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Top officials converge at UN to tackle global economic crisis

24 June - As high-level delegates from around the globe gathered in New York today to discuss how to address the economic meltdown while taking the interests of all nations into account, top United Nations officials issued urgent calls for action to ease the burden on the world’s poorest.

“At this critical moment, we must all join our efforts to prevent the global crisis, with its myriad faces, from turning into a social, environmental and humanitarian tragedy,” General Assembly President Miguel D’Escoto said at the start of the Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development.

He called for a solution to the current turmoil that will not leave “the vast majority of humanity to their fate,” exhorting the representatives from nearly 150 Member States expected to address the three-day gathering to “take decisions that affect us all collectively to the greatest extent possible.”

For his part, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon underscored that the current crisis is “not a cause for any one person, nation or group of nations. It is a challenge for us all.”

Despite signs of financial stabilization and growth in some pockets of the world, he said that “the real impact of the crisis could stretch for years.”

A multi-pronged approach is needed to stem the catastrophe, Mr. Ban said, that incorporates boosting access to education, promoting ‘green’ growth, helping subsistence farmers and increasing resources to fight diseases such as AIDS and tuberculosis.
“The world institutions created generations ago must be made more accountable, more representative and more effective,” he pointed out, voicing regret that reforming financial institutions has divided Member States.

The crisis has revealed the need for a “renewed multilateralism,” he said, adding that “challenges are linked. Our solutions must be, too.”

The event will also feature several roundtable discussions on topics including the role of the UN in responding to the crisis and how to mitigate the impact of the downturn on development, featuring, among others, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay and UN Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator Helen Clark.

Earlier this year, an expert panel appointed by Mr. D’Escoto and chaired by Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz emphasized that international finance structures must be drastically overhauled in the face of the current global economic crisis, calling on wealthier nations to direct one per cent of their economic stimulus packages to help developing countries address poverty.

A coordinated approach – bringing together not just the G-8 or even G-20 nations, but the "G-192" representing all members of the Assembly – is needed to pull the world out of the recession, according to the recommendations of the Commission of Experts on Reforms of International Finance and Economic Structures.

The experts also called for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to increase the availability of funds for hard-hit nations.

Secretary-General discusses situation in Iran with Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi

24 June - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has voiced his concern regarding the situation in Iran and his dismay over the post-election violence, particularly the use of force against civilians, in his talks with Iranian human rights activist and Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi.

The two spoke by phone yesterday, according to information provided by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson.

On Monday, Mr. Ban urged an immediate end to the arrests, threats and use of force taking place in Iran amid the post-election violence that has already claimed a number of lives.

Protesters have taken to the streets following the 12 June presidential poll, which opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi has said was fixed in favour of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The Secretary-General told Ms. Ebadi that he had called on the Iranian authorities to respect fundamental civil and political rights, especially the freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of information.

He has also called on the Government and the opposition to resolve peacefully their differences through dialogue and legal means, and hoped that the democratic will of the people of Iran would be fully respected.
**Ban calls on G8 to combat climate change, boost support for development**

**24 June** - Climate change and development top the list of challenges requiring action that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has laid out in a letter to leaders of the Group of Eight (G8) industrialized nations ahead of their upcoming summit.

In the letter, Mr. Ban asks G8 governments to take the lead on the issue of climate change by making “ambitious and firm commitments” to slash greenhouse gas emissions by 25-40 per cent, the levels the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says are required on the part of industrialized countries to ward off the worst effects of global warming.

“He says that he hopes that G8 governments will commit to a specific timetable and modalities to deliver the billions of dollars needed during the next few years to assist the poorest and most vulnerable to adapt to climate change,” his spokesperson, Michele Montas, said.

Resources must be committed to help the poorest and most vulnerable adapt to climate change as well as to “seal the deal” on an ambitious new pact in December in Copenhagen to replace the Kyoto Protocol, whose first commitment period ends in 2012, the letter says.

On the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the eight anti-poverty targets with a 2015 deadline, the Secretary-General writes that annual aid to Africa is still at least $20 billion below the targets set at the G8 summit in Gleneagles, United Kingdom, in 2005.

