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Ukraine death toll hits 6,000 amid ongoing fighting – UN

2 March - The estimated death toll caused by the continuing fighting in Ukraine has now surpassed the 6,000 mark, the United Nations human rights office confirmed today, amid broader warnings that the country stands on the brink of a “new and very deadly chapter” in its conflict.

According to the latest human rights report released by the UN Office for the High Commissioner (OHCHR), the surge in fatalities in the Eastern European country has continued despite successive ceasefires as Government and rebel forces have escalated their fighting in recent weeks, particularly near the airport in Donetsk and in the area around the town of Debaltseve. The clashes have resulted in hundreds of deaths, both civilian and military, and “an untenable situation” for those trapped in the strife-torn areas.

“It is imperative that all sides comply with the provisions of the Minsk Agreements and halt the indiscriminate shelling and other hostilities that have created a dreadful situation for civilians – in stark disregard of international humanitarian law and human rights law,” the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, warned in a press release.

“The human rights situation in Ukraine remains grave,” he continued. “Should this trend continue, this would represent a new and very deadly chapter in this conflict, expanding the areas where the rule of law and the protection of human rights are effectively absent.”

In late February 2014, the situation in Ukraine transcended what was initially seen as an internal Ukrainian political crisis into violent clashes in parts of the country, later reaching full-scale conflict in the east. Despite the Minsk cease-fire, the
situation in Ukraine has since continuously deteriorated, with serious consequences for the country's unity, territorial integrity and stability. Recent media reports have suggested a potential worsening of the situation amid claims of a massive recruitment campaign by anti-Government groups.

At the same time, the High Commissioner observed a dangerous shift in the nature of the conflict following a series of recent deadly terrorist attacks in the cities of Kharkiv and Odessa and another suspected attack in Mariupol on 24 January.

The fighting has also sparked a massive outflow of refugees and displaced persons. Last month, the UN refugee agency reported at least 943,500 internally displaced persons (IDPs), with Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policy today counting some 980,000 people as currently internally displaced. Meanwhile, over 600,000 Ukrainians have fled the country, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, particularly the Russian Federation, but also Belarus, Moldova, Poland, Hungary and Romania, since February 2014.

“All aspects of people's lives are being negatively affected, and the situation is increasingly untenable for the local inhabitants, especially in areas controlled by the armed groups,” Mr. Zeid explained. “Many have been trapped in conflict zones, forced to shelter in basements, with hardly any drinking water, food, heating, electricity or basic medical supplies.”

The living conditions for civilians in besieged areas has steadily deteriorated amid indiscriminate shelling as well as “credible allegations” of arbitrary detention, torture and enforced disappearances, committed mostly by armed groups but, in some instances, also by Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, OHCHR added in its report.

Mr. Zeid admitted that many civilians remained in territory controlled by armed groups because they fear for their lives if they try to move while others are forced to stay against their will, or are simply physically unable to leave.

“All those who remain have a right to protection according to international human rights and international humanitarian law, which must be respected by all relevant authorities,” he affirmed. “All violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law must be thoroughly investigated and perpetrators promptly brought to justice.”

UNESCO welcomes re-opening of Iraq’s National Museum in Baghdad

2 March - The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has congratulated Iraqi authorities for the 12-year effort to re-open the Baghdad Museum, containing artefacts dating back 7,000 years as having “tremendous significance as a response to the deliberate destruction of the country’s other priceless pieces conserved in the Mosul Museum and those in the region of Nineveh.”

Established in 1926, the Baghdad Museum dedicated to documenting and interpreting the history of Iraq and its environs, through its collections comprising objects covering the past 7,000 years, according to the UNESCO.

“It has a tremendous significance as a response to the deliberate destruction of the country’s other priceless pieces conserved in the Mosul Museum and those in the region of Nineveh, by confirming the will of the Iraqi Government and support of the international community to highlight this iconic Museum as a defense against intolerance, ignorance and violence perpetrated on the testaments of a nation’s historical past, intercultural exchange and cultural diversity,” UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova said.

