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Côte d'Ivoire: UN urges calm as violence mars voter registration appeals process

5 February - The United Nations peacekeeping mission in Côte d'Ivoire has deplored recent violence in the towns of Katiola and Divo and appealed for calm as the voter registration appeals process for the upcoming elections takes place.

The appeals process is currently underway in preparation for the publication of the final voters list, a vital step in the process towards the holding of the West African nation's long-delayed presidential polls.

The UN mission, known as UNOCI, "encourages all the parties to work to resolve the issues while respecting their respective prerogatives," spokesman Hamadoun Touré told reporters in Abidjan yesterday.

Mr. Touré appealed to everyone to exercise self-control to preserve and consolidate the "remarkable" achievements made in the electoral process, according to a news release issued by UNOCI.

Originally intended to be held as far back as 2005, the polls have been repeatedly postponed. Last scheduled for November 2009, they are now slated for March.

As part of its continued support for the electoral process, the mission has recently provided generators and fuel to monitoring committees, which will allow them to continue their work without being affected by power cuts.



Provisional voters list for the election in Côte d'Ivoire

In addition, it will hold the next round of “UNOCI days” from 10 to 12 February in Bocanda – which will include free medical consultations, workshops, and sports and cultural activities – as part of its efforts to inform the local population about the holding of peaceful elections.

Mr. Touré noted that, while it is not UNOCI’s responsibility to decide on an election date, there are risks of further delays. “Taking into account all the remaining phases, simple mathematics shows that time is not on our side,” he said.

Last week the Security Council extended UNOCI’s mandate through 31 May, and the French forces supporting it, to help Côte d’Ivoire stage free, fair and transparent elections, a crucial benchmark for the country, which was split into a rebel-held north and Government-controlled south by civil war in 2002.

Funding crisis threatens UN aid efforts in Yemen



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

5 February - Two United Nations agencies today warned that a lack of funding is hampering their efforts to assist the estimated 250,000 civilians uprooted by conflict in Yemen, with the UN refugee agency saying it has received less than three per cent of the needed cash.

“We are facing a dramatic funding situation in Yemen and may be forced to scale down our operations for refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) there if we do not receive fresh contributions very soon,” Melissa Fleming, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told reporters in Geneva.

To date UNHCR has received less than three per cent of the \$35.6 million it requested as part of the 2010 UN consolidated appeal for Yemen, where civilians have been caught up in the fighting that resumed last August between Government forces and Al Houthi rebels.

“We are deeply concerned that unless there is a prompt and adequate response from donors, the lack of funding will very soon have a direct impact on our work to protect and assist some 250,000 IDPs and more than 170,000 refugees in Yemen,” said Ms. Fleming.

The agency said the funding crisis reduces its capacity to register and document refugees and IDPs, to monitor their situation and to address their needs.

The funds requested are also needed to expand the existing, already overpopulated IDP camps and to build new ones, to organize and provide shelter materials, and provide basic relief items such as blankets, mattresses and hygienic kits.

Meanwhile, the World Food Programme (WFP) said today that due to a lack of donor support, it has provided a loan of \$4 million from its own internal resources to support its operation in Yemen. The funds will be used to address the hunger needs of the displaced for a number of weeks.

In addition, WFP will be speaking to a number of donors in the region to seek their support for operations in Yemen.

UN refugee agency to facilitate absentee voting for Iraq's upcoming elections



Casting a vote in Baghdad in a previous election

5 February - A large number of Iraqi refugees sheltering in neighbouring countries will be able to vote in Iraq's parliamentary elections early next month with help from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the agency announced today.

Responding to a request from Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), UNHCR said it is ready to cooperate with Iraqi authorities and host governments, providing demographic data on registered Iraqi refugees and informing them of their rights to participate in the 7 March elections.

"As of December 2009, UNHCR had on its records some 300,000 Iraqis who are believed to still be present in the region – including over 210,000 in Syria – of whom close to 190,000 are of voting age," UNHCR spokesperson Melissa Fleming told reporters in Geneva.

