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Syria: More aid gets into besieged Homs as more evacuees leave, UN reports

12 February - More relief moved in today for Syrians trapped in the Old City of Homs for nearly two years without aid, and more evacuees moved out, as Government and opposition delegates met in Geneva in United Nations-sponsored talks seeking to end the bloody conflict.

UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi, who yesterday said scant progress was being made in the talks which he is mediating, today met both delegations simultaneously, but made no statement afterwards.

Tomorrow, he will hold a joint meeting with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov and United States Under-Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in a bid to speed up the talks, which the two countries initiated in a diplomatic push to end a war that has killed well over 100,000 people and driven nearly 9 million others from their homes since it erupted between President Bashar al-Assad and various groups seeking his ouster nearly three years ago.

On the humanitarian front, food for around 1,000 people for one month was delivered to community leaders inside the Old City of Homs under a sometimes violated three-day “humanitarian pause” that the warring sides agreed to last week and then extended for a further three days to bring relief to a city that has become an iconic symbol of the suffering endured by civilians in the war’s relentless bombardments and sieges.

Some 200 men, women and children were reported to have left the besieged area so far today, bringing the total evacuated under the accord to 1,350, more than half the estimated 2,500 who have suffered the years-long siege, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said. As with those who left earlier, many were frail and had difficulty walking, it added.

Under the agreement, women, children and the elderly were allowed out but not men over 15 and under 54 years of age, but
336 men in this latter category, apparently unwilling to abandon their families, were detained by Syrian authorities in a school on the outskirts where UN officials are present but do not attend interrogation sessions. So far over 150 of these have been questioned and released.

UN officials have voiced deep concern at the detentions, warning that torture and mistreatment are war crimes.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is waiting along with partners to receive evacuees at a reception point at the edge of the Old Town. Only 200 have so far opted to go to a centre in the suburb of Al Waer which Syrian authorities have designated as a shelter should they wish, while the rest have asked to be taken to neighbourhoods where they have ties or might feel more secure.

Despite the declared “pause” sporadic mortar and sniper fire has at times interrupted the operation, which has been fraught with risk.

On Sunday, UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent aid workers delivering food and medical aid were deliberately targeted by fire that killed 11 civilians and almost completely destroyed the car of the UN country representative while he and colleagues were in it.

## Security Council, senior UN officials say conflict parties must respect, protect civilians

12 February - With civilians now routinely targeted and subjected to indiscriminate brutality in most current conflicts – from the civil war in Syria to ethnic and political strife in Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan – the Security Council joined senior United Nations officials today to once again urge greater protection for the countless men, women and children caught in the crossfire of war.

Holding its first open debate on the topic since the release of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s most recent report, in which he notes somberly that “the current state of the protection of civilians leaves little room for optimism,” the Security Council sounded the alarm on behalf of desperate civilians and examined the core challenges the international community faces, from enhancing compliance with civilian protection regimes by non-State actors to improving humanitarian access to people in need.

A Presidential Statement adopted by the meeting reaffirmed the Council’s commitment to its range of civilian protection measures initially approved in March 2002. This is the fifth edition of the Aide Memoire and is the result of consultation with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as well as concerned UN departments and agencies, and other relevant humanitarian organizations.

The Council today also reaffirmed that Governments bear the primary responsibility to respect and ensure the human rights of citizens, and that parties to armed conflict bear the primary responsibility to take all feasible steps to ensure the protection of affected civilians.

“The Security Council stresses the need to end impunity for violations of international humanitarian law and violations and abuses of human rights, and reaffirms that those who have committed or are otherwise responsible for such violations and abuses must be brought to justice,” according to the statement by Raimonda Murmokaité, Permanent Representative of Lithuania which holds the rotating presidency of the Security Council for February.

Addressing the Council, Hervé Ladsous, the Under-Secretary-General for UN Peacekeeping Operations, noted that today’s debate, which comes two months ahead of the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, “is proof of how much has changed and how much remains the same”.

More than 95 per cent of peacekeepers now work in missions specifically mandated by the Security Council to protect civilians, he said, addressing the meeting which focused on effective implementation of protection of civilians mandates in
UN peacekeeping missions, one of five core protection challenges identified by the Secretary-General.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), peacekeepers have utilized a clear and robust mandate to respond to those who would perpetrate attacks on civilians, and this past November witnessed the surrender of the M23 rebel movement, he said.

