leaving every day and another 30,000 slated to return to Kilinochchi district – a former LTTE stronghold – on 1 December.

He said Government officials had confirmed that all the camps will be emptied by the end of January, and from the beginning of next month IDPs will be granted freedom to move in and out of the camps.

"Nevertheless, there are concerns about the quality of the returns process," said Mr. Holmes, who also serves as the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator.

He raised questions over the amount of notice and preparation time given to IDPs and UN agencies on the ground before authorities direct the movement of people. There are also concerns over the speed of landmine clearance and quality of basic services in the areas where IDPs are returning.

The Government provides a cash payment of around \$220, which is set to double, as well as roofing materials to help IDPs re-establish their lives and rebuild destroyed housing, "but there is not doubt it will be a difficult process," he stated.

On his visit to Sri Lanka, Mr. Holmes spent two days visiting IDP camps in Jaffna and Vavuniya before heading to Colombo to meet with President Mahinda Rajapaksa and other Government officials, as well as a delegation from the Tamil National Alliance.

Kidnappings, attacks threaten to undercut UN-AU efforts in Darfur – Ban



UNAMID peacekeepers patrol in North Darfur

23 November - Increased threats to international staff in Darfur, including “extremely alarming” kidnappings, ongoing military action by Chad, Sudan and rebels, and Government limits on peacekeepers’ movements continue to hamper efforts to stabilize the Sudanese area torn apart by nearly seven years of war, says a new report by the United Nations chief.

“These incidents of hostage taking of international workers are a new and deeply troubling development in Darfur, with the potential to undermine the efforts of the international community,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon writes in his latest report to the Security Council on the joint UN-African Union operation in Darfur (UNAMID).

Two international staff members of UNAMID who were abducted on 29 August in West Darfur are still being held in captivity.

“Until their security is unconditionally guaranteed by all parties in Darfur, the activities of UNAMID and the agencies will continue to be a risky and dangerous undertaking. The safety of both United Nations hostages, meanwhile, remains an urgent concern and efforts are ongoing at the highest levels to secure their safe and unconditional release,” says Mr. Ban.

He notes that the attacks, harassment, criminal activity and banditry against UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have already led to the suspension of some activities and programmes by the humanitarian community in a region where at least 300,000 people are estimated to have died and 2.7 million more have been driven from their homes in the fighting between the Government, its militia allies and various armed groups.

Since the last report in June, UNAMID has reached 69 per cent of its authorized troop strength –14,638 military personnel out of the total 19,555, and 4,449 police. However, the force still lacks key military elements, including two medium transport units, a level II hospital, an aerial reconnaissance unit, and 18 medium utility helicopters – “a source of serious concern” – nearly two years after its creation.

Mr. Ban voices deep concern at reports of ongoing fighting between the Government and the rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army/Abdul Wahid faction (SLA/AW), leading to the deaths of civilians and demonstrating that the parties have not made a full commitment to a political solution to the Darfur crisis.

“In the context of the ongoing violence in Darfur, freedom of movement for UNAMID and humanitarian personnel is absolutely critical,” he says, stressing that the frequent denial of access by Government officials for UNAMID, including to camps for internally displaced persons (IDP), “are a direct violation of the Status of Forces Agreement with the Government of the Sudan and a serious impediment” to the mission’s mandate.

“In particular, where populations have been made more vulnerable by violence, I urge the Government to intensify its efforts to ensure that UNAMID and humanitarian personnel are granted full access to affected areas.”

Referring to clashes between Chadian and Sudanese troops along their common border, the Secretary-General calls on all parties “to exercise restraint, to cease support for rebel groups in both Chad and the Sudan, and to work in good faith towards a secure environment in Darfur.”

On the political front, attempts to resume peace negotiations have not been successful despite “extraordinary efforts” at mediation, with both SLA/AW and JEM refusing to engage in substantive discussions with the Government, he writes, urging all parties “re-engage with the peace process in good faith, with a view to achieving a sustainable peace for all Darfurians.”