Ms. Fleming noted that based on host government sources, the total number of Iraqis in the region is much higher, as hundreds of thousands do not register with UNHCR for various reasons.

UNHCR said it will also provide logistical support that may be needed for a smooth and orderly election process, which many consider to be a major opportunity to consolidate national reconciliation.

UN appeals for donations to restore Haiti's quake-devastated educational system



Haitian children

5 February - With hundreds of Haitian schools destroyed or damaged by last month's devastating earthquake, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has launched a public appeal for donations to help re-establish the education system in the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

Of some 1,500 schools visited to date in the worst hit areas of Haiti, only 85 had escaped severe damage from the 12 January quake, which is estimated to have killed some 200,000 people, injured many others and left 2 million in need of aid, UNESCO said in a news release today.

The vast reconstruction effort to rebuild Port-au-Prince, the destroyed capital, will require skilled workers and UNESCO is also developing technical and vocational education and training for young people so that they may find employment and participate in this undertaking.

Significant contributions have also been pledged by Brazil, Bulgaria, Israel and the Norwegian Refugee Council for UNESCO initiatives in the country. A Brazilian donation of \$400,000 will fund training for teachers in psycho-social support and disaster awareness, benefiting 110,000 secondary and higher education students.

Teachers and educational support staff will be trained to understand how learners are affected by the disaster; how to use learner-centred pedagogies and methods of behaviour management and make referrals for those who are severely traumatized, UNESCO said.

The agency has also been extending emergency support to the national education authorities, providing them with basic equipment and temporary work space, following the collapse of the Education Ministry's building, and will provide basic training for ministry officials in emergency response planning and management.

Haiti's only World Heritage site, an early 19th-century complex in the north of the country, which includes the ruins of a royal palace and the largest fortress of the Western Hemisphere, appears to have been largely spared by the quake. But the full impact on the property, inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1982, is yet to be fully analyzed.

The agency is assessing damage to other cultural sites and mobilizing efforts to avert the danger of looting, calling for a temporary international ban on the trade in Haitian artefacts and asking the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) to provide round-the-clock protection to key landmarks and museums.

UNESCO is aiding attempts to rescue whatever panels or significant fragments remain of the remarkable painted murals that decorated the Episcopal Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Port-au-Prince, which collapsed in the quake, and is also working on training in anti-seismic construction techniques for the professionals who will be rebuilding the country. Many historical and cultural landmarks, including the Presidential Palace, churches and cathedrals, have been destroyed.

UN agricultural agency aiding Peruvian alpaca farmers



5 February - The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is rushing veterinary care to the rural population in the Peruvian Andes, where the Government has declared a state of emergency after two weeks of heavy rains.

Livestock farmers in the central and southern regions of Apurimac, Ayacucho, Huancavelica, Puno and Cusco are in a serious crisis, according to FAO, as the rains threatened their means of livelihood. On Monday, Peru's Civil Defence announced that some 37,000 people have been affected.

The FAO Emergency Rehabilitation and Coordination Unit, working with the regional Peruvian government, has issued a call to all organizations involved in the region for immediate support and development of activities to promote the agricultural sector.

Among its projects in the areas, FAO is providing emergency veterinary kits for the treatment and prevention of bronchial pneumonia in baby alpacas in the communities of Arequipa, Puno and Cusco. These areas, home to alpaqueros – smallholders whose livelihoods depend completely on raising alpacas – are most vulnerable to damage from heavy rains and snowfall in areas over 4,000 metres above sea level.

Alpacas provide both meat and wool for the farmers in the region, and their survival is linked to keeping their herds alive.

According to the FAO, there are approximately 40,000 alpacas in need of urgent attention in the Canchis province of Cusco.

FAO is coordinating with communities, local and regional governments in Peru, as well as Spanish and European Union aid and humanitarian agencies, to distribute the kits. FAO's work has also helped local communities acquire skills in emergency preparedness.