The opening of the museum in Baghdad came as the UN Security Council over the weekend denounced the “deliberate destruction of irreplaceable religious and cultural artefacts” housed in Mosul Museum in a statement that strongly condemned the “ongoing barbaric terrorist acts” committed by militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Objects in the collection of the National Museum represent Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Islamic cultures, including in various media – including glass, pottery, metal, ivory, and parchment, according to UNESCO.
Having sustained extensive damage during the Gulf War of 1990-1991, the museum was closed until April 2000, UNESCO said in a press release. The armed conflict in March 2003 and the subsequent looting of the National Museum in April led to the loss of many of its objects from its collections.

UNESCO said he Museum management staff has estimated the number of looted items to be at approximately 15,000, including 5,000 valuable cylinder seals. According to the National Museum, 4,300 objects out of the 15,000 looted from the Museum have been returned.

Since its closing, the Iraqi authorities and UNESCO have endeavoured to coordinate international assistance to revive the National Museum, with Member States, expert communities and partners.

“Thanks to funding from Japan, the museum laboratory was restored and specialized training for staff provided,” UNESCO said.

Among the major artefacts are the Sumerian sacred vase and the masque of Warka (4th millennium BCE), the head of an Akkadian ruler from Nineveh (ca.2250-2200 BCE), an Assyrian cuneiform slab from Nimrud (first half of 1st millennium BCE), a Babylonian terracotta lion (19-18th century BCE), and a stucco panel from Samarra (9th century CE).

**UN mission welcomes steps taken towards draft agreement on peace, reconciliation in Mali**

2 March - The United Nations Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) congratulated the parties involved in reaching a draft agreement on peace and reconciliation, which was initialled in Algiers on Sunday, according to the UN Secretary-General’s spokesperson today in New York.

According to Stéphane Dujarric, the Government of Mali, a member of the coalition of armed groups ‘Platform’ and the mediation team led by Algeria reached agreement today, though the ‘Coordination’ of coalition of armed groups has not yet initialled the document and has requested additional time to consult with its constituencies in Mali.

The mission says the draft peace accord is “the most viable compromise to meet the multiple challenges facing Mali”. It also notes that sustained and united international support is required to assist the parties in finalising and then implementing an inclusive and sustainable peace agreement.

“The ownership and commitment of the Malian parties is crucial for success. And the mission calls on all Malian parties to continue to engage constructively and in good faith towards a final settlement” Mr. Dujarric added.

The Government in Mali has been seeking to restore stability and rebuild following a series of setbacks since early 2012, including a military coup d'état, renewed fighting between Government forces and Tuareg rebels, and the seizure of its northern territory by radical Islamists.

Throughout much of this time, Mali’s north has remained restive and, in recent months, MINUSMA and its “blue helmets” have come under repeated violent attack.
Political consensus urgent to protect human rights, Ban tells opening session of UN council

2 March - The United Nations has the mandates and tools it needs to prevent human rights violations, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told delegations gathered in Geneva today for the opening of the current session of the world body’s Human Rights Council, while he warned that the biggest challenge to using these tools is lack of political consensus among Member States.

“I appeal to the Human Rights Council to unite behind early, practical steps to support national actors in promoting and protecting human rights. Early action on human rights helps to strengthen national sovereignty, rather than challenge or resist it,” Mr. Ban said via video message at the opening of the three-day High-Level Segment of the 47-member body’s 28th session.

“The world faces serious violations of human rights, from discrimination and inequality to oppression and violent extremism. Our shared challenge is to do far more to keep these and other abuses from occurring in the first place,” added the Secretary-General, who was joined by the Council’s President, Joachim Rucker, and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein.

The Council also heard statements from the President of The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Prime Minister of Fiji and dignitaries from 20 States who spoke about their concerns regarding the situation in a number of countries around the world and outlined some of the efforts their countries were undertaking in the promotion and protection of human rights.

Mr. Ban called the protection and realization of human rights “intrinsic to the entire agenda of the United Nations” and underscored the role of capacity-building, monitoring and reporting including through the work of the Human Rights Up Front Initiative. “The conflict in Syria offers just one example where early United Nations efforts to address human rights violations might have averted a human and political catastrophe,” he said, emphasizing that Member States must do their part to generate this “much-needed shift” in the way they work.

