



In the headlines:

- Sri Lanka: UN chief urges due process for arrested opposition leader
- Curbing sexual violence in conflict is 'mission irresistible' for new UN envoy
- Latrine shortage could worsen public health in Haiti, UN agency says
- In Kenya, UN partners with MTV to dramatize stories of love – and HIV infection
- Humanitarian crisis for Pakistan's displaced far from over – UN official
- UN crime watchdog helps Iran set up unit to combat money-laundering from drugs trade
- Joint UN-African Union envoy to Darfur talks peace with armed rebel movements
- UN health agency stresses good hygiene to prevent cholera spread in Benin
- Needs of Haiti's disabled must not be forgotten, says UN expert body
- Pacific island nations at UN meeting call on world to fulfil aid commitments
- UN seeks to restore Haiti's weather services to prevent further disasters
- UN uses nuclear technology to improve child nutrition

Sri Lanka: UN chief urges due process for arrested opposition leader



General Sarath Fonseka

9 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today called on authorities in Sri Lanka to ensure the rights and safety of the defeated presidential candidate and former army chief who was arrested yesterday, and said he intends to speak to the country's President Mahinda Rajapaksa to discuss the issue.

General Sarath Fonseka, the challenger who received 40 per cent of the vote in the 27 January presidential election, was arrested yesterday by Sri Lankan troops for alleged "military offences."

Mr. Rajapaksa is also reported to have ordered the dissolution of Parliament with effect from midnight on Tuesday.

Mr. Ban is following developments in the South Asian nation "with concern," UN spokesperson Martin Nesirky told reporters in New York.

"He urges the authorities to follow due process of law and provide all the necessary protections and guarantees to his safety," said Mr. Nesirky.

"He underlined the importance of ensuring a positive political climate as the country prepares for parliamentary elections and in the interest of peace, stability and reconciliation."

The Secretary-General intends to speak to Mr. Rajapaksa, who was re-elected after obtaining nearly 58 per cent of the more

than 10 million votes cast in the recent polls, and will maintain close engagement through his senior advisers, the spokesperson added.

Curbing sexual violence in conflict is 'mission irresistible' for new UN envoy

9 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's newly appointed Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict promised today a more coherent and effective battle against the scourge, citing recent mass rapes in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and calling her new task "mission irresistible."

"Sexual violence against women is not cultural, it's criminal. It's not a women's issue, it's a human rights issue. It's for both men and women to make sure that women have the right to their body," Margot Wallström, a Swedish politician with a long history in defending women's rights, told a news briefing in New York, citing the need to end impunity as a priority area. "Women carry half the sky, so they have to be valued that way."



Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Margot Wallström

Ms. Wallström was introduced by Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro who said the new appointment was "a major step" towards protecting civilians subjected to sexual violence not only in conflict but also in post-conflict situations.

"Ending sexual violence in conflict situations remains a top priority for the Secretary-General who has called for increased actions by the international community to prevent violence, to protect individuals, to punish perpetrators, and to provide redress to victims," she added.

Today's presentation came just a day after the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) reported that more than 8,000 women were raped in the DRC during fighting between warring factions last year. Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Alain Le Roy told the briefing that such abuse was occurring not just in the DRC. "In most of our missions we have this extremely serious question of sexual violence," he said.

In the DRC the UN is combating the scourge by developing a greater presence on the ground, escorting women going to market or fetching firewood or water, developing early warning systems, and working with local mayors.

"At the same time, it is not enough," he added, noting that UN peacekeepers in all DRC numbered 20,000 soldiers while just the two war-torn eastern Kivu provinces, where most rapes occurred, had a population of 10 million people. "We cannot be behind... [every] tree."

Ms. Wallström said the DRC would be one of the first places she would visit, but cautioned that her main challenge would be living up to all the expectations put in her given the breadth of the mandate and its limited length of only two years. "We'll also have to create some success stories if you ask me," she added. "It is also obvious where the hotspots are, where everybody expects us to be present and to do as much as we can. Of course, the DRC is the obvious example..."

"I will never be able to live up to all these expectations," she said. But, she added, "of course I feel honoured and humbled and excited. It's a tough task and the mandate is short, two years, but it is mission irresistible to me at this moment."