While the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has in recent weeks provided unprecedented protection for up to 85,000 civilians fleeing violence.

Soldiers cannot impose peace on warring parties, however, and resolution of protection challenges ultimately requires political solutions, Mr. Ladsous noted.

“Peacekeeping is an expression of the will of the Security Council and troop and police contributing countries,” he said.

“Its success depends on clear, decisive and resolute direction from the Security Council, the commitment of all those that take part in peacekeeping to fully implement the mandate, and the provision of sufficient capabilities and resources to effectively confront the challenges on the ground,” he added.

Implementation of robust protection mandates can lead to tensions between the peacekeeping mission and humanitarian actors, noted Valerie Amos, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.

She highlighted the importance of coordination between peacekeepers and aid workers, and the delineation between humanitarian and military or political objectives.

When a peacekeeper’s impartiality is called into question and particularly if the mission is perceived to become a party to the conflict, “its close proximity to civilians, including in pursuit of its protection activities, could place civilians at increased risk of attack,” she said.

Ms. Amos used the opportunity to appear before the Council to reiterate the obligations of States to protect citizens, as detailed in human rights and humanitarian law. Recent examples of Syria, the Central African Republic and South Sudan bear this out, with parties to conflict failing, sometimes deliberately, to respect and protect civilians, despite their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.

“Until such a time as parties act accordingly… the state of the protection of civilians will continue to give little cause for optimism but considerable cause for despair, outrage and shame,” she said.

Turning to the situations in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, Ms. Amos denounced the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, a cry echoed by Yves Daccord, Director-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who also addressed the Council.

“The ICRC joins the Secretary-General [Ban Ki-moon] in encouraging States to share information on their respective polices, operational practices and lessons learned on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas,” he said.

During his briefing, Mr. Daccord also stressed the importance of humanitarian access and reiterated his appeal to State and non-State parties to respect the provisions of international humanitarian law, including those related to aid access.


“States must do more to ensure that violations of international human rights and humanitarian law are investigated and their perpetrators are held accountable,” she said, adding that the Council must also do more to systematically condemn violations.

As part of an effort to strengthen UN response to potential and emerging crises, Mr. Ban launched the “Rights Up Front”
initiative last year. Among its provisions, it includes training UN staff on the world body’s core purpose of promoting respect for human rights.

The initiative “is strengthening UN efforts with regard to both South Sudan and the CAR, including those of my Office,” Ms. Pillay said.

The day-long debate was also scheduled to hear from all 15 Council members, as well as diplomats from the wider UN membership.

Food airlifts begin in Central African Republic amidst worsening insecurity

12 February - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) today began to airlift food into the Central African Republic where 1.25 million people are affected by violence that the top UN refugee official now fears is “ethnic-religious cleansing”.

A WFP-chartered Boeing 747 from neighbouring Cameroon landed in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), with 82 metric tons of rice the agency in a shipment, which along with 24 other flights expected over the next four weeks, the agency is calling “a lifeline”.

“We are launching these airlifts at a high cost but we have no choice,” said WFP Regional Director for West Africa Denise Brown.

WFP has said that the price of transporting by air the estimated 1,800 metric tons of mostly rice – enough to feed 150,000 people for a month – would be $2 million, roughly five times more expensive than transportation by road, which is insecure and deemed too unreliable to transport all the food aid.

At one stage, 51 WFP food trucks were blocked at the Cameroon border for weeks. Two large road convoys escorted by troops from the African-led International Support Mission (MISCA) have now arrived in Bangui.

In addition to immediate aid, WFP is replenishing food stocks in remote places during the “lean season” when hunger usually starts to peak and before the rainy season begins in May when roads will be impassable.

Meanwhile, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned that farmers in the country urgently need seeds and essential tools for the March planting season if they are to help avert a full-scale food and nutrition crisis.

The success of the planting season could be a critical turning point for food security in the country, where around 75 per cent of the population rely on small-scale agriculture for their food and income, said Alexis Bonte, acting FAO Representative in CAR.