In 2008, the Peruvian Government declared a state of emergency when an unseasonable cold spell, known locally as "El friaje," threatened 11 of the country's 25 provinces.

UN-Finnish project seeks to develop software to help maintain land records

5 February - A new \$2.4 million project between the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Finland aims to help countries develop affordable land administration systems to improve tenure security and land governance.

Ghana, Nepal and Samoa will be the first to participate in the project, designed to help FAO member countries test and adopt low-cost open source technology to better maintain land records.

Their experiences will then be disseminated to encourage other FAO members to consider the advantages of open software solutions in the development of their land administration.

According to FAO Assistant Director-General Alexander Müller, effective and transparent land administration plays an important role in ensuring the security of tenure of rural and urban populations.

“The project responds to a real demand in a context where land administrations commonly lack tailored and flexible software tools necessary to effectively maintain and develop the cadastre [register] and land registration processes,” he noted.

Using information technology systems is one of the key ways to reduce corrupt and non-transparent land management practices, FAO pointed out.

Effective information technology systems also improve the structure and accessibility of records, facilitating knowledge-based decision making and wider data dissemination.

“Effective and transparent land administration is a vital element for food security, poverty reduction and sustainable use of natural resources and is becoming increasingly important in many parts of the developing world,” said Paavo Väyrynen, Finnish Minister for Foreign Trade and Development.

“This new FAO programme clearly reflects the priorities of our development cooperation policy, which includes the promotion of high technology solutions in development activities,” he added. “We look forward to seeing the results.”



Rice fields in Nepal: new land administration systems will help to ensure tenure security

Internet access for visually impaired is focus of UN workshop



5 February - Nearly 200 cyber experts and other stakeholders seeking access to the Web for scores of millions of people with visual and other disabilities wrapped up a four-day United Nations workshop in Geneva today, stressing the need for universal access despite handicaps.

“The key to the information society is universal access and no one should be denied the potential benefits of ICTs [information and communication technologies], not least because they are hampered by their disabilities,” UN International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Secretary-General Hamadoun Touré said, noting that an estimated 650 million people live

with disabilities worldwide.

“ICTs have the great merit of serving as a powerful equalizer of abilities, empowering persons with disabilities to fulfil their potential, realize their own dreams and ambitions, and take their place as active members of society.”

ITU, which co-organized the workshop with the UN World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), focuses on a series

of strategic issues ranging from the rights of the disabled to making technical design standards accessible to providing education and training on accessible ICTs.

WIPO Director General Francis Gurry underlined the importance of accessibility in general and reaffirmed his agency's commitment to establishing an accessible web environment that promotes easy access to intellectual property information in line with its visually impaired persons (VIP) initiative launched in 2008 to explore ways to facilitate and enhance access to literary, artistic and scientific works for the VIP community.

Mr. Gurry, noting that only 5 per cent of all published works are currently available in formats accessible to the VIP community, said WIPO and its member states are actively seeking to improve this situation. WIPO's copyright committee is currently considering a draft treaty that would create an enabling legal environment to address exceptions and limitations to international copyright law.

A first workshop was hosted by WIPO last May, and the forums are in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities which entered into force in 2008, which requires that accessibility be taken into account in the design of new information technologies and systems.

This week's meeting brought together experts from the World Wide Web consortium, Mobile web initiative, Yahoo!, Adobe Systems Incorporated and the British Royal National Institute for Blind People. Participants agreed on the need for an annual workshop to keep abreast of technological developments and to share knowledge and experience of the issue within the UN system.

Humanitarian crisis persists in Somalia with malnutrition rampant in young, UN warns



5 February - A widespread humanitarian crisis persists in war-torn Somalia, with an estimated 3.2 million people, or 42 per cent of the population, in need of emergency aid or livelihood support, and one in six children acutely malnourished and requiring specialist care, according to a United Nations update released today.

Of these children, one in 22 is severely malnourished and at a nine-fold increased risk of death compared to well-nourished children, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported.