“He urges the G8 to set out, country by country, how donors will scale up aid to Africa over the next year to make the Gleneagles commitments real,” Ms. Montas said.

This year’s G8 summit will be held from 8-10 July in the Italian city of L’Aquila.

**UN official urges greater investment in drug control and treatment to cut scourge**

**24 June** - Amid an increasingly brutal struggle for a bigger slice of the $50 billion global cocaine market between Central American drug cartels, the head of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has warned that legalizing narcotics would be an “historic mistake,” in a call for a global boost in drug treatment and crime control.

UNODC Executive Director, Antonio Maria Costa, acknowledged that laws controlling narcotics have created a huge black market for illicit drugs that thrives on violence and corruption.

However, “a free market for drugs would unleash a drug epidemic,” said Mr. Costa, as UNODC launched its 2009 World Drug Report today in Washington, DC.

“Proponents of legalization can’t have it both ways,” he said. “Legalization is not a magic wand that would suppress both mafias and drug abuse.”

Mr. Costa stressed that attempts to remove drug-related crime by decriminalizing illicit drugs – as some have suggested – would be an “historic mistake” because of the danger narcotics pose to health.
“Societies should not have to choose between protecting public health or public security. They can, and should, do both,” he said in a call for more resources for drug prevention and treatment, and stronger measures to fight drug-related crime.

The international cocaine market is undergoing seismic shifts, with purity levels and seizures in the main consumer countries going down, prices on the rise, and consumption patterns in a state of flux, noted Mr. Costa. “This may help explain the gruesome upsurge of violence in countries like Mexico. In Central America, cartels are fighting for a shrinking market.”

Over 40 per cent of the world’s cocaine is seized, mostly in Colombia, compared to less than 20 per cent of opiates — opium, morphine and heroin — captured, according to the World Drug Report.

In West Africa, a major transportation hub for trafficking to Europe, a decline in seizures seems to reflect lower cocaine flows after five years of rapid growth, the report said.

“International efforts are paying off,” said Mr. Costa, who launched the report along with newly appointed Director of the US Office of National Drug Control Policy, Gil Kerlikowske. Yet drug-related violence and political instability continue, especially in Guinea-Bissau, he added.

“As long as demand for drugs persists, weak countries will always be targeted by traffickers,” said Mr. Costa, adding that if “Europe really wants to help Africa, it should curb its appetite for cocaine.”

The new UNODC study reported that opium cultivation in Afghanistan, where 93 per cent of the world’s total is grown, declined by 19 per cent in 2008, and Colombia, which produces half of the world’s cocaine, saw an 18 per cent decline in cultivation and a 28 per cent decline in production.

“The more opium is seized in Afghanistan’s neighbourhood, the less heroin on the streets of Europe, and vice versa, the less heroin is consumed in the West, the more stability there will be in West Asia,” said Mr. Costa who plans to bring the message to a Group of Eight industrialized nations (G-8) ministerial conference on Afghanistan later this week in Italy.

Mr. Kerlikowske said that US President Barack Obama’s Administration is “committed to expanding demand reduction initiatives,” adding that through “comprehensive and effective enforcement, education, prevention, and treatment, we will be successful in reducing illicit drug use and its devastating consequences.”

The Report provides a number of recommendations on how to improve drug control, including the treatment of drug use as an illness.

“People who take drugs need medical help, not criminal retribution,” said Mr. Costa, appealing for universal access to drug treatment with the argument that people with serious drug problems provide the bulk of drug demand and treating this problem would contract the market.

Mr. Costa also called for an end of what he characterized as the “tragedy of cities out of control,” pointing out that most “drugs are sold in city neighbourhoods where public order has broken down. Housing, jobs, education, public services, and recreation can make communities less vulnerable to drugs and crime.”

Government enforcement of international agreements against organized crime, such as the UN Conventions against organized crime and corruption, and greater efficiency in law enforcement with a focus on the large volume of petty offenders, would also help international drug control efforts, he said.