“The civil conflict is putting millions at risk of a full-scale food and nutrition security crisis,” Mr. Bonte noted. “The situation is increasingly worrying in the capital city, Bangui, but even more acute in the rest of the country.”

Some 833,000 people are displaced from their homes across the country, more than 400,000 of them in Bangui alone, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported an additional 268,779 people seeking refuge in Cameroon, Chad, Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

“We are witnessing a humanitarian catastrophe in Central African Republic,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres today told reporters during a visit to Bangui. “There is an ethnic-religious cleansing taking place.”

Thousands of people in CAR are estimated to have been killed in the crisis, which began when the mainly Muslim Séléka
rebels launched attacks a year ago, and has recently taken on increasingly sectarian overtones as militias known as anti-Balaka (anti-machete), who are mainly Christians, take up arms.

Speaking with a group of journalists yesterday at the UN Headquarters in New York, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stressed that both Muslims and Christians have been murdered and forced to flee their homes.

“The sectarian brutality is changing the country's demography,” he said. “The de facto partition of the CAR is a distinct risk.”

Mr. Ban added that the international response to the conflict “does not yet match the gravity of the situation”, and urged more action to prevent more atrocities, protect civilians, restore law and order, provide humanitarian assistance and hold the country together.

Edmond Mulet, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, is currently in the CAR and is scheduled to meet today with interim president, Catherine Samba Panza.

Mr. Mulet is looking into the possible transformation of MISCA into a UN peacekeeping operation, Mr. Ban confirmed. “But even if that change looks increasingly necessary, it would take time for it to happen.”

Mr. Ban has been working the phones, speaking with Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma of the African Union and French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, among others, about sending additional troops to the country.

**Ignoring equality, rights and women’s health risks derailing development – UN officials**

**12 February** - While nearly 1 billion people have escaped extreme poverty in the past 20 years and child and maternal mortality have been cut by almost one half, much more work remains to be done to address inequalities and ensure the rights and dignity of all, especially women and children, top United Nations officials stressed today.

“Our objective is to deliver equal rights and opportunity to all, to eradicate extreme poverty and to set the world on a sustainable development path,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said at a news conference at UN Headquarters to launch the International Conference on Population and Development Global Review Report.

The International Conference on Population and Development (IPCD), held in Cairo in 1994, was a milestone in the history of population and development, as well as in the history of women’s rights.

A total of 179 Governments signed up to the ICPD Programme of Action, which set out to provide universal access to family planning and sexual and reproductive health services and reproductive rights, and deliver gender equality, empowerment of women and equal access to education for girls.

The Programme of Action also sought to address the individual, social and economic impact of urbanization and migration, as well as support sustainable development and address environmental issues associated with population changes.

“It affirmed sexual and reproductive health as a fundamental human right,” Mr. Ban said of the Conference. “And it emphasized that empowering women and girls is key to ensuring the well-being of individuals, families, nations and our world.”

He noted that the past two decades have seen “considerable” advances in equality and empowerment for women, global health and life expectancy, and education for girls, adding that much has been accomplished through the framework of the global anti-poverty targets known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
“But much remains to be done,” he said, noting that the report launched today highlights the enormous inequalities that remain in the realization of human rights and access to vital services, as well as new challenges and opportunities related to population growth, changing age structures, rapid urbanization and migration.

“We need to establish common policy responses to the yearnings of people everywhere for a better life,” stated the Secretary-General.

Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), recalled the “ground-breaking consensus” forged at the Cairo Conference.

“Delegates from all regions and cultures recognized that increasing social, economic and political equality and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is the basis for individual well-being, lower population growth and sustainable development. The evidence of the report launched today supports this consensus.”

While describing some of the achievements cited in the report, Dr. Osotimehin said that progress over the past 20 years does not tell the whole story.

“The report reveals in stark detail the persistent inequalities and discrimination that threaten to derail development. In many countries and regions, progress is limited to the wealthy with enormous numbers of people excluded from the process and benefits of development,” he said.

“More than half of the absolute gains in global income from 1988 to 2008 went to the richest 5 per cent and none went to the bottom 10 per cent. In the poorest communities, women’s status, maternal death, child marriage and many of the concerns of Cairo have seen too little progress over the past two decades,” he added.

