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World meets goal of boosting access to clean water but lags on better sanitation – UN

6 March - The goal of reducing by half the number of people without access to safe drinking water has been achieved, well ahead of the 2015 deadline for reaching the globally agreed development targets aimed at ridding the world of extreme poverty, hunger and preventable diseases, the United Nations said today.

Between 1990 and 2010, over two billion people gained access to improved drinking water sources, such as piped supplies and protected wells, according to a joint report by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the UN World Health Organization (WHO).

Halving the number of people without access to clean drinking water is one of the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which include ending extreme poverty, reducing child and maternal mortality rates, fighting diseases and establishing a global partnership for development.

“Today we recognize a great achievement for the people of the world,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said upon the release of the report, entitled ‘Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation 2012’ and produced by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation.

“This is one of the first MDG targets to be met. The successful efforts to provide greater access to drinking water are a testament to all who see the MDGs not as a dream, but as a vital tool for improving the lives of millions of the poorest people.”



The world has met the MDG target of halving the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water. Photo: UNICEF-WHO

At the end of 2010, some 89 per cent of the world's population, or 6.1 billion people, used improved drinking water sources, according to the report. That figure is one per cent more than the 88 per cent stated in the MDG targets.

The report estimates that by 2015, some 92 per cent of the global population will have access to improved drinking water.

“For children this is especially good news,” said UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake. “Every day more than 3,000 children die from diarrhoeal diseases. Achieving this goal will go a long way to saving children's lives.”

Mr. Lake cautioned that victory can not yet be declared because at least 11 per cent of the world's population – 783 million people – are still without access to safe drinking water, and billions live without sanitation facilities.

“The numbers are still staggering,” he said, “But the progress announced today is proof that MDG targets can be met with the will, the effort and the funds,” he added.

The report shows that the world is still far from meeting the MDG target for sanitation, and is unlikely to do so by 2015. Only 63 per cent of the world population has access to improved sanitation, a figure projected to increase to only 67 per cent by 2015, well below the 75 per cent target in the MDGs. Currently 2.5 billion people still lack improved sanitation.

UNICEF and WHO also cautioned that since the measurement of water quality is not possible globally, progress towards the MDG target of safe drinking water is measured through gathering data on the use of improved drinking water sources. Significant work must be done to ensure that improved sources of water are and remain safe, the two agencies stressed.

“Better water, sanitation and hygiene are key to improving human health and development,” said WHO Director-General Margaret Chan. “Today, even with this exciting new progress, almost 10 per cent of all diseases are still linked to poor water, sanitation and hygiene.”

The global figures also mask massive disparities between regions and countries, and within countries, the two agencies emphasized.

Only 61 per cent of the people in Sub-Saharan Africa have access to improved water supply sources, compared with 90 per cent or more in Latin America and the Caribbean, northern Africa, and large parts of Asia. Over 40 per cent of all people globally who lack access to drinking water live in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The report also confirms that in cases where water supplies are not readily accessible, the burden of carrying water falls disproportionately on women and girls.

“We have reached an important target, but we cannot stop here,” said Mr. Ban. “Our next step must be to target the most difficult to reach, the poorest and the most disadvantaged people across the world. The United Nations General Assembly has recognized drinking water and sanitation as human rights. That means we must ensure that every person has access.”

Meanwhile, Lenny Kravitz, the Grammy award-winning singer-songwriter, record producer and actor, has thrown his support behind the global effort by UNICEF and its partners to help save and improve the lives of millions of children and their families around the world by providing them with access to clean water and adequate sanitation.

“I was born in New York City and have always taken access to clean water as a given,” said Mr. Kravitz. “No child should die of diarrhoea from drinking dirty water. That thousands of children under the age of five continue to die every day because they lack clean water and basic sanitation is simply unacceptable.”

Mr. Kravitz will be appearing in public service announcements and on Twitter and Facebook with a message that all children can – and must – have access to clean water and adequate sanitation.

The musician, who recently released the album ‘Black and White America,’ is joining forces with UNICEF to help mark World Water Day on 22 March and will send a global message of the importance of investing in children and providing them with clean water and sanitation.



Images of alleged torture in Syrian hospitals 'shocking' – UN rights office



Rupert Colville, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

6 March - The United Nations human rights office said today that images shown by a British news programme of the alleged torture of patients in Syrian hospitals were “shocking” and similar to those received by UN-mandated investigators.