Turning to the humanitarian situation, Mr. Ban reports that efforts continued to fill the gaps in the delivery of services created by the Government's expulsion in March of 13 international NGOs and the dissolution of three national NGOs.

"These shortages have contributed to an increase in malnutrition levels, particularly in rural areas, where relief assistance is stretched beyond capacity," he says. "In addition, of an estimated 800,000 households that have been left without humanitarian support in the food security and livelihoods sector, more than 40 per cent have not received vital seeds and tools."

Moreover, livestock vaccination remained below 20 per cent of the planned target, environmental resource protection coverage was insignificant despite continued natural resource degradation, and the expulsions left a significant gap in the education sector, with 27 of 70 administrative localities either partially or not at all covered, potentially eroding gains achieved during the past years. There is an outstanding gap of some 9,100 new teachers in Darfur.

UN still concerned over access to civilians displaced by Yemen conflict



A group of forcibly displaced people in north Yemen. Many are desperately in need of aid

23 November - United Nations agencies and their partners are continuing to assist civilians uprooted by fighting in northern Yemen, but warned today that access to internally displaced persons (IDPs) that are not staying in camps is still a concern.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) also voiced concern about access to a large number of civilians who remain trapped in parts of Al-Jawf, Amran and Sa'ada governorates.

An estimated 175,000 people have been affected by the conflict in Yemen since 2004, including those displaced by the latest surge in fighting between Government forces and Al Houthi rebels.

As of 14 November, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and its partners in Yemen had distributed 2,065 metric tons of food to more than 100,000 beneficiaries. The November food distribution cycle will be completed in all districts prior to the Eid holidays later this week.

Meanwhile, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that the distribution of non-food items through its partners has benefited more than 5,000 families in three governorates in northern Yemen.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), for its part, has provided four additional water tanks in the new blocks of the Al-Mazrak camp in the Hajjah governorate, and four outside the camp, while work to improve water distribution, disinfection and quality monitoring in the camp is ongoing.

In addition, UNICEF and the non-governmental organization (NGO) Oxfam have constructed 900 latrines in the Al-Mazrak camp.

UNHCR has warned that the Al-Mazrak camp has exceeded its capacity with nearly 10,000 IDPs living there. The agency has expressed its readiness to work with the authorities in speeding up the construction of Al Mazrak II camp, which will be able to house up to 1,000 families.

New UN energy report says 1.5 billion people worldwide live in darkness

23 November - With the United Nations climate change summit in Copenhagen just 13 days away, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) has highlighted the need to ensure that the energy needs of developing countries are central to any new climate agreement, after a new report found that almost a quarter of the world's 6 billion people live without electricity.



The majority of the 1.5 billion people who live in the dark are in the least developed countries (LDCs) of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, according to the report, *The Energy Access Situation in Developing Countries: A Review Focusing on the Least Developed Countries and Sub-Saharan Africa*.

“Expanding energy access is essential to tackle global poverty. It needs to happen at the lowest cost and in the cleanest and most sustainable way possible to help developing countries establish a low-carbon route to development,” Olav Kjørven, UNDP Assistant Administrator and Director of the Bureau for Development Policy, told reporters in New York at the launch of the report.

“Almost half of humanity is completely disconnected from the debate on how to drive human progress with less emissions and greener energy because their reality is much more basic than that: they carry heavy loads of water and food on their backs because they don’t have transport; they cook over wood fires that damage their health, not with electricity, gas or oil,” said Mr. Kjørven.

“We must ensure that the energy needs of these people are central to a new climate agreement,” he added, referring to the pact to curb greenhouse gas emissions that countries are hoping to achieve when they meet in the Danish capital in December.

Mr. Kjørven noted that two million people die every year from causes associated with exposure to smoke from cooking with biomass and coal – and 99 per cent of those deaths occur in developing countries.

In LDCs and sub-Saharan Africa, half of all deaths from pneumonia in children under five years, chronic lung disease and lung cancer in adults are attributed to the use of solid fuel, compared with 38 per cent in developing countries overall.

According to the report, to halve the proportion of people living in poverty by 2015 – the first of the eight globally agreed targets known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – 1.2 billion more people will need access to electricity and two billion more people will need access to modern fuels like natural gas or Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), also called propane.