Also addressing the Council for the first time since taking his post last year, High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said the world must be “completely principled and cunning in its collective attempt to defang” violent extremists.

“For us, international humanitarian law and international human rights law cannot be trifled with or circumvented, but must be fully observed,” Mr. Zeid stressed, saying how even though the UN Charter was established 70 years ago, with alarming regularity, human rights are disregarded, and violated, sometimes to a shocking degree.

States claim exceptional circumstances, he said. “They pick and choose between rights. One Government will thoroughly support women’s human rights and those of the LGBT communities, but will balk at any suggestion that those rights be extended to migrants of irregular status. Another State may observe scrupulously the right to education, but will brutally stamp out opposing political views. A third State comprehensively violates the political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights of its people, while vigorously defending the ideals of human rights before its peers.”

“Some of the evidence may be hidden. But the reality, in far too many countries, of massacres and sexual violence; crushing poverty; the exclusive bestowal of health-care and other vital resources to the wealthy and well-connected; the torture of powerless detainees; the denial of human dignity – these things are known,” he said, adding: “And delegates, they are what truly make up a State’s reputation; together with the real steps – if any taken to prevent abuses and address social inequalities.”

The High-Commissioner said he is “disturbed deeply” by the disregard displayed by several States towards the Council’s independent experts – and also by the reprisals and smear campaigns that are all too frequently exercised against
representatives of civil society.

The only real measure of a Government’s worth is not its place in the solemn ballet of grand diplomacy. Rather it is the extent to which it is sensitive to the needs – and protects the rights – of its nationals and other people who fall under its jurisdiction, Mr. Zeid said, calling on Member States to align their actions with the recommendations of the Human Rights Council.

As an inter-governmental body within the UN, the Council is responsible for strengthening the protection of human rights worldwide and for addressing situations of human rights violations and make recommendations on them.

Mr. Zeid commended the work of all staff of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), particularly those who work in situations of daily danger. He expressed dismay to learn that “because of lack of will by Member States,” the UN is not in a position to make adequate provision for support to staff that are injured in high-risk missions, or to the families of staff-members who have been killed in such circumstances.

“Frankly, this is appalling and I appeal to all of you to change it,” he said.

Also addressing the Council, via video message, General Assembly President Sam Kutesa said that Member States bear the primary responsibility to protect their citizens and provide them with internationally agreed upon human rights. It is essential therefore that the Council take this into account when dealing with rights challenges and utilize the Universal Periodic Review mechanism.

“In recent times around the world, we have witnessed an unsettling rise in many forms of intolerance, discrimination and prejudice. These behaviours have culminated in a wide range of negative outcomes; including stereotyping, stigmatization, exclusion, threats and even extreme violence,” he said.

Mr. Kutesa called on the Human Rights Council to focus more on social and economic rights and in particular, the right to development, as these are pivotal to the attainment of an acceptable standard of living in the most economically challenges parts of the world.

“As we formulate a new, transformative development framework this year at the United Nations, we must bear in mind the inextricable link between development and human rights,” he added.

UNICEF fears scores of kidnapped children in South Sudan could be sent to front lines

2 March - Hundreds of children seized by armed men from a village in South Sudan have generated fears that “they are going from the classroom to the front line,” says the top United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) representative in that country who demanded their immediate release.

UNICEF, in a press release issued in Juba, South Sudan, reported that 89 children preparing for exams were forcibly recruited last month as child soldiers, but the agency now believes the number of children may be in the hundreds. In addition, adult males were also forcibly recruited during the raids that took place on 15 and 16 February.

Witnesses also stated many children have been seen in a training camp as young as 12 years old were seen carrying guns but not in uniform, according to UNICEF.

“We fear they are going from the classroom to the front line,” said UNICEF’s Representative in South Sudan, Jonathan Veitch. “UNICEF appeals to [militia leader] Johnson Oloni to let those children go back to school and be with their families, immediately.”

Mr. Veitch also urged the Government of South Sudan to use whatever influence it had to secure the children's release.
UNICEF said it is confident that the armed group which took the children was a Shilluk Militia under the control of John

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Oloni. This militia is aligned with the Government’s Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) forces, he added.