“The pictures shown on Channel 4 last night are truly shocking, and unfortunately very much in accordance with evidence that has been accumulated in the Human Rights Council-mandated fact-finding mission and commission of inquiry reports on Syria,” said Rupert Colville, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The OHCHR fact-finding mission and the independent Commission of Inquiry that investigated the violations in Syria concluded that crimes against humanity may have been committed since March last year when the popular uprising – similar to the Arab Spring protests seen across North Africa and the Middle East – began.

Mr. Colville noted that gross human rights violations, including torture, under the cloak of emergency legislation, have been documented in Syria since 1963.

“The brutality of the country’s security forces is notorious, and a number of the security and intelligence agencies act as independent entities and are involved in matters beyond their official functions. They enjoy immunity from prosecution by law,” he told reporters in Geneva.

Methods of torture, most of which are known to have been used in Syria over many years, include severe beatings, electric shocks, suspension for long periods by the limbs, psychological torture and routine humiliation, he stated.

The November 2011 report by the commission of inquiry documented cases of injured people taken to military hospitals, where they were beaten and tortured during interrogation, said Mr. Colville.

Torture and killings reportedly took place in the Homs Military Hospital – the hospital shown in the Channel 4 images – by security forces dressed as doctors and allegedly acting with the complicity of medical personnel.

Consistent testimonies received by both the commission and the fact-finding mission described how members of the security forces tracked down wounded protesters in both public and private hospitals. In early June and late July, security forces allegedly conducted raids in hospitals in Hama, and injured demonstrators were arrested and taken to military hospitals, where they were reportedly interrogated and tortured.

“When widespread and systematic, torture amounts to a crime against humanity,” Mr. Colville stated.

Fadéla Chaib, a spokesperson for the UN World Health Organization (WHO), stressed that hospitals should remain places where people could seek help in a secure environment, where health workers could go about their business neutrally and securely.

While very little information from the ground was available, she added, it was presumed that conditions in hospitals were “difficult.”

UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos is scheduled to arrive in Syria tomorrow to urge parties to the conflict to allow in humanitarian assistance, while the Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the League of Arab States, Kofi Annan, is due in the region to begin efforts to end the crisis.

Meanwhile, the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said that as many as 2,000 refugees from Syria may have

crossed into Lebanon in the past two days but it was unclear how many had remained.

The agency is currently assessing the situation, spokesperson Sybella Wilkes told reporters, adding that the majority were fleeing violence in Al Qusayr, south of Homs, and many of them were accommodated with host families and a few families were in a mosque in Aarsal. UNHCR and partners are undertaking needs assessments, and essential food and non-food items are being sent to the area.

DR Congo: UN concerned over fresh attacks by Ugandan rebel group



Civilians displaced by increasing LRA attacks. UN Photo/Tim McKulka

6 March - The United Nations refugee agency today voiced concern over the recent displacement of several thousand people as a result of fresh attacks by the notorious Ugandan rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the Orientale province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

After a lull in LRA raids in the second half of last year that resulted in improved security in the north-eastern province, new attacks on civilians have been reported during the past few weeks in the territories of Dungu, Faradje, Watsa, Niangara, Bondo and Ango.

The fresh attacks have caused 3,000 people to flee, according to Fatoumata Lejeune-Kaba, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

There have been 20 new attacks since the beginning of this year, with one person killed and 17 abducted, she told reporters in Geneva.

The most recent attacks took place in the village of Bagulupa, 55 kilometres east of Dungu. The village was attacked on 10 February and again on 24 February, forcing most of the residents to flee on foot towards Dungu, the main town in Haut Uele district, Ms. Lejeune-Kaba said.

According to information gathered by UNHCR field staff, most newly-arrived internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Dungu have previously been displaced by LRA attacks.

Ms. Lejeune-Kaba said the humanitarian conditions for the displaced are harsh, with IDPs in and around Dungu sleeping in makeshift settlements. They lack clean drinking water and basic sanitation facilities.

To alleviate the suffering of the IDPs in Dungu territory, UNHCR recently distributed basic emergency items, such as plastic sheeting, sleeping mats, blankets, mosquito nets and kitchen sets to some 200 newly-displaced people. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) distributed food, while several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provided medical care and farming tools.

Between 2006 and 2011, a total of 831 attacks against civilians were reported in the northern part of Orientale province. The majority of attacks were blamed on the LRA. More than 2,000 people are known to have been killed and 2,832 abducted, including 1,109 children, according to UNHCR.

LRA activities in Orientale have caused the displacement of an estimated 320,000 people since 2008. Over the same period, 30,000 Congolese refugees were forced to flee to the neighbouring Central African Republic and South Sudan.