“We have to see Copenhagen as an opportunity. For a climate deal to work, it also has to be a development deal. Developing countries have to see that this deal would help them move forward, not slow down,” Mr. Kjørven stated.

The report was produced in partnership by the UNDP and the World Health Organization (WHO), with support from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Bosnia needs continued support amid political impasse, Security Council told

23 November - Bosnia and Herzegovina needs continued international support in its bid for Euro-Atlantic integration, despite the political impasse it is currently facing, the United Nations Security Council was told today.

Valentin Inzko, High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, told the 15-member body that the impasse resulted from two confusions. The first was the confusion in the Republika Srpska over its own nature and that of the State as a whole, while the other was confusion in both entities over the proper focus and functioning of politics and the State as a system.



The Republika Srpska leadership had failed to grasp that State and entity authorities had separate and clearly defined mandates, and each must work without interference from the other, said the High Representative. At the same time, a number of political leaders in the Federation advocated an unbalanced, larger role for the State, which also impeded progress.

He commended the Security Council for its decision last week to approve the extension of the mandate of the European Union stabilization force (EUFOR) entrusted with ensuring continued compliance by all sides in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the ethnic war there.

He noted that the Council's action served as a guarantee to citizens that the international community would not tolerate the possibility of a return to violence.

"The country is now at a crossroads and the political leaders will now need to decide whether they are ready to fulfil the necessary conditions which would help them move forward on Euro-Atlantic integration and whether they are ready to address the conditions needed for the closure of the Office of the High Representative," he said.

"Let us remember that Bosnians and Herzegovinians have shown resilience, creativity and fortitude in the past. With their help I know that we can end the present impasse and move ahead."

Military action alone will not defeat scourge of piracy, Secretary-General says



23 November - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has paid tribute to all those who serve on the front lines of the battle against piracy off the coast of Somalia, while stressing that this scourge will not be defeated by military means alone.

"We will find a solution only by addressing the broader political and security situation," Mr. Ban said in a video message to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) Bravery Awards in London, stressing the need to support the "fragile" transitional Government in Somalia.

He noted that in recent years, pirates operating from Somalia have been hijacking ships in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean and holding their crews and cargo for ransom.

However, thanks to the resolve of the IMO and the Security Council, the international community has done much to discourage such acts, he said.

The Secretary-General noted that since the start of the international naval escort system in the western Indian Ocean two years ago, not a single ship heading to Somalia with UN World Food Programme (WFP) aid has been attacked.

“WFP has been able to scale up its operations, providing much-needed food assistance to nearly 3 million people,” he pointed out.

Mr. Ban stated that all States have a duty to cooperate in the repression of piracy, as set out in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, adding that several Security Council resolutions now provide a firm basis for enhanced action in this arena.

Paper football signed by UN chief fetches over \$200,000 at charity auction



Princess Haya and Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace, Wilfried Lemke

23 November - A street football from the slums of Nairobi, Kenya, made from paper, wrapped in plastic bags and tied with string – and signed by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon – was the top scorer at a United Nations-backed gala auction in Dubai last night that raised nearly \$1 million for Palestinian youth.

The football, also signed by International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Jacques Rogge fetched \$205,000.

Other items included a signed football and match T-shirt from the English Chelsea Football Club, a Dubai World Cup VIP package (including tickets, travel and accommodation), a tennis ball and official programme signed by top female tennis players including the

Williams sisters, Svetlana Kuznetsova, Jelena Jankovic, and a signed match T-shirt and photograph of tennis champion Roger Federer.

The gala dinner was hosted by Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein, a UN Messenger of Peace who is the wife of the Vice-President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, and Mr. Ban’s Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace, Wilfried Lemke. Mr. Ban joined in with a recorded video message.

For many years the UN has acknowledged the importance of sport in advancing social and humanitarian goals, with its agencies enlisting star athletes and major sporting events in campaigns to promote immunization against childhood diseases and other public health measures, to support the fight against racism and apartheid, and for human rights.