In an intensive information gathering exercise, both in Juba and in Upper Nile state where the seizures took place, UNICEF

and its partners have tried to piece together what happened during and after the raid and to discover the location of the children.

One of the challenges hampering evidence gathering has been a heavy militia presence remaining in the area, making it

impossible to receive first-hand information.

From reports received so far it is becoming clear the children are not together in a single group, UNICEF reports, saying that

some of the children - including some of the school boys - were believed allowed back into their village to eat with their

parents and in some instances some children were allowed to go to school. They were then taken away again at night.

UN agency head urges cooperation on safeguards, stresses role of nuclear energy in development

2 March - In his introductory statement to the Agency’s Board of Governors, the head of the United Nations atomic energy watchdog said he remains “seriously concerned” about nuclear programme of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and that he is not yet in a position to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is used for peaceful purposes.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Yukiya Amano said the Vienna-based body remains ready to play an essential role in verifying the DPRK’s nuclear programme, despite DPRK’s unwillingness to allow verification teams into the country.

“It is nearly six years since Agency inspectors were asked to leave the DPRK,” he said. “I call upon the DPRK to comply fully with its obligations under relevant Security Council resolutions, to cooperate promptly with the Agency in implementing its NPT (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons) Safeguards Agreement, and to resolve all outstanding issues.”

Verification of the non-diversion of nuclear material by Iran continued under the Safeguards Agreement was continuing, Mr. Amano said, monitoring and verification in relation to the nuclear-related measures set out in the Joint Plan of Action agreed between Iran and the so called “E3+3” countries (China, France, Germany, Russia, United Kingdom and United States).

“The Agency is not in a position to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran,” he said adding that that meant it was therefore impossible to conclude that all nuclear material was being used peacefully.

The Agency was unable to clarify two outstanding practical measures that were agreed last year under the Framework for Cooperation, while Iran was still to propose new practical measures. With increased cooperation by Iran, the Agency could help to accelerate resolution of all outstanding issues under the Framework, and he called for timely provision of access to all information, documentation, sites, material and personnel requested by the Agency.

“This process cannot continue indefinitely,” he said. “Once the agency has established an understanding of the whole picture concerning issues with possible military dimensions, I will provide a report with our assessment to the Board.”

Pointing to positive recent meetings with Iran’s Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and his Deputy Araghchi, Mr. Amano reported that he had no new developments to report on implementation of safeguards in Syria and he renewed his call on Syria to cooperate fully in connection with unresolved issues related to the Dair Alzour site and other locations.

While stressing the importance of nuclear safeguards, Mr. Amano also underlined the importance of the Agency’s work to make nuclear technologies available for development.
“I feel that our mandate could be understood today not just as ‘Atoms for Peace,’ but as Atoms for Peace and Development,” he said, emphasising the importance of modern science and technology, including nuclear technology, for development, and calling for its appropriate recognition in the post-2015 development agenda.

He also drew attention to progress in implementation of the IAEA Action Plan on Nuclear Safety, including adoption of the Vienna Declaration on Nuclear Safety including principles for the implementation of the Convention to prevent accidents with radiological consequences and to mitigate such consequences should they occur.

Noting that the Agency was moving into a “critical period” as far as extra-budgetary contributions for the ReNuAL project to modernise the nuclear applications laboratories at Seibersdorf are concerned, he said it was “worrying” that no concrete commitments of contributions towards the cost of construction of the buildings have been received so far, although some Member States have indicated strong interest.

Malaysia: UN expert urges Government to boost efforts in helping victims of human trafficking

2 March - The Government of Malaysia must increase its efforts in addressing all forms of human trafficking while also protecting the rights of its victims, a United Nations human rights expert said today.

“The institutional and legal framework to prevent and combat trafficking is in place in Malaysia,” Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, explained in a press release following her six-day visit to the country.

“The challenge is now to make the whole mechanism more effective and able to deal with the ever changing features of trafficking, especially concerning its labour dimension, and its connection with migration policies,” she added.