Latrine shortage could worsen public health in Haiti, UN agency says



Haitians build temporary homes in Port-au-Prince

9 February - Sanitation has become a pressing need in Haiti and the lack of it could pose health problems for the nearly 1 million people living in temporary settlements ahead of the rainy season, United Nations officials warned today.

“Some 18,000 latrines are needed in Port-au-Prince for 900,000 people. Less than 5 per cent of the need for latrines has been met,” Paul Garwood, a World Health Organization (WHO) spokesperson in Geneva, told journalists. The need is calculated on the basis of one latrine per 50 people.

There are more than 1.2 million people are living in spontaneous settlements, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) announced today, and nearly 480,000 have left Port-au-Prince for neighbouring areas, putting additional stress on the rural population in those towns to support the displaced persons.

Despite the high numbers of people and the need for greater sanitation, Mr. Garwood noted that there has not been a notable increase in infectious diseases so far. He said that acute respiratory infections are the most commonly reported infectious disease, accounting for up to a quarter of consultations. Diarrhoeal diseases represent up to 12 per cent of cases.

The next serious category is trauma injuries, such as broken bones sustained during the quake. While slowly decreasing, they still account for more than 10 per cent of cases.

Clinics are in need of supplies. UN agencies and donor countries provide medicines to various health partners on a daily basis through a large-scale coordinated effort run out of Haiti’s pharmaceuticals hub in Port-au-Prince known by its acronym PROMESS (Program on Essential Medicine and Supplies). The warehouse was recently reorganized to make it more effective.

Mr. Garwood said that more than 22 containers with some 200 types of medical supplies have now arrived. The containers also included 1,000 beds, more than 200 stretchers and other items such as wheelchairs, crutches, bed sheets, blankets and pillows.

Outside of Port-au-Prince, more than 1.5 tons of essential drugs were delivered this month to Les Cayes, Jérémie, Port-de-Paix and Gonaïves. WHO is expected soon to send basic emergency medicines that can treat 705,000 people for the next month.

UN officials are concerned about the rainy season that is due to start in April. Mr. Garwood warned that the rains could increase morbidity rates for childhood diseases, such as acute respiratory infections and diarrhoea.

In Kenya, UN partners with MTV to dramatize stories of love – and HIV infection



Actress Lupita Nyong'o in a scene from the Kenyan TV drama 'Shuga'.

9 February - The United Nations and MTV are reaching out to young Kenyans to highlight that HIV is not a death sentence though a new three-part television series exploring the lives and love of a group of friends in Nairobi.

“It’s fast, it’s furious, it’s cool – and that’s exactly how we filmed it,” said Lupita Nyong’o, who plays Ayira, one of the lead roles in the show entitled Shuga.

Her character is a college student torn between a boyfriend her own age and an older man in the series that underscores how behaviours – including having multiple sexual partners, exploitation and alcohol abuse – can increase young people’s vulnerability to HIV.

“Especially where we were doing the scenes where we were doing the HIV testing, there was a hush on the set,” Ms. Nyong’o said at a panel discussion recently at the New York headquarters of the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), which collaborated with MTV and other partners to produce the show.

“It was a heavy time for us, and a lot of actors said, ‘This is real. Yeah, this is real – and I need to make a change in my life.’”

Messages about AIDS prevention are especially vital in East and Southern Africa, the heart of the global epidemic, according to UNICEF, with young women particularly affected by the virus.

“In some countries, as many as three young women to each young man are infected,” said Susan Kasedde, the agency’s Senior Specialist in HIV Prevention.

According to UNICEF, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization (WHO), out of a total population of nearly 40 million people in Kenya, up to two million are living with HIV.

UNICEF acknowledged that popular programmes like Shuga alone will not bring an end to the epidemic, but can help to fight the stigma faced by people living with HIV.

Humanitarian crisis for Pakistan’s displaced far from over – UN official

9 February - The top United Nations humanitarian official in Pakistan has called on the international community not to forget the vulnerable civilians displaced in the country’s northwest, urging donors to contribute to a \$537 million appeal launched to meet immediate relief needs.

