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General Assembly to discuss latest developments in Syria



10 February - The General Assembly will meet on Monday to discuss the situation in Syria, where the death toll keeps rising as Government forces continue their bloody crackdown against a pro-democracy uprising.

Navi Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, will brief Member States on the latest developments after a request from General Assembly President Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser.

The 193-member Assembly will also discuss the report of the UN Human Rights Council from December last year in which that body strongly condemned abuses by Syrian authorities carried out as part of the crackdown.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, meanwhile, firmly condemned today's bomb attacks in the city of Aleppo that targeted governmental security offices and killed and injured scores of people.

He extended his sympathy and condolences to the bereaved families and the Government and people of Syria.

“The Secretary-General reiterates that all violence is unacceptable and must cease immediately from all sides,” said a statement issued by his spokesperson.

He reiterated his strong conviction that the crisis in Syria can only be solved through a comprehensive peaceful political solution that addresses the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people and ensures the full respect of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

More than 5,000 people have been killed since the uprising – part of the broader Arab Spring movement across North Africa and the Middle East – began in March last year, and senior UN officials have urged the Government to stop the violence and hold dialogue with opposition groups.

Earlier this week Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the UN is considering sending a joint observer mission with the League of Arab States in a bid to resolve the crisis engulfing the country.

He also voiced regret that the Security Council was unable to agree on collective action on the issue after Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution endorsing Arab League efforts to end the crisis.

“The failure to do so is disastrous for the people of Syria,” he said. “It has encouraged the Syrian Government to step up its war on its own people. Thousands have been killed in cold blood... I fear that the appalling brutality we are witnessing in [the city of] Homs, with heavy weapons firing into civilian neighbourhoods, is a grim harbinger of worse to come.”

Mr. Ban’s Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect, Francis Deng and Edward Luck, issued a joint statement today in which they urged an immediate end to the violence, particularly given the daily reports emerging from Homs of attacks against densely populated areas.

“The presence of armed elements among the population does not render attacks against civilians legal,” the statement noted.

Mr. Deng and Mr. Luck voiced grave concern over reports of rising sectarian tensions within Syria, and they called on civil society groups and others to make “proactive and vigorous efforts... to restore confidence across ethnic and sectarian lines before tensions escalate further.”

The Special Advisers urged all sides to take immediate steps to ensure that the human rights of everyone, regardless of their religious identity or political affiliation, are respected and protected.

Rupert Colville, a spokesperson for Ms. Pillay, told reporters today in Geneva that international law requires that during any armed conflict the wounded and sick must be treated humanely, and the neutrality of medical facilities must be respected.

Fadéla Chaib, a spokesperson for the UN World Health Organization (WHO), also expressed concern about press reports indicating that health-care facilities were not being treated as neutral premises.

Ms. Chaib said there has been a massive increase in weapons-related injuries in recent days, and medical staff have also outlined disruptions to the supply of medicines and pharmaceuticals.

Ban urges Sudan and South Sudan to make compromises on unresolved disputes

10 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today voiced concern over the lack of progress in talks to resolve post-independence issues between Sudan and South Sudan, as well as the possibility of an escalation in tensions after unilateral decisions taken by the two governments over their oil dispute.

Mr. Ban urged both countries to re-commit to the negotiation process scheduled to start today in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, and reach agreements on all outstanding issues.

“The moment has come for the leaders of both countries to make the necessary compromises, once again, that will guarantee a peaceful and prosperous future for both nations,” said a statement issued by the spokesperson of the Secretary-General.

South Sudan became an independent State last July, six months after its people voted overwhelmingly to secede from Sudan.

Tensions between the two countries over unresolved border disagreements have continued to simmer. A dispute over tariffs charged by Sudan on South Sudan for the use of a pipeline and port to export oil has recently further strained relations.

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Valerie Amos, briefed the Security Council on the situation in South Sudan and told reporters afterwards that she had voiced concern that the country’s decision to suspend oil exports could undermine the Government’s financial capacity to respond to the humanitarian crisis facing its people.

She also reiterated to the Council her concern over the lack of access by aid workers to Sudan’s conflict-affected states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

In a related development, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said today it is seeking an additional \$145 million to assist tens of thousands of refugees who have entered Ethiopia and South Sudan after fleeing fighting in Sudan’s Blue Nile and South Kordofan states.

Heavy fighting between the Sudanese armed forces and the rebel Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-North) in South Kordofan and Blue Nile has forced more than 130,000 people to flee, UNHCR spokesperson Adrian Edwards told reporters in Geneva.