“Our passion for sport in this region provides us with an opportunity to change lives and develop young people,” Princess Haya said. “None of us have the capacity to individually solve the problems of the world, but collectively, we can help find solutions and provide hope to the children and youth of Palestine.”

Mr. Lemke referred to his visit to the occupied Palestinian territory earlier this year. “What I saw there changed my life,” he said. “Sometimes it is only when we see things first hand that we can understand just a little of what these people, these children, went through and continue to go through, every day. We have an obligation to help these children. We have an obligation to provide them opportunities to improve their lives.”

Ban lauds new report on ways to boost development cooperation with Africa



Observing Africa’s carbon cycle

23 November - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today lauded a new report which outlines steps to be taken by Africa and its development partners to help lift millions of people across the continent out of poverty.

The recommendations by the Commission on Effective Development Cooperation with Africa include creating an African Guarantee Fund in partnership with the African Development Bank, ensuring access to energy, and unleashing the power of African entrepreneurship.

Mr. Ban called the recommendations “far-reaching,” adding that if implemented conscientiously, such steps will help mitigate the effects of the economic crisis and help to lift millions of people out of poverty.

Speaking at the presentation of the report in New York, the Secretary-General warned that the gains made by African countries over the past decade are being threatened by climate change, armed conflict, political upheaval and crises involving food, fuel and the global economy.

“Investments are declining, businesses are struggling to survive and jobs are being lost,” he said. “Africa and its development partners must act urgently to promote stability, prosperity and peace.”

He welcomed the report’s emphasis on youth employment and opportunities for young people, noting that recent figures show that more than 60 per cent of those unemployed in sub-Saharan Africa are below the age of 24.

“This terrible waste of human resources is visible on the streets of the continent’s cities. Africa needs its young people to get to work on its behalf,” said Mr. Ban.

He called on Africa’s leaders to show the “bold leadership” required to intensify the fight against poverty, while urging the donor community to help implement the report’s recommendations, including through financial and technical aid.

The UN will continue to be Africa’s “close and enduring partner” in this important effort, he added.

Launched in 2008 by Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the Commission comprises heads of State and government, politicians, experts, representatives from international and regional organisations, as well as the business community, civil society and the academic world.

New policy centre and trust fund in Seoul mark shift in UN-Korean relations



UNDP Administrator Helen Clark

23 November - The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Republic of Korea signed plans today for a new policy centre and trust fund, marking a shift in their 40-year partnership to reflect the country’s status as an emerging donor to development.

“The Republic of Korea shows that a country can emerge from conflict and poverty through hard work, good strategies, and smart policies,” UNDP Administrator Helen Clark said today in the capital, Seoul, at the start of a three-country Asia trip. “I am thrilled to be here at this transitional moment for UNDP’s partnership with Korea.”

The agreement signed with the Government will establish the Policy Centre on Global Development Partnerships in Seoul, which will promote global learning, networking and dialogue to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development.

It will also set up a Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Trust Fund, managed by UNDP, to support activities in developing countries aimed at achieving the globally agreed targets to slash poverty, hunger and other social ills, all by 2015.

UNDP’s partnership with the Republic of Korea dates back to 1965. It has evolved from strengthening agricultural productivity and providing basic health care and primary education in the 1960s-70s, to promoting environmental protection, gender equality and social security systems in the 1990s.

While in Seoul, Miss Clark met today with President Lee Myung-bak, the Vice Minister of Education, Science and Technology, Kim Jung-hyun, and the Chair of the Presidential Commission on Green Growth, Kim Hyung-kook.

Aside from discussions on the changing nature of the partnership between the country and UNDP, their meetings focused on the lead-up to next month’s UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen and the MDG Summit planned for next year.

Miss Clark travels next to Japan and China.

UN-backed demobilization process begins in North Darfur

23 November - Over 150 ex-combatants who once fought for armed militia in Sudan's war-torn Darfur region participated today in a United Nations-backed demobilization and reintegration programme which aims to ease the return of former soldiers to their communities.