The Pakistan Humanitarian Response Plan for 2010, put together by the Government, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other aid actors, will enable continued assistance in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) for at least another six months.



Women and children in Pakistan's IDP camps face an especially tough time

UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Pakistan Martin Mogwanja urged the international donor community “to keep up their invaluable contributions to enable the humanitarians to continue assisting the people in need in Pakistan.”

A total of 3.1 million people from NWFP and FATA were displaced in 2009 due to Government operations against militants in these areas. The funds sought for the response plan just launched will not only response to the needs of the internally

displaced persons (IDPs), but also support those who have returned to their places of origin, those who never left and the families who opened up their homes to host the displaced.

“Considering that the number of IDPs from Orakzai Agency has risen nearly tenfold in the last two months, the emergency in Pakistan seems far from over,” said Mr. Mogwanja.

In addition to providing relief to the IDPs, the main humanitarian activities in 2010 will include the distribution of food, the rehabilitation and reconstruction of damaged infrastructure and assistance to farmers who lost their crops due to hostilities and displacement.

The largest share of the requested funds – \$195 million – will be needed for food-related projects, since a large part of the affected population will continue to depend on food aid. Other priority areas include shelter and non-food items, health, water and sanitation, agriculture and the coordination and management of IDP camps, among others.

As of 31 December 2009, last year’s \$680 million appeal was 71 per cent funded. Those funds enabled the humanitarian community to reach more than four million people in need of assistance with vital relief including food and drinking water.

UN crime watchdog helps Iran set up unit to combat money-laundering from drugs trade

9 February - Iran has teamed with the United Nations anti-crime agency to set up a financial intelligence unit tasked with tackling the spread of money-laundering in the country, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) announced today.

The move is a major step forward towards fighting the use of illicit earnings in Iran – mostly connected to opium trafficking from neighbouring Afghanistan – to finance serious criminal activity, undermining peace and security in the country.

In a 2009 report, UNODC estimated that trafficking in opiates has created an illegal market worth some \$65 billion annually, more than the gross domestic product (GDP) of at least 120 countries and 65 times the value of the market for firearms trafficking.

“The time has come to celebrate progress on anti-money-laundering by the Islamic Republic of Iran,” UNODC’s country representative Antonino De Leo said at the inauguration of the new unit.

“UNODC is proud of having contributed to these national achievements through its technical assistance programme,” added Mr. De Leo.

The new unit, initially consisting of 15 officials from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, will analyse suspicious domestic and international financial transactions, and help the judiciary investigate and prosecute those involved in money-laundering.

UNODC has also assisted Iran in establishing a computer-based training centre in its capital, Tehran, which is “a centre of excellence to train officials on international best practices in tackling money-laundering and financing of terrorism,” said Mr. De Leo.



UNODC representative Antonino De Leo (left) with Iran's Vice Minister Asghar Abol Hassani

Joint UN-African Union envoy to Darfur talks peace with armed rebel movements

9 February - The newly appointed head of the joint African Union-United Nations peacekeeping mission in Darfur, known as UNAMID, today met with members from key rebel militia as part of a series of talks on the prospects for a durable peace in the war-scarred region in western Sudan.

The meeting, which took place in the Qatari capital of Doha, was held between UNAMID Joint Special Representative Ibrahim Gambari and negotiators from the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army/Armed Revolutionary Front (SLA/ARF).



Ibrahim Gambari head of UNAMID at its headquarters in El Fasher, Darfur.

UNAMID noted that the talks, covering a range of issues relating to cooperation between the joint peacekeeping operation and the rebel groups, were transparent, constructive and promising, with all parties committed to working closely to advance the peace process in Darfur.

The JEM and SLA/ARF militia also underscored the need to reach an agreement to end all hostilities and tackle the root causes of the conflict in Darfur.

In addition, the parties voiced their desire to cooperate with UNAMID, which was set up in late 2007 to protect civilians and quell the violence in Darfur, where an estimated 300,000 people have been killed and another 2.7 million have been forced from their homes since fighting erupted in 2003, pitting rebels against Government forces and allied Janjaweed militiamen.