The agency anticipates that people will continue fleeing over the next months with clashes continuing and humanitarian conditions deteriorating in the conflict zones.

Many of the refugees are staying in remote border areas close to the fighting. In South Sudan, Elfoj area in Upper Nile state and Yida refugee settlement in Unity state have both been targets of air raids. UNHCR has relocated some 20,000 refugees from unsafe border sites since 6 January, moving them to four new settlements.

In Ethiopia’s Assosa region, the pace of relocation from border areas has also picked up in recent weeks as a result of fighting in Blue Nile and the end of the harvest season for farmers near the border. The two existing camps have reached capacity and new arrivals are being sheltered at a transit centre until a third camp can be built.

In addition to the need for urgent relocation from volatile border areas, UNHCR’s emergency response includes the provision of basic relief items and services, registration and child protection.

In December, the agency mounted a massive airlift to bring in supplies, including tents, plastic sheets, jerry cans and kitchen sets, to the refugees in South Sudan.



Young refugees from Sudan's Blue Nile state collect water to wash with at Doro camp in South Sudan. Photo: UNHCR/V. Tan

UNHCR will also use the funds to build and service additional refugee settlements, improve road access and pre-position relief supplies ahead of the onset of the rainy season in April when many roads become impassable.

The appeal for \$145 million is in addition to this year's budget of \$269.1 million for programmes in Ethiopia and South Sudan.

Meanwhile, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) reported that nearly five million people in South Sudan will face food shortages this year, as a result of poor harvests, soaring food and fuel prices, conflict and displacement.

The agency was already planning to provide food assistance to 2.7 million people this year and is now preparing to scale up operations if the situation worsens, WFP spokesperson Gaëlle Sévenier told reporters in Geneva. She said the agency has funding shortfall of \$160 million for its operation in South Sudan.

UN welcomes charges against army colonel over mass rapes in Guinea



10 February - A senior United Nations official welcomed today the news that a Guinean court has filed charges against an army colonel accused of being responsible for mass rapes that occurred during a pro-democracy protest in the country's capital in 2009.

"Justice in Guinea has been delayed, but this signals that it cannot be denied," said Margot Wallström, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Margot Wallström. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

On 28 September 2009, civilians organized an opposition rally in a soccer stadium in Conakry when Guinean security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing at least 150 and resulting in the rape and sexual abuse of 109 women.

Lieutenant Colonel Moussa Tiegboro Camara was charged by a national court for the atrocities – including mass rape – committed that day. He is the highest-ranking official yet to be charged for his role in the massacre.

"The recent charges are a welcome step in the right direction. They signal that no official is above the law, and no citizen is below it," Ms. Wallström said.

The Special Representative, who met with rape survivors during her visit to the country in November, said in a statement that she was pleased by the new Government's commitment to fight impunity and prevent and deter sexual violence.

However, she also stressed that the process to bring those responsible to justice has been "painfully slow," adding that "the legacy of the massacre and mass rape is far from over.

"There remains an urgent need to assist the survivors and bring the remaining perpetrators to justice. It is equally crucial that all victims, other witnesses and their families are afforded full protection and that no effort is spared to ensure their safety throughout this process."

Ms. Wallström also reiterated the UN's readiness to support the Government's efforts to address impunity for sexual violence and to ensure that such atrocities are never repeated.

Libya: UN calls for justice after killings of displaced persons

10 February - The United Nations political mission for Libya today voiced serious concern over the killing of seven internally displaced persons (IDPs), including three children and two women, and urged authorities to investigate the crime and bring those responsible to justice.

The attacks took place on Monday took place at Janzur Marine Academy near Tripoli, where three of the victims were killed, the UN Support Mission for Libya (UNSMIL) said. Four other IDPs – all from the town of Tawerga – were murdered during a street demonstration.

UNSMIL said it welcomed the action taken by military police of the national army to restore security.

Libyans successfully overthrew the long-standing regime of Muammar al-Qadhafi last year after a protracted civil war, but tensions have persisted in some areas, leading to violent incidents involving militias and community groups.

The mission was established by the Security Council last September to support the National Transitional Council (NTC) in its reconstruction efforts, including restoring the rule of law, drafting a new constitution, promoting reconciliation and preparing for elections.