The three-day scheme, supported by the joint UN-African Union peacekeeping mission to Darfur (UNAMID) and the Sudanese Government, is expected to register more than 400 ex-combatants in the North Darfur capital of El Fasher before moving onto West and South Darfur.



People of Darfur

The process involves briefings on what to expect during reintegration, verification of administrative documents, medical and disability screening, fingerprinting, and the provision of identification cards.

Participants are also given a cash payment in local currency of \$150 and after two months they receive food vouchers in addition to other basic amenities.

Since fighting erupted in 2003, pitting Government forces and allied Janjaweed militiamen against rebel groups, some 300,000 people have been killed and an estimated 2.7 million others displaced from their homes in Darfur.

The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme is part of the final security arrangement of the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement, which paved the way for the deployment of UNAMID at the start of last year.

Number of researchers rising globally but women still in minority – UN report

23 November - Although the number of researchers working in developing countries over the last five years has increased by 50 per cent, women only occupy a very small percentage of these positions in some regions, according to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report released today.

The UNESCO report, published by the agency's Institute for Statistics (UIS), noted that between 2002 and 2007 almost 1 million new researchers were counted in developing countries, bringing the total number to 2.7 million and increasing its global share from around 30 per cent to over 38 per cent.

Asia benefited from the largest rise in researchers, mainly due to China increasing its share from 14 to 20 per cent in five years.

"The increase in the number of researchers, notably in developing countries, is good news," said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova.

"Although the participation of women in science, which UNESCO promotes notably through the L'Oréal-UNESCO Awards for Women in Science, is still too limited," stressed Ms. Bokova.

According to the new UIS study, women represent less than 30 per cent of the researchers in the world, a figure that hides numerous regional disparities.

In Latin America, 46 per cent of researchers are women and gender parity has been achieved in Argentina, Cuba, Brazil, Paraguay and Venezuela, whereas in South Asia women only represent 18 per cent.



Number of researchers in developing countries is rising, but women still in minority

The report noted that in Europe only the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova and Serbia have achieved gender parity. In the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), women's participation in research is 43 per cent, compared to 33 per cent in Africa.

In addition, the report said that expenditure on research and development (R&D) is increasing, with rises in the percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) devoted to R&D in most countries, which now stands at 1.74 per cent on average around the world from 1.71 per cent in 2002.

The report also noted that in most developed countries, R&D is largely financed by the private sector – 60 per cent in North America and 50 per cent in Europe – while in Latin America and the Caribbean it ranges from 25 to 50 per cent. In Africa, however, research is financed mostly by the public sector.

“Policy makers seem to realize more and more that innovation is key for economic growth, to the point of setting R&D investment targets,” said UNESCO Institute of Statistics Programme Specialist Martin Schaaper.

“China is the foremost example of a country setting a target – 2 per cent by 2010 and 2.5 per cent or more by 2020 – and being well on its way to reaching it,” said Mr. Schaaper, who is also one of the authors of the report. “Another example is given by the African Science and Technology Consolidated Plan of Action (CPA), which sets a target of 1 per cent of GDP devoted to R&D.”

International Criminal Court trial of two former Congolese leaders opens tomorrow

23 November - The trial against two former Congolese rebel leaders for crimes allegedly committed by their militias in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2003 is set to begin tomorrow in The Hague at the International Criminal Court.

Germain Katanga, a senior commander from the group known as the Force de Résistance Patriotique en Ituri (FRPI), faces three counts of crimes against humanity and six counts of war crimes for a deadly assault on the village of Bogoro, in the province of Ituri. Hundreds of people were killed and many women forced into sexual slavery in that February 2003 attack.



International Criminal Court
Headquarters in The Hague

Mathieu Ngudjolo Chui is a former commander of the rebel National Integrationalist Front (FNI). He faces three counts of crimes against humanity and six of war crimes, and is alleged to have played a key role in designing and carrying out the Bogoro attack.

Among the crimes the two men are accused of is using children under the age of 15 in active hostilities, including as bodyguards and combatants, during the deadly assault on Bogoro.

Ten child soldiers will be among the 345 people authorized to take part in the trial, the second one to be held at the ICC with regard to the situation in the DRC. The first was that of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, a Congolese warlord accused of recruiting child soldiers, whose trial began in January 2009.