Security Council concerned over renewed clashes along Sudan-South Sudan border



Sudanese refugees from Blue Nile state line up to collect water in a camp. Photo: UNHCR/V.Tan

6 March - The Security Council today expressed grave concern about reports of renewed cross-border violence between Sudan and South Sudan, and called for a ceasefire in the area to end the hostilities that have caused thousands of people to flee the region over the past weeks.

The Council, in a presidential statement, demanded that “all parties cease military operations in the border areas and put an end to the cycle of violence,” and that both Governments “take no action that would undermine the security and stability of the other.”

Tensions between the two countries over unresolved border disagreements have continued to simmer and heavy fighting between the Sudanese armed forces and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – North (SPLM-N) in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states has led to a humanitarian crisis and triggered massive displacement.

The Council urged the Sudanese and South Sudanese Governments to return to direct talks to resolve their political and security issues on the basis of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the 2005 document that ended decades of civil war and led to South Sudan formally seceding from Sudan last July.

The 15-member body also emphasized the urgency of delivering aid to prevent the current crisis from worsening.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also warned that the recent clashes are prompting thousands of people to flee their homes and seek for safety in South Sudan’s Upper Nile state and western Ethiopia.

Last week, UNHCR registered 2,287 new arrivals in the Doro and Jammam refugee sites in Upper Nile, bringing to more than 80,000 the total number of registered refugees in this region. In western Ethiopia, the agency is also receiving a steady flow of new arrivals mostly from Sudan’s Blue Nile state.

“We are working at establishing a third camp to accommodate the growing Sudanese influx into Ethiopia,” UNHCR spokesperson Fatoumata Lejeune-Kaba told reporters at a briefing in Geneva.

“The new camp is located in Bambasi and will have the capacity to house up to 20,000 refugees when it is completed later this month,” she said, adding that UNHCR is expecting more arrivals into South Sudan and Ethiopia because refugees reported that more communities are on the move in Blue Nile.

Ms. Lejeune-Kaba said the security situation is also precarious in the other border areas between South Sudan’s Unity state and Sudan’s Southern Kordofan after reported bombings last week along the western border of Pariang County and in the Lake Jau area.

“We are extremely concerned about the safety of people in the nearby Yida refugee settlement, which hosts 16,022 Sudanese,” Ms. Lejeune-Kaba said. “UNHCR is continuing to transfer refugees away from volatile border areas to refugee sites we have established at safer distances from the fighting.”

South Sudan now hosts more than 100,000 registered Sudanese refugees from South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Western Ethiopia has so far registered more than 30,000, mainly from Blue Nile.

Meanwhile, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) confirmed that fighting between Lou Nuer and Murle youth had taken place in Jonglei state over the weekend, with the number of casualties still unknown. The Mission stated that it sent patrols to the area to determine the cause of the clashes and the number of casualties.



UN expert warns of global public health disaster caused by unhealthy foods

6 March - Globalized food systems and the spread of Western lifestyles has spawned an international public health disaster with over a billion people suffering from undernourishment while another billion remain overweight or obese, an independent United Nations expert warned today.

“Our food systems create sick people,” said Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, as he presented his latest report to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

“The right to food means not only access to an adequate quantity of food, but also the ability to have a balanced and nutritious diet,” he added, while urging governments to uphold their responsibility in securing their citizens’ right to healthy foods.

In his new report, Mr. De Schutter identified five priorities for putting nutrition back at the heart of food systems in both the developed and developing world. They are taxing unhealthy products; regulating foods high in saturated fats, salt and sugar; cracking down on junk food advertising; overhauling “wrong-headed” agricultural subsidies making unhealthy ingredients cheaper than others; and supporting local food production.

“Urbanization, supermarketization, and the global spread of Western lifestyles have shaken up traditional food habits. The result is a public health disaster,” said the expert. “Governments have been focusing on increasing calorie availability, but they have often been indifferent to what kind of calories are on offer, at what prices, to whom they are accessible, and how they are marketed.”

Mr. De Schutter pointed to the accessibility and abundance of highly-processed foods as a major factor in nutrition-related illnesses as they tend to be richer in saturated and trans-fatty acids, salt and sugars.

As a result, he argued, children frequently become addicted to the junk foods targeted at them. Also, it is the poorest population groups in wealthy countries that are most affected by processed foods, which are often more affordable than healthy diets. He further noted that the export of such Western dietary habits had brought diabetes and heart disease to the developing world.

“We have deferred to food companies the responsibility for ensuring that a good nutritional balance emerges. Voluntary guidelines and piecemeal nutrition initiatives have failed to create a system with the right signals, and the odds remain stacked against the achievement of a healthy, balanced diet,” said Mr. De Schutter.

“Ambitious, targeted nutrition strategies can work,” he added, “but only if the food systems underpinning them are put right.”



Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food
Olivier De Schutter. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

'State religions' risk alienating minorities, warns UN rights expert



Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Heiner Bielefeldt. UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

6 March - State-sanctioned religions risk alienating minorities and discriminating against members of other faiths, an independent United Nations human rights expert warned today.

Speaking at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva where he presented his latest report on freedom of religion or belief and recognition issues, Heiner Bielefeldt urged governments around the world to ensure that 'official' religions do not discriminate against communities of other faiths within their jurisdictions.

"It seems difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of an official 'State religion' that in practice does not have adverse effects on religious minorities, thus discriminating against their members," said Mr. Bielefeldt, who also cautioned against the use of 'official' religion for purposes of national identity politics.

The new report explores the key issues affecting the right to religious freedom around the world – from the limits imposed on communities of faith by strict registration procedures to the potential risk that official State religions pose to minority groups.

In addition, it distinguishes between three separate meanings of the concept of State 'recognition' of religion so as to avoid any potential misunderstandings which could affect freedom of religion or belief or even undermine it as a universal human right.

"Respect for freedom of religion or belief as a human right does not depend on administrative registration procedures, as it has the status of a human right, prior to and independent of any acts of State approval," added Mr. Bielefeldt, who has served as the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief since August 2010.

He also called on States to offer "quick, transparent, fair, inclusive, and non-discriminatory" options for religious communities to achieve the status of legal personality, which is frequently necessary for a community to fully enjoy its freedom to worship.

New UN-backed emissions reduction scheme helps poorer nations use clean energy



Rural households in developing countries will soon be able to get clean renewable energy. Photo: CDM-UNFCCC

6 March - Rural households in developing countries will soon be able to swap kerosene lamps and diesel generators for clean renewable energy thanks to a financial incentive provided under the emissions reduction mechanism of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), it was reported today.

The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and an emissions baseline and monitoring methodology approved by the CDM executive board will enable registered projects to earn saleable credits when they reduce greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to sustainable development, the Convention's Secretariat said in a press release.

The CDM allows emission-reduction projects in developing countries to earn certified emission reduction (CER) credits, each equivalent to one tonne of carbon dioxide. These CERs can be traded and sold, and used by industrialized countries to meet a part of their emission reduction targets under the Kyoto Protocol – an addition to the UNFCCC that contains legally binding measures to reduce emissions.

Under the new CDM arrangement for clean rural electrification, each project must use an approved methodology to

determine existing, pre-project emissions and monitor ongoing emissions once the project is up and running.

“This is what the CDM is all about – reducing greenhouse gas emissions and contributing to sustainable development,” said CDM Executive Board Chair Maosheng Duan at the close of the Board’s 66th meeting.

“It brings market forces to bear on two of the world’s most pressing challenges, climate change and development.”

The new methodology can be used by projects that install renewable electricity generation technologies, like solar electric panels, in communities with no access to electricity, as long as 75 per cent of the consumers are households.

Ban calls for greater efforts to remove barriers to women’s economic empowerment



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. UN
Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

6 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today called for greater efforts to remove barriers that hinder women’s full participation in the economy, citing lack of access to jobs, markets, credit and property as some of the impediments.

“The meaningful participation of women in business – from the inclusion of women-owned businesses in supply chains, to having significant representation of women on corporate boards – also translates into stronger performance,” Mr. Ban told an event at UN Headquarters on gender equality for sustainable business.

Mr. Ban joined nearly 200 business leaders and representatives from civil society, governments and the UN to mark the second anniversary of ‘Equality Means Business,’ an initiative of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the UN Global Compact that provides a roadmap on how business can empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community.

“We cannot achieve sustainable development without buy-in from business – from leading global corporations to small- and medium-size enterprises, from investors to entrepreneurs,” Mr. Ban told those attending the event, whose theme this year is ‘Gender Equality for Sustainable Business.’

“Nor can we achieve sustainability – at a corporate or a global level – without empowering the world’s women,” he added.

Michelle Bachelet, UN Women’s Executive Director, emphasized that countries and companies with higher levels of gender equality enjoy faster growth and better performance. “And the growth is more inclusive, which benefits all of us,” she said.

The Secretary-General said that the UN Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs) provide guidance on improving the status of women. Nearly 400 chief executives worldwide have publicly declared their commitment to implementing the WEPs over the past two years.

He pointed out that two other UN efforts, the ‘Every Women, Every Child’ initiative, aimed at improving the health of women and children, and the ‘Sustainable Energy for All’ initiative are also linked to the goal of achieving sustainable development while ensuring gender equality.