Flag of Libya's National Transitional Council at the United Nations in Vienna. Oct '2011. Photo: UNIS Vienna

Ban urges dialogue in dispute over Falkland Islands (Malvinas)



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (right) meets with Héctor Marcos Timerman, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Argentina. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

10 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today voiced hope that Argentina and the United Kingdom can avoid escalating their dispute over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) and resolve their differences through dialogue.

Mr. Ban met with Argentine Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman in New York this morning, and the two officials discussed recent developments relating to the islands in the South Atlantic Ocean.

Mr. Ban expressed concern about the increasingly strong exchanges between Buenos Aires and London on the issue, according to information released by a spokesperson for the Secretary-General.

He called on the two governments to avoid escalating their dispute and to resolve their differences peacefully and through dialogue, stressing that his good offices remain available if requested.

During their meeting Mr. Ban and Mr. Timerman also discussed the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and proposed changes to its framework.

The President of the General Assembly Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser also held talks with Mr. Timerman on developments in the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

Mr. Al-Nasser expressed his hope that the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom will resolve any dispute peacefully through mediation and dialogue, and in accordance with international law.

He said he would be availability to coordinate discussions between the two parties if required, while reiterating his readiness to support any efforts to resolve any dispute.

UN invites countries to tune in for first World Radio Day



Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro being interviewed by UN Radio.
UN Photo/JC McIlwaine

10 February - The role of radio as a facilitator of education, freedom of expression and public debate will be celebrated as World Radio Day is observed for the first time on Monday by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

“In a world changing quickly, we must make the most of radio’s ability to connect people and societies, to share knowledge and information and to strengthen understanding,” said UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova in her message marking the Day.

With the ability to reach up to 95 per cent of the world’s population, radio is the most prevalent mass medium which has the ability to reach remote communities and marginalized groups at a low cost. It has also proven to be highly resilient as its scope and distribution platforms have grown with the development of new technologies.

“Radio is the mass medium that reaches the widest audience, especially the most marginalized parts of our societies,” said Ms. Bokova. “Free, independent and pluralistic radio is essential for healthy societies, it is vital for advancing human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

The observance of the day on 13 February also marks the anniversary of UN Radio, which was launched in 1946. UNESCO stressed the importance of radio as a vital source of information during natural disasters, and as a central instrument in community life with the potential of mobilizing social change.

However, UNESCO noted that worldwide, up to one billion people still do not have access to radio. In Nepal, for example, almost one fifth of the people live in areas without radio coverage.

“There are hundreds of radio stations in Nepal and we hope that they will use 13 February to celebrate their power,” said Axel Plathe, head of the UNESCO office in Kathmandu, the capital. “Radios have a crucial role in creating access to information in remote areas, especially in the mountainous regions where they are often the only media available.”

To encourage public broadcasters and the public to celebrate the Day, UNESCO has created a website with audio messages in several languages and handbooks for community radio stations. The site also provides free access to UNESCO’s audio archives showcasing interviews with renowned figures such as Nelson Mandela, Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Picasso and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Spanish judge should not be prosecuted for doing his job, says UN rights office



Rupert Colville, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

10 February - The United Nations human rights office today voiced concern at the trial of Judge Baltasar Garzón for probing alleged atrocities committed during Spain’s civil war, noting that the country is obliged under international law to investigate past serious human rights violations.

“Judges should not be subject to criminal prosecution for doing their job,” Rupert Colville, the spokesperson for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), told reporters in Geneva.

The prominent Spanish judge was reportedly convicted yesterday in a separate trial for authorizing illegal phone-tapping, and suspended from the judiciary for 11 years.

He is also on trial on charges of “knowingly exceeding his jurisdiction” by admitting and investigating complaints related to crimes against humanity regarding allegations of enforced disappearances between 1936 and 1951, during the country’s civil war and then under the regime of Francisco Franco.

These cases are allegedly inadmissible because of a Spanish amnesty law introduced after General Franco's death and the expiration of the statute of limitations.

"Spain is obliged under international law to investigate past serious human rights violations, including those committed during the Franco regime, and to prosecute and punish those responsible," said Mr. Colville.

He recalled that, after reviewing the report presented by Spain, the UN Human Rights Committee in 2009 informed the country that it should repeal its amnesty law, which was not in conformity with international human rights law.

In its concluding observations that same year, the Committee also recommended that Spain consider taking the necessary legislative measures to guarantee recognition by the domestic courts of the non-applicability of a statute of limitations to crimes against humanity, he said.