In south and central Somalia, which has been plagued by factional fighting and has not had a functioning central government since 1991, the rates are higher with one in five children acutely malnourished, of which one in 20 is severely malnourished. These national rates of acute malnutrition continue to be amongst the highest in the world.

Currently, the rates translate into an estimated 240,000 children under five years of age being acutely malnourished, of which 63,000 are severely malnourished. More than two thirds of these children are located in south and central Somalia, the area's most affected by the current conflict.

Long-term integrated responses combining nutritional rehabilitation with promotion of optimal infant and young child feeding practices and increasing access to safe water and health services are the only way to address the crisis, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) continue to be the largest single group in crisis, representing 44 per cent of the 3.2 million, and with the ongoing conflict this is likely to even increase further.

In the north, a drought following four seasons of below-average rainfall has left 290,000 pastoral and agro-pastoral people in need of both life-saving and livelihood support to recover, but some good indications are reported for agricultural areas in the south, where a bumper harvest will increase food availability and accessibility to many households, including poor urban families, and has reduced the number of rural people in crisis by 15 per cent from six months ago.

DR Congo: UN sounds alarm over armed attacks against camps for displaced

5 February - The emergency relief wing of the United Nations voiced deep concern today over the dire humanitarian situation and safety of more than 1 million people forced to flee their homes in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as a result of violent conflict in the region.

A series of armed attacks on makeshift camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), human rights violations and general banditry in the North and South Kivu provinces have seriously disrupted aid operations, reported the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

On 15 January in North Kivu, armed militia stole a truck belonging to a humanitarian organization and then used it for a violent assault on aid workers in the Muhanga IDP camp in a bid to steal their belongings.

OCHA said that the mainly Rwandan Hutu rebel group, known as the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), reportedly raided the Nyange camp in North Kivu on 22 January, killing three people and injuring several others.

According to IDPs in the camp, the incursion was intended to forcefully recruit men to the FDLR, which has been on the receiving end of several Government offensives since last year in a bid to flush the group out of North and South Kivu, where it has been operating since the 1994 genocide in neighbouring Rwanda.

In addition, reliable information collected by OCHA suggests that the notorious Ugandan rebel outfit, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), slaughtered some 100 people in north-eastern DRC on 13 January. The total number of Congolese slain by the LRA in January is still unknown, but OCHA reported that over 80 had been killed in December 2009.

OCHA said that displacement lies at the core of the humanitarian crisis in eastern DRC, with an estimated 1.3 million IDPs in the two Kivu provinces and at least 1 million believed to have been driven from their homes in 2009.

Aid operations are severely restricted by conflict and rampant banditry leaving many vulnerable populations without assistance, said OCHA, adding that the poor state of roads and other infrastructure have compounded the situation.

Any pact with Taliban must guarantee rights of Afghan women – UN panel

5 February - Any agreement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban should include a clear commitment to protect women's human rights, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women said today.

The Committee, which consists of 23 experts on women's rights, voiced deep concern at "the absence of clear strategies to protect women's rights in the process of the discussions leading to negotiations with representatives of the Taliban," which severely restricted women's freedom before its ouster in 2001, including the right of girls to schooling.

While welcoming the current commitment and efforts of the Government and its international allies to help secure a peaceful, prosperous and democratic future, it urged the Government and its allies "to ensure that women representatives are included in the upcoming peace and development dialogues and negotiations with the Taliban."

The Committee also regretted the exclusion of Afghan women from the high decision-making level of an international conference on the war-torn country in London last month.



Conflict, chronic poverty and high food prices threaten children's well-being in the eastern DRC



Women waiting to vote in Afghanistan

“Afghan women, who constitute the majority of the Afghan population, must be full and equal participants in decision-making, at all levels, in the process of peacebuilding, reconciliation, reconstruction and development of their country,” it said in a news release.