According to the UN rights office (OHCHR), there are an estimated 2 million documented migrants workers and another 2 million or more undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia where they are often exploited for cheap labour by unscrupulous recruitment agents and employers through breach of contract, payment of excessive recruitment fees, debt bondage, non-payment of salary, withholding of passports, excessive working hours, lack of rest days and abuse, both physical and sexual.

In addition, the trafficking of young foreign women and children from the purpose of sexual exploitation is also prevalent in the country, where they are mostly forced into the commercial sex trade following deceptive practices for legal work in Malaysia. Many victims of trafficking are often detained and subsequently deported and not provided with adequate specialist support for recovery and social inclusion, the press release continued.

As a result, Ms. Giammarinaro called for the country’s Government to adopt a new system of protection that provides exploited workers immediate assistance to claim compensation as well as temporary residence status and a work permit.

“No victim of trafficking should be prosecuted for crimes linked with their situation of trafficked persons, and be detained,” the expert stressed. “Shelters must be open places, preferably run by NGOs, which should be adequately funded for this purpose. Psychological, medical and legal assistance should aim to promote rehabilitation, reintegration and social inclusion of trafficked persons.”

Human trafficking is a multi-billion dollar industry which has trapped some 21 million men, women and children in forced labour. According to 2005 estimates released by the International Labour Organization (ILO), profits generated in the sex industry alone are as high as $32 billion a year. Furthermore, nearly one-third of all victims of human trafficking officially detected around the world between 2007 and 2010 were children, according to a report released in December 2012 by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) citing data from 132 countries.

Despite encouraging progress – 90 per cent of countries now have legislation criminalizing human trafficking – convictions
reported globally remain extremely low. According to UNODC’s 2014 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, some 15 per cent of countries did not record a single conviction between 2010 and 2012, while 25 per cent only recorded between one and 10 convictions.

**UN chief welcomes Lesotho elections, reaffirms commitment to democracy in the Kingdom**

1 March - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has congratulated the people of the Kingdom of Lesotho on the “peaceful conduct” of the country's parliamentary elections, held on 28 February.

In a statement issued this evening, the UN spokesperson said the Secretary-General commended the work of the Independent Electoral Commission of Lesotho in preparing for the elections, as well as the Southern African Development Community, which had “led efforts to peacefully resolve political challenges in the country.”

“The successful completion of this process will be an important step in Lesotho's return to political normalcy,” the statement continued.

Moreover, it added that Mr. Ban reaffirmed the UN's “readiness” to support efforts in Lesotho “to consolidate democracy and advance justice and development for the benefit of all the people of the country.”

**UN envoy dispatches mission to Syria to lay groundwork for Aleppo 'freeze'**

1 March - The Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, is continuing discussions with the Government of Syria on his proposed 'freeze' of localized hostilities in the city of Aleppo, the United Nations spokesperson's office said today.

Mr. de Mistura is currently dispatching a mission to Aleppo to assess the situation on the ground amid continuing fighting throughout the Middle Eastern country, a note to correspondents issued this morning by the UN Spokesperson has confirmed.

The mission will seek to ensure that once the so-called 'freeze' is announced, humanitarian aid can “significantly increase,” and any violations can be followed-up with the appropriate arrangements.

According to the UN, the conflict in Syria has sparked the largest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, with 7.6 million people displaced and 3.2 million refugees created by the conflict, as well as a further 12.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.

Well over 150,000 people have died in the conflict, with at least 680,000 injured. Several rounds of UN-mediated peace talks in Geneva among the parties last year ended without a settlement and the Organization has since been reiterating the need to press ahead with political negotiations to achieve the aims of the Geneva Communiqué.
On Zero Discrimination Day, UN urges tolerance for diversity

1 March - The United Nations agency leading the world's HIV/AIDS response has kicked off the 2015 global edition of Zero Discrimination Day as part of the Organization's wider effort to spur solidarity towards ending discrimination.

“Discrimination is a violation of human rights and must not go unchallenged,” United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared in a press release issued for the Day. “Everyone has the right to live with respect and dignity.”