UN-backed report warns of dangers of increasing electronic waste in West Africa



Domestic Consumption is Main Contributor to Africa's E-Waste. Photo: UNEP

10 February - West Africa is facing a significant increase in waste generated by electronic equipment which poses mounting health and environmental risks, according to a United Nations report released today.

About 85 per cent of the waste produced in the region comes from domestic consumption, the report reveals. However, the problem is further exacerbated by industrialized countries importing used equipment which often proves to be unsuitable for re-use and end up being discarded.

"Effective management of the growing amount of e-waste generated in Africa and other parts of the world is an important part of the transition towards a low-carbon, resource-efficient Green Economy", said Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

The report assessed the situation over two years in five countries – Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria – and found that they produce between 650,000 and 1,000,000 tons of domestic e-waste each year, which can have a negative impact in the environment and increase the risk of health issues.

As for waste coming from other countries, the report notes that the United Kingdom is the dominant exporting country to Africa for both new and used electrical and electronic equipment, followed by France and Germany.

According to UNEP, although the use of electrical and electronic equipment is still low in Africa compared to other regions, it is growing at a staggering pace as more people start using mobile phones and personal computers.

The report, which was prepared by the Secretariat of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal and partners, also documents the economic and environmental potential of building a resource recovery and waste management system for electronic waste, along with the risks of continuing on the present course.

"We can grow Africa's economies, generate decent employment and safeguard the environment by supporting sustainable e-waste management and recovering the valuable metals and other resources locked inside products that end up as e-waste," Mr. Steiner said, adding that the report provides various strategies to limit damages and provide economic opportunities, something that is crucial for long-term sustainability.

"E-waste is the fastest growing waste stream world-wide and a key waste stream under the Basel Convention," said Jim Willis, Executive Secretary of the Basel Convention. The convention's secretariat is administered by UNEP.

"Dealing with electronic and electrical equipment properly presents a serious environmental and health challenge for many countries, yet also offers a potentially significant opportunity to create green businesses and green jobs."

UN envoy calls on Israel to preserve health of Palestinian detainee on hunger strike

10 February - The United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process today called on Israel to do everything in its power to preserve the health of a Palestinian detainee who is on a hunger strike and to resolve the case.

Khader Adnan has been refusing food since 18 December in protest at his detention without charge, according to media reports. Early this month, a military court reportedly ordered that he be held in administrative detention for four months.

Special Coordinator Robert Serry called on the Israeli Government “to do everything in its power to preserve the health of the prisoner and to resolve the case while abiding by all legal obligations under international law,” according to a statement issued by his office.

During his recent visit to the region, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon discussed the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli custody with the Palestinian Minister of Prisoners’ Affairs.

Mr. Serry’s office is following up on some of the issues related to the question of prisoners, particularly on the use of administrative detention.

The statement noted that administrative detention “should only be employed in exceptional circumstances, for as short a period as possible, and without prejudice to the rights guaranteed to prisoners.”

Blue economy needed to protect Mediterranean Sea and world’s oceans – UN official

10 February - The Mediterranean Sea is a “key pillar” for the development of the countries in the region, a senior United Nations official said today, warning that continued degradation of the aquatic environment could put its entire ecology at risk.

The call came as delegates from 22 Mediterranean and European Union countries brought their three-day meeting on safeguarding and promoting a clean and healthy Mediterranean environment to a close in Paris.

“The time has come for us to rethink how we manage our oceans,” said Achim Steiner, the Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in his address to the gathered delegates. “They are a key pillar for many countries’ economic and social development, and are vital in the fight against poverty,” he added.

The participating countries have called for the creation of a “blue economy” initiative which would be a marine version of the green economy, and hope to see a strategic policy framework adopted at the UN Sustainable Development Conference (Rio+20) to be held in Brazil in June.

UNEP defines a green economy as one that improves human well-being and social equity while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities.

“Management decisions and investments that focus on the well-being of the oceans are essential if we are to continue to profit from this rich natural resource,” Mr. Steiner said, noting that too many natural resources found in marine environments were being degraded by unsustainable use, ultimately putting their ecosystems, food security and climate regulations at risk.



Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process. UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz



Countries call for blue economy to protect the Mediterranean. Photo: UNEP

“A ‘blue’ economy in the Mediterranean and elsewhere would be a big step on the right path,” he said.

The world’s marine ecosystems provide essential food and livelihoods to millions of people. According to UNEP, a switch to a blue economy would unlock the potential of the marine-based economy while reducing ocean degradation and alleviating poverty.