Mr. Costa noted that in some countries, five times as many people are imprisoned for drug use compared to drug trafficking. “This is a waste of money for the police, and a waste of lives for those thrown in jail. Go after the piranhas, not the minnows.”
UN experts tackle ‘conspiracy of silence’ over sexual violence in wartime

24 June - Women’s rights activists, senior military figures and top United Nations officials met in New York this week to discuss what the world body’s former humanitarian chief Jan Egeland described as “one of the biggest conspiracies of silence in history” – the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war.

The talks focused particularly on the lack of female involvement in peace negotiations, and on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1820, passed last year, which for the first time acknowledged the use of sexual violence in conflict as a deliberate tactic of war.

According to the UN’s agency for women, UNIFEM, women comprise on average less than 10 per cent of peace negotiators and less than 2 per cent of mediators. Out of approximately 300 peace agreements reached in 45 conflicts since the end of the Cold War, only 10 peace processes even mentioned sexual violence.

Anne-Marie Goetz of UNIFEM told a news conference that among the key principles endorsed by participants in this week’s talks were that sexual violence should be addressed right from the start of the mediation process, and that crimes of sexual violence should be given the same priority as other international crimes.

“This kind of meeting backs up the quest for justice,” said Leymah Gbowee of the organization Women, Peace and Security Africa, who participated in the talks. “It emboldens mediators and gains greater respect for women’s groups, which the parties to peace talks can often ignore.” She added that resolution 1820 “changed the dynamic at the peace table and legitimized the status of women.”

Ms. Gbowee said the opportunity to brief the Security Council on the results of the conference would serve to create awareness of sexual violence as a weapon of war among Member States, who she said might be inclined to see rape during wartime as a social or a humanitarian problem rather than a military issue.

She added that the presence of senior military officers, including Major-General Patrick Cammaert, a former commander with the UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), was particularly effective in raising awareness that sexual violence was often used as a deliberate and systematic military strategy.

Ms. Gbowee spoke forcefully of the barriers to women’s participation in mediation processes, including the fear that addressing sexual violence would prevent the smooth running of peace talks, since the negotiating parties might be seriously implicated.

Recalling her own role in leading the women’s peace movement that helped bring Liberia’s stalled peace process to a successful conclusion in 2003, she added: “I am proud of the role women played… but one of my greatest regrets is that we did not use this opportunity to raise our own issues and demand prosecution for perpetrators of sexual violence.”

Pioneering insurance policy greatly benefits poor farmers, finds UN-backed report

24 June - The fragile livelihoods of millions of poor farmers in developing countries, often devastated by adverse weather conditions, have been fortified by an innovative insurance scheme, according to a United Nations-backed report released today.

A variable and unpredictable climate can restrict income and limit development for many smallholders, as banks, for example, are unlikely to lend to farmers if a drought will cause widespread defaults, even if the farmers could pay back
loans in most years.

This lack of access to credit restricts farmers’ ability to buy improved seeds, fertilizers and other inputs needed to cultivate land, according to the Index Insurance and Climate Risk: Prospects for development and disaster management report launched at the Global Humanitarian Forum (GHF) in Geneva today.

Index Insurance uses a measure of weather, such as the amount of rainfall, to determine payouts, resolving a number of problems that make traditional insurance unworkable in rural parts of developing countries, said the report.

With Index Insurance contracts, there is no need to visit the policyholder to determine premiums or assess damages. Instead, if the rainfall recorded by gauges is below an agreed-upon threshold, the insurance pays out.

Having this insurance allows farmers to apply for bank loans and other types of credit which was previously inaccessible, said the report, which was produced by the International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI) in partnership with UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP), among other governmental and non-governmental agencies.

“Only the richest three per cent of people in the world are covered by insurance,” said Olav Kjorven, UNDP Assistant Administrator and Director of the Bureau for Development Policy.

“The world’s poor have been completely left out, even though they are the most vulnerable people most in need of protection.

“Droughts, floods and hurricanes often strip whole communities of their resources and belongings,” he said, adding that Index Insurance could “finally enable millions of poor people to access financial tools for development and properly prepare for and recover from climate disasters.”

A number of projects have shown that Index Insurance is affordable for people living on just $2 a day, an example being farming communities in Malawi which have been able to buy small insurance contracts to cover the purchase price of seeds in case of drought since 2005, according to the report.