Silvana Arbia, the Court's Registrar, affirmed at a news conference at ICC headquarters today that “the Court is to become a model of fairness of procedures, of respect for the rights of the Defence, and for victims' participation.”

ICC Prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo said he intends to call 26 witnesses, including an expert witness on gender issues and on the military aspects of the crimes, during the upcoming trial.

The ICC is an independent, permanent court that tries persons accused of the most serious crimes of international concern – namely genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

No improvement in Palestinian access to Israeli-occupied West Bank land, UN reports

23 November - Israel continued to increase freedom of movement for Palestinians between most urban centres in the West Bank over the past six months, but access to land has not significantly improved, with 60 per cent of the area remaining largely off-limits for use and development, according to a new United Nations report released today.

“The easing of Palestinian movement between urban centres is a welcome step,” the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in its monthly update, noting that access still continues to be severely restricted to and from areas behind the barrier – which Israel says it is building to keep out suicide bombers and other attackers – including East Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley, as well as within the Israeli-controlled area of Hebron.



Palestinian women walk near Israel's barrier near Ramallah in the West Bank

“Further measures aimed at restoring Palestinian control over West Bank space are required in order to make progress towards the fulfilment of the above obligations,” it added, referring to Israel’s responsibility under international law for ensuring the humanitarian needs of people under its occupation, including the right to free movement, work, housing, health, education, and to freedom from discrimination.

It called on Israel to take several initial steps, including revoking the permit regime associated with the barrier which is partially built on occupied Palestinian territory, opening up closed military zones and nature reserves for Palestinian use, lifting access restrictions to the Jordan Valley and within Hebron, and freezing all settlement activity.

Among recent progress, the report cited the removal of two checkpoints and the shifting of four others, the relaxation of crossing procedures at most checkpoints to the east of the barrier, the extension of opening hours, and the performance of searches and documentation checking on a random basis only, as well as the removal of 46 earth mounds and roadblocks that prevented vehicular access to main routes from various communities.

All this resulted in a significant reduction in travel time between the main urban centres, excluding East Jerusalem. But the barrier continues to be the single largest obstacle to Palestinian movement, with no improvement noted regarding access of Palestinians holding West Bank identity cards to areas isolated between it and the Green Line [the border before the 1967 war], including East Jerusalem.

Moreover, although Israel issued additional permits and opened dozens of seasonal gates for the olive harvest season that started in October, productivity was hindered due to lack of access throughout the year. Israeli settlements remain the most important factor shaping the system of movement and access restrictions, including the barrier’s route, the report said.

As of the end of October, there were a total of 578 closure obstacles inside the West Bank, including 69 permanently staffed checkpoints, 21 partially staffed checkpoints, and 488 un-staffed obstacles such as roadblocks, earth mounds, earth walls, road barriers and gates, and trenches.

But the report noted that while the large majority of obstacles are un-staffed roadblocks and earth mounds, most are designed to channel Palestinian traffic into staffed checkpoints, making the latter a key component of the closure system. As a rule, fluctuations in the number of checkpoints provide only a partial indication, since the ability to move across a given point varies depending on the policy implemented there.

Additionally, given that the checkpoints along the barrier allow limited access to areas that would be otherwise blocked, a decrease in the number of these checkpoints may indicate a deterioration, rather than an improvement, in freedom of movement, and vice versa.

Equally important, the report stressed, is that the number of closure obstacles at a given time does not reflect other key dimensions such as the so-called Area C, covering 60 per cent of the West Bank, which remained largely off-limits for Palestinians.

While the overwhelming majority of Palestinians reside in Areas A and B, Area C holds the land reserves necessary for the development of the main centres, a significant part of the agricultural and grazing land, and is critical for any large-scale infrastructure project.

Any Palestinian construction in Area C, for housing, health, education, infrastructure, tourism or industry, is subject to an Israeli permit regime, and in practise Palestinians are prevented from obtaining such permits in most of Area C, which was registered in the past as state land and subsequently included within the jurisdictional areas of Israeli settlements.