Among other challenges, he noted that around 800 women die daily while giving birth; one in three women worldwide report having experienced physical or sexual abuse; and one in three girls in the developing world is married before the age of 18, despite the fact that marriage under 18 is illegal in 158 countries.

The Executive Director went on to add that there is no country today in which women are equal to men in political and economic power. In addition, too many people, particularly the poor, live without access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning. Indeed, more than 200 million women in the developing world who want contraception are not getting it.

“Twenty years on, we still have a long way to go in realizing the vision of Cairo,” said Dr. Osotimehin. “But the ICPD 20-year review shows us that the vision is still as relevant today as it was in 1994.”

Renewed tension disrupts UN construction projects in Gaza Strip

12 February - More than 20 vital United Nations construction projects for schools and housing in Gaza are stalled, and social and economic conditions are worsening due to the closure of crossings with Israel as clashes have increased, the top UN envoy for the Middle East warned today.

“I sincerely hope that the Israeli authorities will fully adhere to their commitment to reopen Gaza for construction materials for UN projects”, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Robert Serry said after a visit to Gaza, where a ceasefire ending eight days of fierce fighting between Israel and Gaza’s ruling Hamas in 2012 has started to fray with renewed rocket attacks against Israel and Israeli reprisals.

“I am worried we are seeing more and more signs that the understanding on a ceasefire reached in November 2012 is eroding in both of its main requirements – the end of all hostilities and the opening of the crossings for people and goods.
“During the past two months, we have seen more rockets being fired at Israel, border incidents, and Israeli retaliatory operations causing death or injury to civilians. The United Nations condemns the rise in violence, and all parties must act in accordance with international law.”

In December, Israel agreed to resume the transfer of construction materials for UN projects in Gaza, where the world body is working on a “critical” $500-million package to build schools, social housing, and water and sanitation facilities, but clashes with Israel have since increased and the work has been stalled since November.

Mr. Serry stressed that imports of construction materials have dramatically decreased, lamenting the fact that the closure by Egypt of illegal tunnels beneath its border with Gaza has not been turned into an opportunity to increase the entry of such materials through legal crossings.

He welcomed the recent decision to allow 1,000 tons of cement and other materials for flood relief, but stressed that imports of construction material for the private sector through legal crossings remain essential for Gaza’s economy while ensuring that it is not be diverted from its intended peaceful purposes. He also voiced the hope that the Rafah crossing with Egypt would soon resume normal operations.

Mr. Serry visited the Gaza City paediatric hospital, which has been affected by frequent power cuts due to the precarious energy situation in the Strip. “I was heartened to see that this children’s hospital is one of the facilities that benefit from the fuel emergency safety net created by the United Nations through the generous contributions of Turkey and the Islamic Development Bank, which is securing continuity of vital services,” he said.

“However, this is but a stop-gap measure, and more must be done to address Gaza’s chronic energy problems. Energy is the basis for everything – whether desalination, private sector growth, or health services. Short-term solutions, such as the generous donation of Qatar to the Gaza power plant, remain essential.

“But we must also look to the medium term,” he added, voicing UN support for the Palestinian Authority’s request to establish a power line from Israel into Gaza for better and more cost-efficient access to energy.

“Ultimately, only the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank under the legitimate Palestinian Authority, based on the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) commitments, can pave the way to a durable solution for Gaza, as part of political progress towards peace.”

The Authority, headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, controls the West Bank from its headquarters in Ramallah and endorses the PLO commitments to seek peace with Israel based on the existence of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side within secure borders.

Hamas, which ousted Fatah from Gaza in fighting in 2007, does not recognize Israel’s right to exist. Israel has severely restricted the entry of goods and materials into the Strip since Hamas seized control.
Ban welcomes start of South Sudan political talks, urges adherence to recent ceasefire

12 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has welcomed the start yesterday of the South Sudan political talks between the Government and the opposition, and stressed the need for the parties to adhere to the ceasefire signed last month.

Thousands of people are believed to have been killed and some 870,000 others have fled their homes, 145,000 of them to neighbouring countries and 75,000 to United Nations bases within the country, since fighting broke out on 15 December between the forces of President Salva Kiir and former deputy president Riek Machar.