Nearly two million Indian farmers have also had access to Index Insurance programmes since 2003, but in order to achieve their full potential, applications of Index Insurance will need to scale up to reach many more people, the report stressed.

UN supports Liberian security forces with new training facility

24 June - The handing over of new training facilities to the Liberian National Police (LNP) signals a boost in efforts to achieve a fully-functional democratic security force in the West African nation, said the top United Nations envoy to Liberia.

Ellen Margrethe Løj, Special Representative of the Secretary-General to Liberia, said it was a particularly satisfying occasion as the UN worked closely with the LNP for several months on its strategic plan, which prioritizes significant changes in human resources and training, administration, and operational effectiveness and efficiency.

Speaking at the handover ceremony of the seven-classroom building at the LNP Academy in Paynesville, Monrovia on 20 June, Ms. Løj voiced appreciation to the Netherlands for supporting LNP programmes with a large chunk of its close to $2 million donation going towards the construction of the building.

In addition, Ms. Løj, who also heads the UN Mission on Liberia (UNMIL), underscored the need to recruit more women to the LNP to create some much needed trust among the country’s population, and contribute to a well run police force.

The completion and handover of the building was a significant development ahead of a donors’ meeting organized by the LNP and UN Police for this week, UNMIL said in a news release.
Darfur: joint UN-African Union mission reports calm although banditry persists

24 June - The joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID) today reported that the security situation in the war-torn western Sudanese region was calm although banditry remains a problem.

UNAMID said the most recent incident involved a robbery yesterday of a house shared by mission staff in El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, where thieves made off with electronics and cash, said UN spokesperson Michele Montas.

Ms. Montas added that other acts of banditry have been reported in and around makeshift camps sheltering internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Darfur, where an estimated 300,000 people have been killed and another 2.7 million forced from their homes since violence erupted in 2003, pitting rebels against Government forces and their allied Janjaweed militiamen.

In a report to the Security Council earlier this month, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned armed clashes which erupted in North Darfur in recent months, initiated by elements of the rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) against the Sudan Liberation Army/Minni Minawi (SLA/MM), a pro-Government faction, supported by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).

Mr. Ban said a 24 May attack on the SAF Umm Baru camp left at least 53 people seriously injured, needing evacuation for medical treatment. In addition, around 350 civilians – mainly women, children and the elderly – as well as 100 unarmed Sudanese soldiers and members of the SLA/MM took refuge at the UN base near the scene of the violence.

UNAMID, currently at 68 per cent of full deployment with some 13,455 uniformed personnel, was established by the Security Council in 2007 to protect civilians in Darfur.

UN-backed campaign prevents locust outbreak in East Africa

24 June - United Nations-backed emergency efforts have successfully contained a massive Red Locust outbreak in Tanzania and upheld the livelihoods of millions of farmers, marking the first time that biopesticides have been used on a large scale in Africa against the transboundary pests.

Infestations have been markedly reduced by the campaign, organized and coordinated by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Locust Control Organization for Central and Southern Africa (IRLCO-CSA).

Aerial surveys will be carried out in the coming weeks in Malawi, Mozambique Tanzania and Zambia until the threat is fully under control.

“Without the rapid intervention, involving affected countries and the international community, the Central and Southern Africa region could have faced a major Red Locust disaster, putting agriculture and food production of millions of poor farmers at risk,” said Modibo Traoré, FAO Assistant Director-General.

East African nations, which do not have the resources and equipment needed to swiftly respond to infestation in hard-to-reach areas, which faced potential outbreaks appealed to FAO for emergency help.

FAO’s locust control activities in Tanzania focused on three main areas: the Iku-Katavi National Park, the Lake Rukwa plains and the Malagarasi River Basin.
If not controlled, large Red Locust swarms will fly over large tracts of farmland and feed on cereals, sugar cane and other crops often planted by poor farmers. An adult Red Locust consumes roughly its own body weight – about two grams – in fresh food every 24 hours. Just a fraction of an average swarm consumes the same amount of food in one day as 2,500 people do.

**Attack on Afghan aid workers prompts UN call for better security**

**24 June** - The acting United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Afghanistan, Tekeste Tekie, today called for better security for aid workers, after three national staff of a local non-governmental organization (NGO) were killed when the vehicle they were travelling in was destroyed by a roadside bomb.