UNESCO ready to boost assistance as Myanmar moves ahead with reforms

10 February - The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which is already assisting with a number of initiatives in Myanmar, voiced its readiness to work even more closely with the South-East Asian nation as it moves forward with planned reforms.

“UNESCO welcomes the Government of Myanmar’s comprehensive programme of democratization and reform and we are determined to accompany this process in our fields of competence,” said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova.



Aung San Suu Kyi. UN Photo

Ms. Bokova’s comments came as Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Myanmar’s National League for Democracy (NLD), received the 2002 UNESCO-Mandanjeet Singh Prize for Tolerance and Non-Violence today.

The award was presented to her by Ryuhei Hosoya, head of the Office of the Director-General of UNESCO, who is on an official visit to Myanmar.

Ms. Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was unable to receive the award in 2002 because of her detention under house arrest. “I look forward to the day when Burma and UNESCO can work together more closely than they have done until now,” she said as she accepted the prize.

Last year Myanmar’s President Thein Sein decided to grant amnesty and to set free a significant number of prisoners of conscience as part of a series of reform measures that also included dialogue between the Government and Ms. Suu Kyi.

Ms. Bokova welcomed the country’s “ambitious” reform programme, the agency stated in a news release. She noted that the agency is already working on projects in education, culture and media development, sectors which are essential for dialogue, reconciliation and development.

Among other projects, UNESCO, in partnership with the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), is helping Myanmar’s new civilian government deliver educational reforms as well as supporting projects to strengthen HIV prevention among youth and drafting new media laws that promote freedom of expression and a free and independent media.

Cooperation in culture is being revived with a UNESCO project to mobilize international expertise for the protection of Myanmar’s heritage sites. The country has also expressed interest in proposing properties for inscription on the World Heritage List.

At least 11 Somalis perish in latest Gulf of Aden boat tragedy, UN reports

10 February - At least 11 people have drowned and another 34 are missing in the latest boat tragedy in the Gulf of Aden, the United Nations refugee agency reported today.

The boat capsized on Wednesday in rough seas and bad weather, after setting sail for Yemen last Saturday, according to survivors found on Somali beaches. They said their boat, with three smugglers serving as crew and 58 passengers, lost power soon after departure, setting it adrift for five days.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said that “shocking” details came to light yesterday as survivors recounted to local authorities and the agency’s partners how smugglers forced 22 passengers overboard soon after the engine failed.

“UNHCR is deeply saddened by the tragic loss of life. Authorities in the Somali port town of Bossaso are investigating the incident and we hope that the perpetrators will be brought to justice,” the agency’s spokesperson, Adrian Edwards, told reporters in Geneva.

So far, 11 bodies have been recovered on beaches around the village of Ceelaayo some 30 kilometres west of Bossaso. Locals also found 13 survivors, including two women and a teenage boy and girl, said Mr. Edwards.

In 2011, more than 103,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from the Horn of Africa made the perilous journey across the Gulf of Aden to reach Yemen, fleeing violence, human rights abuses and poverty, according to UNHCR.

Among those who made the crossing last year, more than 130 are known to have drowned, and those who reached Yemen’s shores arrived in desperate conditions, suffering from dehydration and malnourishment.

To alert people planning to cross the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden, UNHCR teamed up in 2009 with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other partners to spread awareness about the dangers.

“But people still keep making the perilous crossing,” said Mr. Edwards.

UN agency steps up aid delivery to refugees fleeing conflict in Mali



Tuareg refugees from Mali who have been forced to flee fighting, arrive at Fassala village on the border with Mauritania. Photo: UNHCR/A.O. Barry

10 February - The United Nations refugee agency said today it is stepping up the delivery of aid to people affected by the outbreak of conflict in Mali, where fighting between Government forces and Tuareg rebels has sent thousands of civilians fleeing to neighbouring countries.

The first of four cargo planes landed in Mauritanian town of Nema today carrying 300 tents, according to Adrian Edwards, a spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The agency has initially bought 1,200 tents to shelter refugees arriving in Mauritania, 2,000 for Niger and 500 for Burkina Faso. The tents will be flown to those countries from stockpiles in Cameroon and Ghana, Mr. Edwards told reporters in Geneva.

Trucks will also be used to transport basic relief items such as sleeping mats, blankets, jerry cans, mosquito nets and kitchen sets. Two trucks carrying 40 tons of aid are on the way from Accra, the Ghanaian capital, to Niger, where they are due to



People waiting to board a boat to take them across the Gulf of Aden. Photo: Alixandra Fazzina

arrive by the middle of next week.