The political talks between the Government of South Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in opposition, are taking place in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, under the auspices of the East African regional body known as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

“The Secretary-General reiterates the importance of national political dialogue, with the participation of all South Sudanese political and civil society representatives, including all senior SPLM detainees,” Mr. Ban’s spokesperson said in a statement.

The spokesperson added that the Secretary-General notes with deep concern the reports of ongoing fighting and skirmishes in parts of Unity and Upper Nile states and that he reiterates the need for the parties to fully implement the Agreements on Cessation of Hostilities and on the Status of Detainees signed on 23 January.

“The Secretary-General also calls on all parties to respect the lifesaving work and ensure unhindered freedom of movement of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and of all humanitarian workers,” said the statement.

In addition, Mr. Ban condemned the use in the South Sudan conflict of cluster bombs, remnants of which were found last week by the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), on the Juba-Bor road in Jonglei state.

UNMAS has deployed a clearance team specialized in unexploded ordnance (UXO) in Bor to support the Mission’s role in facilitating access. The team, which arrived on 5 February, was requested to ensure that compounds and buildings used by international stakeholders are free from explosive remnants of war and small arms ammunition removed.

The Mission added in an update today that four UNMAS teams are traveling to Bentiu by road to clear unexploded remnants of war in the capital as well as other areas in northern Unity state. The teams have different capacities, to clear UXOs, landmines, survey roads and provide risk education to affected population.

Independent UN expert urges Tajikistan to turn policy into action to eradicate torture


“Tajikistan still needs to breach the gap between policies and reality,” said the Special Rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Méndez, following a three-day follow-up mission to the evaluate the implementation of the recommendations issued after his 2012 visit.

“I find it very satisfying to see that my recommendations were taken so seriously and that systematic action has been initiated by the Government to implement some of them,” he stressed.
Mr. Méndez welcomed in particular the adoption of a National Action Plan to implement his advice, and other measures taken, such as the new institute of forensic medicine, legal awareness campaigns and capacity building efforts.

“I regret, however, that civil society has not been consulted in the creation or execution of this Plan, that some areas lack specificity and measurable indicators and that no specific time frame for the implementation is provided,” he noted.

The expert was encouraged by the adoption of new legislation that brings the definition of torture in line with the Convention against Torture and a Supreme Court decree that guarantees the availability of safeguards to prevent torture from the time of apprehension.

However, he insisted that the punishment for torture and ill-treatment needs to be increased in accordance with the severity of such acts and that amnesty for these crimes needs to be specifically prohibited in the applicable legislation.

“I am still concerned that in the past two years only four cases were prosecuted under the new provision despite the fact that allegations of torture and ill-treatment during apprehension, interrogation, pre-trial detention, and in prison still persist,” said the expert.

“The Government must continue working to ensure that improved laws and policies result in concrete changes in practice,” he stressed. In particular, the Special Rapporteur remains highly concerned about persisting denial to access legal counsel in a timely and independent manner.

Mr. Méndez voiced regret that there has not been substantive progress to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and the creation of a National Preventive Mechanism (NPM).

“The ratification would prove the openness of prison authorities and would enhance the transparency of the penitentiary system,” he said, “and the NPM is essential for the investigation and punishment, but most of all for the prevention of torture and ill-treatment.”

Among his other concerns was the lack of compliance with the non-refoulement provision in the Convention Against Torture. “The legislation should be amended to ensure that the obligation not to extradite or deport or expel a person to a country where he or she faces a risk of torture or ill-treatment is duly recognized and that appropriate legal recourse is guaranteed in order to allow for a meaningful risk assessment,” he stated.

Special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back, in an unpaid capacity, on specific human rights themes.

**Sniffing out danger: dogs join UN peacekeepers in South Sudan to protect civilians**

12 February - Standing on his hind legs to peer at a United Nations vehicle in South Sudan, he poked his head under the hood and sniffed, brown curls shaking around as he searched for explosives.

This water cocker spaniel is one of eight sniffer dogs that arrived last week from the UN Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to help with random searches in and around UN bases and some displacement camps in strife-torn South Sudan.

“They are here to search and indicate if people are bringing in weapons or explosives or other contraband,” said Robert Thompson, UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) Chief of Operations.