“Despite increased efforts, corporate sustainability and gender equality concerns often remain disconnected,” said Georg Kell, the Executive Director of the UN Global Compact. “More and more companies now recognize that business can maximize its contribution to sustainable development by prioritizing and integrating gender equality and women’s empowerment as key components of corporate sustainability.”

Assembly President lauds Belgium's commitment to multilateralism

6 March - The President of the General Assembly today lauded Belgium's commitment to multilateralism and the work of the United Nations, noting shared concerns, such as mediation and the situation in the Middle East.

"Belgium is an important player at the UN," Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser said in his remarks to the Federal Belgium Parliament in Brussels, where he is on an official visit.

Belgium is also an important host for regional and sub-regional arrangements, he noted, adding that he is holding a number of important meetings in Brussels, aimed at enhancing cooperation between these arrangements and the General Assembly.

The meetings are particularly focused on sustainable development and maintaining international peace and security.

"Belgium's deep commitment to multilateralism is essential as we work together towards building consensus and a united global partnership," said the President. "Your engagement with the development activities of the UN helps support the principles and objectives enshrined in the UN Charter."

Particularly "significant" is Belgium's emphasis on and support for mediation efforts, which is his main theme for the current session of the Assembly. "Such efforts are particularly important at this critical juncture in world history."

He also noted some of his main concerns, which are of mutual interest to Belgium and the UN, such as the escalating Arab-Israeli conflict and the "devastating" events in Syria. In addition, he highlighted the four main pillars that he has identified to help guide the work of the Assembly during its current session.

They are the peaceful settlement of disputes, UN reform and revitalization, improving disaster prevention and response, and sustainable development and global prosperity.

Leaders from Arab nations convene for UN technology summit



ITU Director-General Hamadoun Touré addresses opening ceremony of the Connect Arab Summit. Photo: ITU

6 March - More than 600 government and technology leaders from the Arab region convened today at a United Nations summit in Doha, Qatar, to discuss issues such as cybersecurity, access to broadband and youth employment.

During the Connect Arab Summit, participants will be able to map out policies and strategies to tackle those issues, according to a news release issued by the UN International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which organized the three-day event.

The summit will also be a platform for governments to announce commitments regarding information and communications technologies (ICTs) and to establish partnerships that will further accelerate the deployment of networks, applications and services.

Even though the Arab world is one of the world's most connected regions, there are still many countries where connectivity remains low by global standards. The broadband penetration in the region for example, is just 2.2 per cent, far lower than in the Asia-Pacific region, which stands at 6.2 per cent, and the Americas and Europe, which have 15.5 and 25.8 per cent, respectively.

"The slogan of this summit is 'Build, Innovate, Empower.' It is my firm belief that this region will see the enormous synergies of a common language, a shared culture, and a ubiquitous drive for successful entrepreneurship come together to



General Assembly President Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

create extraordinary opportunities,” ITU Director-General Hamadoun Touré told delegates at the opening ceremony.

“This is a vibrant region, rich in human and material resources, and this summit represents a unique chance for leaders from government, from industry, and from the regional and international financial community to forge common strategies that assure mutual success.”

ITU also launched today a statistics report on the state of connectivity and adoption of ICTs in the Arab region.

Nepal, South Africa and Venezuela to receive UN prize for boosting education

6 March - Three institutions from Nepal, South Africa and Venezuela will be recognized for supporting and improving teachers’ effectiveness in developing countries, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) announced today.

The Rato Bangala Foundation, the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences Schools Enrichment Centre, and the Banco del Libro will be awarded the UNESCO-Hamdan Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Prize for Outstanding Practice and Performance in Enhancing the Effectiveness of Teachers during a ceremony in Dubai in April.



The three institutions will be recognized for their outstanding work in the education field in developing countries or within marginalized or disadvantaged communities, UNESCO said in a news release.

Founded in 2002, the Rato Bangala Foundation is a non-governmental organization that provides training programmes to primary and some secondary school teachers in Nepal. It works closely with the Bank Street College of Education in New York, and the Kathmandu University in Nepal, as well as with Nepal’s Social Welfare Council.

The African Institute for Mathematical Sciences Schools Enrichment Centre provides educational opportunities to disadvantaged communities in South Africa and introduces new skills to the teaching of mathematics, having provided courses to 800 teachers from all over South Africa since it was established in 2003.

Venezuela’s Banco del Libro, first established as an exchange centre for used books in 1960, promotes reading and children’s literature in Latin America by setting up schools and public libraries. It also created a library network to select and recommend children’s books.

The three institutions will share the \$270,000 prize, which is awarded every two years with funding from Sheikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum of Dubai.