At the end of last month, Mr. Gambari held talks with Sudanese officials in Khartoum, where he expressed appreciation for the warm welcome he received from the Government and people of Sudan since arriving in the country and vowed to do his utmost to promote lasting peace and security in Darfur.

UN health agency stresses good hygiene to prevent cholera spread in Benin

9 February - Officials from the United Nations health agency and the Beninese Government are urging the West African nation's citizens to be extra vigilant in observing good hygiene amid a recent cholera outbreak that has already claimed several lives.

Since the outbreak began in early January, 131 cases have been confirmed of which two resulted in death, according to Léon Kohossi with the UN World Health Organization (WHO) in Benin.



Clean water is essential in containing the spread of cholera

“This epidemic has erupted due to lack of hygiene,” Dr. Kohossi told the UN News Centre.

He noted that with the current dry season in Benin, locals are finding it difficult to get clean water and are therefore drinking from the Oueme River, which is polluted.

Most of the cases are centred around four villages located near the Oueme River – Bonou, Adjohoun, Dangbo and Aguegues.

Additional cases have been detected in the capital, Cotonou, which is some 200 kilometres from the epicentre of the outbreak, and Allada, located 100 kilometres north of Cotonou.

The Ministry of Health and local authorities are working to sensitize people against drinking unclean water and trying to identify ways to provide them with clean water.

Meanwhile, WHO is providing emergency kits, including medicine, that are being distributed to health centres in the affected areas to treat patients with cholera – an acute intestinal infection picked up through contaminated food or water, and which results in diarrhoea that can lead to severe dehydration and death without prompt treatment.

Needs of Haiti's disabled must not be forgotten, says UN expert body



UN peacekeepers assist quake victim in Haiti

9 February - A group of United Nations experts today stressed that the needs of Haitians with disabilities must be included in the relief, recovery and reconstruction processes following the earthquake that battered the small Caribbean nation last month.

Persons with disabilities must not become “the forgotten ones during the emergency response and the reconstruction of the country,” the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stated in a news release.

“While relief workers are struggling to provide aid to the people of Haiti and while the situation remains difficult for everyone, persons with disabilities are particularly affected by the crisis,” said the Committee’s current chairperson, Mohammed Al-Tarawneh.

“The disabled risk being left out unless a disabilities perspective is built in the recovery process from the start.”

The 12 January quake killed up to 200,000 people, injured many others and left one third of the country’s nine million people in need of aid.

“The trauma caused by this disaster cannot be underestimated,” said Mr. Al-Tarawneh, adding that many disabled people in Haiti have been made even more vulnerable, especially if their caregivers have been killed or injured.

The 12-member Committee urged Haiti to ensure that persons with disabilities fully participate in the decision-making process regarding social and economic reconstruction and that their long-term development needs be taken into account.

The experts serving on the Committee, which will hold its third session in two weeks in Geneva, are tasked with monitoring the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which so far has been endorsed by 144 countries.

The Convention, which entered into force in May 2008, is the culmination of years of global efforts to ensure that the rights of the world’s estimated 650 million persons with disabilities are guaranteed and protected.

It asserts the rights to education, health, work, adequate living conditions, freedom of movement, freedom from exploitation and equal recognition before the law for persons with disabilities.

Pacific island nations at UN meeting call on world to fulfil aid commitments



Pacific island nations meeting in Port Vila, Vanuatu

9 February - Fourteen island developing nations in the Pacific Ocean wrapped up a United Nations-backed meeting today with a call to the global community to honour its commitments to help them weather the fallout from global economic crises and recent natural disasters.

“External assistance, through development aid, debt relief and foreign investment, is needed to support the Pacific on its path to equitable economic growth,” UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Executive Secretary Noeleen Heyzer told the high-level forum in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

“Pacific island economies are vulnerable for a number of reasons. They are isolated, small in size, lacking in resources,

subject to a high frequency of natural disasters and vulnerable to rising sea levels,” she said, noting that global economic crises and recent natural disasters had affected the islands’ halting recovery from the earlier food and fuel crises.