Meanwhile, at Mauritania's Fassala border crossing with Mali, Mauritanian authorities and UNHCR are working around the clock to provide the refugees with food, clean water and shelter. The agency has already sent several convoys of food and other relief items, with the distribution of 15-day rations being carried out by local authorities.

Most of the 10,887 Malian refugees in Mauritania are Tuareg, many of whom are fleeing from nearby Léré. The Mauritanian authorities have identified a potential camp site in M'Bera, 50 kilometres from the border, and are working with UNHCR on a plan to move the refugees to the new location.

The same site had hosted around 30,000 Malian refugees who had fled clashes between the army and the Tuareg rebels in the 1990s.

Yesterday, UNHCR's emergency team in Niger interviewed a group of Malian refugees in Sinogodar area, some 278 kilometres northeast of the capital, Niamey.

"Refugees told us that their hometown in Anderamboukane is now empty," said Mr. Edwards. "They say that the population fled from the Malian border town following a 26 January attack by rebels targeting homes, looting, poisoning water points, burning personal property and businesses and taking away animals."

They expressed their intention to return briefly to salvage whatever property and livestock may have been left behind following the raids and plunder.

In Burkina Faso, UNHCR has released aid from its local stocks to be distributed to Malian refugees as well host communities in the arid northern region of the country. An estimated 8,000 people have crossed into Burkina Faso from Mali.

Since the start of the Tuareg insurgency in northern Mali on 17 January, between 25,000 and 30,000 people have sought refuge in Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger. Some of those entering Niger are citizens of that country who were living in Mali.

Meanwhile, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA), Said Djinnit, today visited Bamako, the capital of Mali, in an effort to gather information on the conflict.

Mr. Djinnit met with President Amadou Toumani Toure and Foreign Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maiga and stressed the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities so that ongoing efforts to establish dialogue can succeed, and to allow the delivery of aid to those affected by the conflict.

He also reiterated Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's statement on Wednesday voicing deep concern over the outbreak of fighting and stressing his disquiet over the large-scale humanitarian consequences of the fighting.

"These population movements are an additional burden on Mali and the host countries that are already facing a very worrying food crisis," said Mr. Djinnit in a press release.

Asia-Pacific nations wrap up UN forum with plan to advance progress on AIDS targets



ESCAP Executive Secretary Noeleen Heyzer (C) opens conference with the President of Fiji Ratu Epeli Nailatikau (L) and Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand Kittiratt Na-Ranong. Photo: ESCAP

10 February - Asia-Pacific nations at a United Nations meeting in Bangkok have agreed to boost cooperation and to develop regional accountability mechanisms and financing modalities to accelerate progress towards global HIV/AIDS commitments.

The agreed action plan comes at the end of three days of high-level talks by representatives of 34 Asia-Pacific nations, organized by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the UN Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and other UN co-sponsors.

The meeting marked the first time that officials from national health, justice, law enforcement, social development and drug control agencies in the region came together at a single forum, according to a news release issued by ESCAP.

They were joined by people living with HIV as well as representatives from populations most affected by HIV, including sex workers, people who use drugs, men who have sex with men and transgender people, to review the region's progress towards commitments on AIDS.

“This is Asia-Pacific at its best – showing leadership, fore-thinking and spirit of collaboration, underlining the powerful force of this region,” the Secretary-General's Special Envoy on HIV, Nafis Sadik, told delegates.

The action plan calls for increased collaboration between government ministries, including health, justice, public security, police and drug control in genuine partnership with civil society and key affected populations.

The meeting also reviewed strategies to move from a punitive to a more rights-based approach with regards to legal and policy barriers impeding access to HIV services. It also emphasized the importance of protecting the manufacture, export and import of life-saving generic medicines.

Participants reported significant progress in a number of areas, including reduction of new HIV infections, an increase in the number of people receiving anti-retroviral treatment and expansion of programmes to reach key affected populations most at risk.

An estimated 4.9 million people were living with HIV in Asia and the Pacific in 2009, according to a UNAIDS report launched last year. The majority of them are living in 11 countries: Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Thailand and Viet Nam.

The report found that the region has seen a 20 per cent drop in new infections between 2001 and 2009, and a three-fold increase in access to antiretroviral therapy since 2006. At the same time, it warned that this progress is threatened by an inadequate focus on key populations at higher risk of HIV infection and insufficient funding from both domestic and international sources.