Senior UN appointees applauded for ensuring UN fulfils its mandate on the ground



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

23 November - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today praised the work of his personal representatives and special envoys for directing the life-saving and rebuilding work of the United Nations around the world.

“It is you, on the ground, who know best when our posture needs to evolve in response to quick-changing events,” Mr. Ban told the senior officials gathered for an annual seminar in the city of Mont Pelerin, Switzerland.

“You are in charge of a remarkable number of working parts,” he said in his remarks via teleconference, commending the envoys for “keeping them all moving in a coherent, productive direction.”

Mr. Ban committed to filling vacancies, speeding up the appointment process and ensuring that there are no leadership vacuums to help the high-level appointees fulfil their tasks.

He also pledged to promptly pursue investigations into sexual abuse and other infractions, given the “cloud” such accusations can cast over a mission.

In addition, he stated that the security of UN personnel is a top priority, “not just because of recent attacks in Kabul and Islamabad but because this has always been essential for doing our work,” noting that he has requested more funding for the next biennium to better screen and protect access to vulnerable UN locations.

Using the gathering to outline issues topping the world body’s agenda for the coming year, the Secretary-General said that climate change will remain at the head of the list for the months to come regardless of what happens at next month’s conference in Copenhagen, where countries are aiming to reach agreement on a new pact to combat global warming.

“You may have seen news reports suggesting it is destined by be a disappointment,” said Mr. Ban. “To the contrary, momentum is building. I believe we will reach a deal that sets the stage for a binding treaty next year.”

The annual seminar, organized by the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), brings together the heads of UN peacekeeping operations from around the world with senior Secretariat staff, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the High Commissioner for Refugees and other leading agency staff to examine how to strengthen UN operations and efforts on the ground.

Sudan: Senior UN rights official praises agreement to end use of child soldiers

22 November - A top United Nations human rights official today welcomed a deal agreed by a former rebel group in southern Sudan to end the use of child soldiers among its ranks, while warning of the threat posed to children by various armed militia operating in the region.

The Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which fought in the nation's long-running north-south civil war, signed the action plan to discharge the children on Friday in the southern capital, Juba.



Child soldiers at a military camp in Nyal, southern Sudan [File Photo]

“This commitment is a milestone in the efforts to end association of children with the SPLA,” said the Secretary General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, on the eve of her departure from Sudan after a nine-day visit.

“I shall continue to appeal to the SPLA leadership to spare no effort to release and prevent re-association of these children with their armed elements,” said Ms. Coomaraswamy.

She also stressed that her office will collaborate with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) to help find much needed resources and funds to support rehabilitation and reintegration efforts of former child soldiers in the whole of Sudan.

While praising the Government of National Unity for its progress over the past two years in strengthening child protection, Ms. Coomaraswamy voiced concern over the “presence of children amongst non-State armed groups including the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) factions.”

In addition, she stressed that incursions into villages and abductions in southern Sudan led by the notorious Ugandan rebel group the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) remain a threat to children in the region.

“I spoke to girls and boys formerly abducted by the LRA in Juba who recounted that they lived in fear of death everyday,” she said. “Children's experiences were horrendous, and the LRA remains one of the worst offenders in the world today.”

The Special Representative urged the international community to harness all its force in a bid to protect civilians, especially children in the LRA affected regions.

Ban applauds easing of restrictions on Sri Lankans in camps for displaced



Thousands of Tamil civilians continue to languish in IDP camps such as this one in Vavuniya, Sri Lanka

21 November - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today welcomed the Government decision to allow greater freedom of movement to Sri Lankans sheltering in makeshift camps in the north of the country.

There were more than 270,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) staying in closed camps in May after a final push by Government forces ended the decades-long civil war with separatist Tamil rebels.

In a message praising the release of over half of the IDPs from the camps since the end of military operations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Mr. Ban encouraged Sri Lankan authorities to prioritize the return home of the remaining people.

He also urged the Government to continue working with the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to improve

assistance programmes which support the return of IDPs and to ensure the best possible services are provided to those who go home.