This year’s theme Open Up, Reach Out encourages all members of the international community to unite under the banner of diversity and celebrate each other’s difference in an authoritative rejection of discrimination in all its forms.

At the same time, Zero Discrimination Day, observed annually on 1 March, draws attention to the millions who still suffer from social and economic exclusion due to prejudice and intolerance. Millions of women and girls in every region of the world, for instance, experience violence and abuse on a daily basis and struggle to access adequate health care and education.

Meanwhile, globally, there are almost 80 countries that still have laws criminalizing same-sex sexual relations while some 38 countries, territories and areas impose some form of restriction on the entry, stay and residence of people living with HIV. Furthermore, legal and social environments are still failing to address stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and those most vulnerable to HIV infection.

In 2013, UNAIDS estimated that 35 million people globally were living with HIV, while 2.1 million people became newly infected with the virus and 1.5 million people died from AIDS-related illnesses.

“Some of the world's most challenging problems can be solved simply by eliminating stigma and discrimination,” said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS. “As we collectively strive for a fairer world we can be encouraged by the enthusiasm for achieving zero discrimination.”

The UN day will be marked by a number of events held around the world, with photo exhibitions in China, dancing in Gabon, concerts in Madagascar, a storytelling event for children in Mongolia and special film screenings in Nepal.

Ban voices shock, condemnation at Russian politician's 'brutal killing'

28 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has expressed shock and condemnation at the brutal killing of Russian politician Boris Nemtsov, the United Nations spokesperson's office confirmed today.

According to media reports, Mr. Nemtsov was gunned down on 27 February in central Moscow by unknown assailants.

In a statement issued earlier this afternoon, the UN spokesperson explained that the Secretary-General noted that an investigation into the murder had been announced by Russian authorities and that Mr. Ban expected the perpetrators to be brought to justice “swiftly.”

In addition, continued the statement, the Secretary-General wished to express his “deepest condolences” to Mr. Nemtsov's family, friends and supporters.
In Chile, UN chief says 'time to take stand' for gender equality

28 February - The international community must work for a stronger world and a better future for all with equal rights for both men and women, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon affirmed today as he emphasized the need for swift global action on gender parity.

Delivering the closing remarks to a High-level Conference on 'Women in Power and Decision-making' co-hosted by Chile’s Government and UN Women and held in Santiago, the Secretary-General urged Member States to expedite their efforts in bringing about gender equality “not next year, not tomorrow, right now.”

“Now is the time to take a stand, to close gaps, to remove obstacles, to invest in women and girls, to move from deed to action,” Mr. Ban declared. “We cannot fulfil 100 per cent of the world's potential by excluding 50 per cent of the world's people.”

The Secretary-General's remarks come ahead of the worldwide commemoration on 8 March of International Women's Day, which this year coincides with the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, considered to be the “international blueprint” for gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Also this year, the international community is hard at work on establishing a new sustainable development agenda that builds on the landmark UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and that will help shape policies and social investments for the next generation.

Mr. Ban told those gathered that 2015 was, in fact, “a pivotal year” for people and the planet as the international community hurtles towards the end-of-year development, climate and gender targets.

“We can make it the year of sustainable development,” he added. “We can make it the year that transforms lives for a generation. For that to happen, women must be front and centre.”

Yesterday, on the side-lines of the conference’s opening session, the Secretary-General met with Michelle Bachelet, President of Chile, who in 2010, was the first to lead the then newly-created UN Women. He thanked the Chilean Government for co-hosting the conference on 'Women in power and decision-making' and also expressed appreciation for the different measures Chile has taken toward women’s empowerment.

The Secretary-General and President Bachelet also exchanged views about the importance of gender equality in the framework of the post-2015 development agenda. They agreed on the importance of good preparatory work for the Financing for Development Conference in Addis-Ababa in July, stressing that private sector engagement would be key to its success.
Security Council strongly depletes ISIL's 'barbarism,' says resolve stiffened to defeat group

28 February - The United Nations Security Council has strongly condemned the “ongoing barbaric terrorist acts” committed by militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and reaffirmed its determination in defeating the extremist group.