The three killed in yesterday’s attack in Jawzjan province in northern Afghanistan worked for Development and Humanitarian Services in Afghanistan (DhSA), which provides shelter for returnees and is a partner organization of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

A statement issued by the UN in Afghanistan noted that this is at least the fourth security incident targeting humanitarian workers in the country in the past two weeks.

“This latest attack is one more example of the unacceptable toll that the conflict in Afghanistan is taking on civilians, and in particular on humanitarian workers whose sole objective is the delivery of relief assistance to people in distress,” the statement said.

The UN added that the continuing attacks and threats have forced aid agencies to restrict their operations and thus adversely affecting their ability to reach those in need.

“All parties to the conflict should honour their obligations under international humanitarian law to ensure that this horrible incident is not repeated,” the world body stated.

This was the second incident involving UNHCR in Afghanistan in the past couple of days.

On Monday, cars carrying three agency staff members and one employee of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) were overtaking a military convoy when one of the military vehicles exploded. Although further details on the incident, which occurred in the country’s east, are not currently available, none of the UN staff members were injured.

**Global economic crisis direct threat to gains in AIDS response, says UN official**

**24 June** - The global economic crisis that has forced cutbacks in Government spending also threatens efforts to mount an effective response to HIV and AIDS, according to the head of the United Nations agency coordinating the fight against the epidemic.

“This crisis is a direct threat to progress in health and development and to our fragile gains in the AIDS response,” Michel Sidibé told the governing board of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) yesterday.

In a wide-ranging address to the board, his first as the agency’s Executive Director, Mr. Sidibé noted that almost $14 billion was spent on AIDS last year. While calling for full funding to reach universal access to comprehensive HIV prevention, treatment, care and support, he said the world can no longer afford to keep AIDS in isolation.
“We must reposition UNAIDS in a crowded global health landscape. We must ensure that our future leaders stay focused on AIDS – not fatigued by it,” he stated.

The challenge in the midst of the current crisis, said Mr. Sidibé, is not only how UNAIDS can do more with less, but how it can leverage existing resources and partnerships to produce more measurable results.

Presenting his vision for future action at the agency, the Executive Director, who took up his post six months ago, committed UNAIDS to act on three fronts: to increase results and their impact, to optimize and expand partnerships, and to transform UNAIDS into a more efficient and effective organization.

In this regard, he highlighted the new Outcome Framework, which commits UNAIDS to stand by people living with HIV and to enhance progress to ensure that people receive treatment. A key objective of the plan is to “break the trajectory of the epidemic” by putting the focus back on HIV prevention, which Mr. Sidibé said has been “systematically underinvested.”

In a related development, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has appointed Dr. Paul De Lay and Ms. Jan Beagle as the Deputy Executive Directors of UNAIDS. Dr. De Lay will be responsible for overseeing the agency’s programmatic aspects and Ms. Beagle for management and external relations.

**Foreign direct investment plummeted in early 2009, UN trade arm reports**

*24 June* - Global foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows dropped by more than 50 per cent in the first quarter of 2009, with the outlook remaining gloomy for the rest of the year, the United Nations agency that promotes commerce to fight poverty said today.

According to economists with the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), FDI inflows fell by 54 per cent and cross-border mergers and acquisitions (M&As) tumbled by 77 per cent during the first quarter of this year.

“A renewed commitment by policy-makers to an open environment for international investment will play an important role in maintaining favourable conditions for a recovery in FDI flows,” said Secretary-General Supachai Panitchpakdi of UNCTAD, which closely monitors investment policy developments at the national and international levels.

Developed countries are mainly responsible for driving the fall of FDI this year, but poorer nations and transition economies are also experiencing declines, according to the agency.

Also feeling the brunt of the global economic slowdown are transnational corporations, which will likely see their FDI expenditures decline by almost two-thirds this year due to failing market expectations, tighter credit conditions and weakening corporate profits.

Comprehensive analysis of FDI trends and policies will be published in UNCTAD’s “World Investment Report 2009” to be launched in September.