The dogs are currently undergoing training with UNMAS and its MineTech contractors to acclimatize to their new environment.
They will be stationed at main gates of the UN Mission (UNMISS) in the country and protection sites in the capital, Juba, working alongside the UN Department of Security and Safety and the UN Police as they carry out daily searches until the end of June.

Thousands of people are believed to have been killed and some 870,000 others have fled their homes since fighting broke out on 15 December in South Sudan between the forces of President Salva Kiir and deputy president Riek Machar.

Among those, 75,000 people are seeking refuge at eight UN bases throughout the country.

“The dogs will be primarily for the protection of civilian sites but we will also use them on the main gates both at UN house and Tomping compound,” Mr. Thompson told UNIFEED. “The dogs will also be flown to other areas like Bentiu and Malakal when needed.”

Most of the dogs are Labradors and water cocker spaniels originally from South Africa. They are on average three years old and have undertaken specialized training for three months before their deployment.

They sniff, sniff, snort, repeat. If it smells something suspicious, the dog is taught to sit down and await further instructions, as opposed to pawing at something that could potentially blow up.

“It is [a] good visual deterrent if anybody is thinking of bringing things in they know we have the capability to find things that are smuggled in the camp,” noted Mr. Thompson.

Last week, UNMAS found unexploded cluster bomblets along the Juba-Bor road in Malek. The bombs are unreliable and indiscriminate, potentially posing long-term danger to civilians and vehicles, and in line with the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the UN has said that it is firmly committed to ending their use, stockpiling, production and transfer.

**UN labour agency calls for major investment in rural Africa as key to prosperity**

**12 February** - Rural development is key to Africa’s prosperity, yet it has been undervalued by Governments, international lenders and policy advisers, the UN International Labour Organization (ILO) said in a paper released today, calling for increased investment in the field.

“Boosting agriculture and building around it a strong rural economy is crucial for Africa. Done right, it would create millions of much needed jobs, as well as wealth, inclusion, food security, crisis resilience, and social and political peace,” ILO Deputy Director-General for Field Operations and Partnerships, Gilbert Houngbo wrote in a commentary.

“A key lesson from ILO rural work is recognizing that rural communities have much potential, and that investment can empower them through integrated approaches. This should start with basic physical and social infrastructures such as roads, energy, education and health facilities. Investments should also target relevant skills development and entrepreneurship support, including through cooperatives and innovative financial mechanisms.”

He said the failure to recognize the value of rural areas has resulted in per capita food production barely growing over the last 50 years, with agriculture representing only 17 per cent of Sub-Sahara’s gross domestic product (GDP), and its already low productivity even declining.

“It’s not surprising that over 60 per cent of rural people live in extreme poverty, and many flee to the cities, where they usually swell the ranks of the unemployed or the informal workforce,” Mr. Houngbo wrote, stressing the need to ensure proper occupational safety and health, social protection and basic rights.

He noted that the reality is not lost on African leaders and the African Union (AU) summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, last month, which had the agricultural transformation as its lead theme.
Promoting rural areas also means combining agriculture with industrial and service activities to stimulate synergies and diversification, and to seize new opportunities in information and communication technology (ICT), tourism, biotechnologies, environmental protection and renewable energy generation, for instance.

Integrated approaches should include promoting links between public and private stakeholders, developing rural workers’ and entrepreneurs’ structures, encouraging dialogue between them and with the authorities, and giving capacities and a voice to youth and women, who are the true engines of rural innovation and growth.

“All important is disseminating the many winning practices,” Mr. Houngbo wrote, citing the Songhaï Centres in Benin where productive enterprises run activities in farming, processing, handicrafts, marketing, energy production, irrigation, repair, recycling and other services, with strong emphasis on holistic approaches, self-reliance, research and training.

Another good example is the Rwandan Telecentre Network, with rural centres that provide information technology (IT) services but also serve as delivery hubs where individuals, companies and government can advertise, sell, buy and exchange products and services from e-training to banking, insurance, taxation, healthcare, electricity and information.

The ILO has actively engaged in rural work since the 1920s, with growing attention to Africa. In 2008, the International Labour Conference adopted a resolution on Rural Employment for Poverty Reduction, which led to the ILO Rural Employment and Decent Work Programme (2009-13), and the declaration in 2013 of decent work in the rural economy as an area of critical importance for ILO.