In a statement released late yesterday evening, the 15-member Council once again stressed that ISIL “must be defeated” and the “intolerance, violence and hatred it espouses must be stamped out,” adding that the “continued acts of barbarism perpetrated by ISIL do not intimidate them, but rather stiffen their resolve.”

“There has to be a common effort amongst Governments and institutions, including those in the region most affected, to counter ISIL,” the statement continued. “No act of violence or terrorism can reverse a path towards peace, democracy and reconstruction in Iraq, underpinned by the rule of law and respect for human rights, which is supported by the people and the Government of Iraq and the international community.”

The Council statement follows a series of recent atrocities perpetrated by ISIL against civilians in Iraq, including the reported abduction of 100 Sunni tribesmen from outside Tikrit on 25 February; the immolation of 45 Iraqis in the town of Baghdad; and the “deliberate destruction of irreplaceable religious and cultural artefacts” housed in Mosul Museum.

Earlier in the week, the militants released a video showing them shattering artefacts and bas-reliefs, including large statues from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site of Hatra, in Mosul Museum, with sledgehammers, garnering condemnation from across the UN system.

ISIL extremists have reportedly engaged in so-called “cultural cleansing” across Iraq and other territories occupied by the group, including the destruction of religious heritage belonging to Muslim, Christian and Jewish sects alike. At the same time, they also participate in the illicit traffic of artefacts in order to help fund their terrorist acts.

In their statement, the Security Council similarly condemned the looting and smuggling of cultural heritage items from archaeological sites, museums, and libraries, warning that the illicit trafficking of such valuable materials was being used to support and finance groups like ISIL and Al-Qaeda.

At a press conference held yesterday in Paris, UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova, also voiced her “dismay” at ISIL’s “destructive fury” against the cultural artefacts in Mosul Museum and observed that the “terrorists use the destruction of heritage in their strategy to destabilize and manipulate populations so that they can assure their own domination.”

Ms. Bokova has noted that such acts against cultural heritage can, in fact, constitute a war crime according to the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).
Middle East: UN envoy says resolution of Gaza crisis key to achieving regional peace

2 March - Peace in the Middle East hinges on resolving the ongoing crisis in Gaza, where reconstruction efforts are faltering and the blockade continues, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process, Robert Serry, said today during his final visit to the war-ravaged enclave.

In a statement issued earlier this morning, Mr. Serry, whose seven-year mandate is set to expire shortly, said he was encouraged that “some progress” towards the reconstruction of Gaza was being made but still lamented the “overall slow pace” of rebuilding.

According to a recent UN assessment, as it stands now, over 100,000 homes were damaged or destroyed in Gaza during last summer’s 51-day conflict between Israel and local militants. The destruction affected more than 600,000 people and many still lack access to the municipal water network. Meanwhile, blackouts of up to 18 hours per day are common.

In addition, the violence killed more than 2,100 Palestinians and more than 70 Israelis.

“I fully understand the frustration of people in Gaza,” the Special Coordinator declared. “Many of those who now have access to building materials lack the money to buy them or to carry out the works.”

He noted that the UN had been forced to suspend cash payments to refugee families due to a lack of donor support, observing that only a small percentage of the $5.4 billion pledged at the Cairo Reconstruction Conference last October had been disbursed.

“This is, frankly, unacceptable,” he added.

Moreover, Mr. Serry continued, the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip had rendered the area “more isolated than ever” due to the many restrictions still in place at Israeli crossings and with the Rafah crossing “practically closed.”

“We, in the UN, have always been in the forefront in calling for an end to the blockade as a prerequisite for a stable, functioning economy in Gaza. You also cannot have a stable, functioning economy without a more durable ceasefire and a recognized, legitimate and inclusive Government leading Gaza’s recovery.”

He explained that the rehabilitation of Gaza would “take years,” particularly as not enough progress was being made to address the enclave’s “underlying issues.”

“Gaza is a political problem which must be addressed as part of ending the occupation and achieving a two-state solution,” Mr. Serry’s statement concluded. “I am convinced that there can be no peace without addressing Gaza’s needs first.”

Last month, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed Nickolay Mladenov of Bulgaria as Mr. Serry’s replacement.