“In order to move forward, we must first understand the social, economic and environmental impacts these new risks and vulnerabilities have had on the region. With this knowledge we can then develop appropriate strategies for recovery and long-term plans for sustainable development.”

Strategies adopted at the two-day meeting, organized by ESCAP and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), include a call on the international community to honour their commitments, adoption of green growth policies, strengthening of implementation mechanisms, and adequate budget allocation.

The outcome will be discussed at a three-day Pacific Conference on the Human Face of the Global Economic Crisis beginning in Port Vila tomorrow, when Ms. Heyzer will be joined by UN Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator Helen Clark.

Ministers and senior officials from the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu participated in the meeting.

UN seeks to restore Haiti’s weather services to prevent further disasters

9 February -

With the rainy season and its flood risks due in April and hurricanes shortly after, Haiti urgently needs operational meteorological services to forestall further disasters after last month’s devastating earthquake, the United Nations weather agency reported today.

“In order to prevent potential disasters related to the natural hazards, which the country is prone to, the capacity of Haiti to produce and disseminate weather information and warnings needs to be developed without delay,” the UN World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said, noting that the national weather office in Port-au-Prince, the capital, was severely cracked by the quake and is no longer safe.

“Weather forecasts and early warnings from the Haiti National Meteorological Centre are essential for national authorities, humanitarian and development agencies and the people for emergency contingency planning and recovery,” it added.

WMO is now working to ensure that the national meteorological service is equipped with basic capacities and expertise for translation and dissemination of information currently being provided by neighbouring regions for risk managers, humanitarian aid bodies, decision-makers and the general public during the upcoming rainy and hurricane seasons, which begin in early April and early June respectively.

Restoration of basic operational meteorological services within the next six to 12 months is a key objective in the UN revised flash appeal, to be launched later this month, and various bilateral support programmes. At an estimated cost of \$1 million the project includes basic capacities such as an operational office space, computers and printer, communication systems, restoration of automated weather stations, back up generators, and hands-on training of staff.

Even before the 12 January quake, which killed up to 200,000 people, injured many others and left 2 million in need of aid, Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, faced pressing needs for disaster risk reduction and early warning capabilities, with WMO Secretary-General Michel Jarraud visiting in November to assess investment requirements.

More than 90 per cent of disasters in the country are linked to frequently occurring climate-related hazards, such as tropical cyclones, storm surges, flash floods, drought, thunderstorms or lightning, landslides or mudslides, which have been further exacerbated by massive deforestation and environmental changes.



Some of the many affected by Gustav try to seek shelter [File Photo]

Haiti annually experiences two rainy seasons, from April to June and from October to November, as well as a hurricane season from early June until the end of November. It suffered significant losses in 2008 from four hurricanes, Fay, Gustav, Hanna, and Ike, that occurred in quick succession. In 2004 tropical storm Jeanne's heavy rains caused massive flooding and landslides.

UN uses nuclear technology to improve child nutrition



Vitamins and minerals are vital in a child's diet to boost immunity and healthy development.

9 February - The United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is working to boost the nutrition of children at risk of malaria, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases through state-of-the-art nuclear technology.

With children in the developing world often experiencing micronutrient deficiencies, such as too little iron, supplements have been routinely recommended. In Africa, the problem is compounded by malaria, which kills one million young people a year and is caused by parasites transmitted through infected mosquitoes.

Research in malaria-affected areas has shown that although iron-deficient children are helped by supplements, those with enough in their system are at the risk of becoming ill

when they take the pills.

Extra iron in the bloodstream could increase the chances of contracting malaria, with parasites reaching higher densities.

As a result, the IAEA is applying stable isotope technology to estimate the amount of absorbable iron in the body to provide a clearer picture for researchers studying the ties between iron absorption and the risk of infection.

"It's one thing to give infants a dose of iron or a dose of zinc and then follow them for a year and see how many of them get sick, but that does not really tell you if they were healthier at the end of that year, why they were healthier," said Nancy Krebs, Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Colorado-Denver's School of Medicine in the United States.

The isotope studies, she said, give more insight into how the body is actually using the supplements or micronutrients being given, expressing gratitude to the IAEA for its work in this field.