“Their voices and views, as well as capacities, are fundamental and necessary for the sustainable establishment of a prosperous and peaceful Afghanistan, based on the rule of law, democracy, justice, human rights and gender equality.”

The Committee called on the Afghan Government to give special attention to a critical review of all discriminatory laws and provisions, drawing particular attention to the much-criticized new personal status law of the Shiite minorities, which is especially discriminatory against women, urging it to modify or repeal them.

The Committee monitors implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which has been ratified by 186 States.

Ban sends report to General Assembly on follow-up to inquiry into Gaza conflict

5 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has transmitted a report to the General Assembly on the follow-up to the report made by the United Nations fact-finding mission into the deadly conflict in the Gaza Strip at the start of last year.

Mr. Ban’s report – submitted at the request of the General Assembly – concerns the implementation of the recommendations of the fact-finding mission, led by Justice Richard Goldstone, a former UN war crimes prosecutor, into the conflict.



Justice Richard Goldstone (file photo)

It contains submissions from the Israeli Government, the Palestinian Authority and the Swiss Government, all received before Mr. Ban’s report was finalized. The report is now being sent to UN Member States.

The Goldstone Report, as it has become known, found that both Israeli forces and Palestinian militants were guilty of serious human rights violations and breaches of humanitarian law during the Gaza conflict, which began in late December 2008.

The four-member fact-finding team, set up at the request of the UN Human Rights Council, called on the two sides to carry out independent credible investigations into their actions during the conflict.

In his report this week Mr. Ban stressed that he hoped Israel and the Palestinians conduct those inquiries appropriately.

“International humanitarian law needs to be fully respected and civilians must be protected in all situations and circumstances,” the Secretary-General wrote.

“The Secretary-General remains personally moved by the plight of all civilians harmed during the Gaza conflict,” Mr. Ban’s spokesperson told journalists today. “He was at the forefront of the efforts to stop the fighting in Gaza. He was the first international leader to visit after the fighting and express his solidarity with victims on both sides of the conflict. He has consistently called for credible domestic investigations, and did so again in this report.

“Looking forward, the Secretary-General is firmly leading the advocacy and planning for the rebuilding of Gaza’s civilian infrastructure.”

Head of key regional group advocates closer ties with UN to tackle security threats



5 February - The head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) today called for boosting the body's partnership with the United Nations to tackle threats to peace and security.

"We believe that a more efficient use of capabilities of such organizations as the OSCE would help the UN and its Security Council to more effectively prevent potential security threats and respond to them," Kanat Saudabayev, Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan and Chairman-in-Office for the OSCE, told a meeting of the Security Council.

Mr. Saudabayev added that the OSCE and other regional intergovernmental bodies play an important role in the area of security, with their "unique resources and advantages and good understanding of the situation on the ground."

A top priority for the Chairman-in-Office, he stated, is further involvement of the OSCE in the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan.

"Close interaction between the OSCE and the UN, which is the main coordinator of international operations in Afghanistan, is in our common interests," said Mr. Saudabayev.

The OSCE plans to focus its efforts on boosting the protection of Afghanistan's borders with its Central Asian neighbours, including through the training of Afghan personnel at the OSCE Border Management Staff College in Tajikistan and the OSCE Customs Training Center in Kyrgyzstan.

"At the same time, we are convinced that it is impossible to ensure a country's transition to a peaceful and constructive life through military means alone," he added. "The time has come for a major expansion of the human dimension of our common efforts, as confirmed by the outcome of the London Conference on Afghanistan."

At the 28 January conference, the international community came together to fully align military and civilian resources behind an Afghan-led political strategy towards the shared goal of a stable and secure Afghanistan.

Mr. Saudabayev noted that all OSCE initiatives will be pursued in full coordination with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and other entities.

The Chairman also touched on the OSCE's efforts in the areas of nuclear security, human rights, and the environment as part of his briefing to the 15-member Council.

NOTE:

For technical reasons, today's UN Daily News contains articles posted up to 1 p.m. New York time on Friday 5 February.