For information media - not an official record

Security Council condemns South Sudan violence, expresses concern at expulsion of UN relief coordinator

3 June - Renewing its support to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the vital mandate it is performing to protect civilians there, the Security Council today expressed its grave concern over the security and humanitarian situation in the country, torn by “a conflict that is only growing more violent as it nears its 18th month.”

In a statement to the press, the members of the Security Council reiterated their full support for UNMISS and expressed concern about the latest developments in South Sudan, where the Government decided to expel, on May 29, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and UN Humanitarian Coordinator, Toby Lanzer.

“They underscored that to make such a determination immediately following the … warning by the World Food Programme that South Sudan is facing the worst levels of food insecurity in the young country’s history because of a combination of conflict, high food prices and a worsening economic crisis, shows a disregard for the plight of the South Sudanese people.”

Since the beginning of the year, some 60,000 civilians have fled the country, mostly to Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda bringing the total number of people who fled since the start of the conflict December 2013 to 555,000. Some 1.5 million are internally displaced and more than 3.8 million – a third of the country’s population of 11 million – do not have sufficient food.

The statement comes a week after the Security Council extended the mandate of UNMISS until 30 November 2015, giving
the operation authorization to use all necessary means to protect civilians, monitor and investigate human rights, and create the conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Today, Council members demanded that all parties end “intimidation and harassment” against UNMISS and humanitarian personnel, cease ongoing restrictions on freedom of movement, and “allow the Mission to fully implement its mandate.”

In the press statement, Council members condemned “in the strongest terms” the repeated violations of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement by the Republic of South Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army soldiers (SPLM/A), the opposition group. On May 28, the very same day UNMISS mandate was extended for a year, SPLM/A soldiers exchanged gunfire into the Mission Protection of Civilians site in Malakal, injuring three civilians and one peacekeeper, an incident also condemned by the Council.

“The members of the Security Council reiterated their call upon the Government of South Sudan to immediately take steps to ensure the safety of all civilians and UNMISS Protection of Civilian sites . . . , to swiftly investigate these incidents, and to bring the perpetrators of these egregious acts to justice. In this regard, they underlined their willingness to impose sanctions against those who threaten the peace, security or stability of South Sudan.”

Finally, the Council called upon all parties to engage meaningfully in the peace process so as to bring about a political solution to the crisis and an end to the conflict.

‘We can no longer stand by and watch,’ UN official says, urging global action against spread of extremism

3 June - At a Headquarters forum on the role of media in combating terrorism, senior United Nations officials today expressed deep concerns over the impact of foreign terrorist fighters and their use of social media in spreading propaganda and radicalizing and recruit vulnerable young men and women to join their ranks.

Delivering the keynote address to the Arab League-organized event, UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman said that violent extremist groups such as the Islamic State of the Levant (ISIL), Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram succeed because they offer young people opportunities to engage with their peers and provide a space where they can bond over their grievances, hopes and deeply held desire for a world that is just and fair.

“We can no longer stand by and watch as this phenomenon spreads. With their message of hate, violent extremists directly assault the legitimacy of the United Nations Charter and the values of peace, justice and human dignity on which that document and international relations are based,” the UN political chief said.

“While governments try to keep up through disseminating more moderate counter-narratives, today’s young people are not looking for moderation – they seek visionary ideas that capture their imagination and offer tangible change,” he added.

According to the UN, more than 25,000 foreign terrorist fighting from over 100 Member States have travelled to Syria and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Libya and between mid-2014 and March 2015 there was an estimated 70 per cent increase in foreign terrorist fighters worldwide.

Mr. Feltman, who also serves as Chairman of the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force and Executive Director of the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre, highlighted how manipulative messages of violent extremists are spread via Twitter, YouTube and other social media, because they are attractive to young people in search of adventure. There are almost 50,000 Twitter accounts supporting ISIL, with an average of 1,000 followers each.

“We need a global, collective and authentic response that engages people to effectively counter and ultimately prevent these destructive, extremist messages that espouse and promote violence and destruction.” Mr. Feltman stressed.
But efforts to combat the spread of extremism must go beyond governments, and extend to religious, youth, women, as well as community, leaders because they are on the front-line to standing up to violent extremists. It is also critical to work closely with media partners to spread stories out about returnees from violent extremist groups and victims of terrorism.

He warned against limits on press freedoms, such as deactivating social media sites or closing newspapers, which at first may appear to suppress the spread of hateful messages, but can end up making violent extremists and their forbidden messages all the more attractive to vulnerable groups.

“Such measures can inadvertently silence activists and other community groups that hold the long-term solutions to preventing violent extremism...we must offer the disenfranchised and disenchanted a real stake in shaping our global world,” Mr. Feltman said.

Also addressing the forum today, Executive Director of the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) Jean-Paul Laborde, quoted Malcolm X in saying: “The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that’s power.”

Media has the power to frame narratives, shape public opinion, and inform both politics and policymaking, he said. Media can also legitimize or delegitimize the narratives of terrorists and violent extremist groups. As an example of the magnitude of the problem, between September and December last year, 46,000 Twitter handles supported Da’esh (or ISIL).

“This demonstrates how easily and quickly global recruitment campaigns using social media can be mounted,” he said, highlighting the attack against Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris this past January and the media blackout allegedly caused by Da’esh on 8 April against the French TV5 network. “What happens if a terrorist group manages to use a network to broadcast beheadings or executions?” he asked.

While freedom of expression and opinion are fundamental rights, they are not absolute, Mr. Laborde stated, citing Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which say that the right may be restricted “for the protection of national security or of public order,” and that “any propaganda for war” shall be prohibited by law.

“A careful balance must be struck,” he stressed, pointing out how the Counter-Terrorism Committee has already begun working to establish links with private corporations, civil society, and industries to discuss how to prevent the use of the Internet by terrorists.

Member States may also wish to encourage information and communications technology companies to collaborate with clerics and religious scholars, to curb the impact of online radical narratives by developing mechanisms that counter hate speech and promote tolerance.

“But actively engaging with the media, the international community can provide a narrative based on our core principles to show that we are not just reacting to the terrorist narrative, but also offering a brighter, positive vision for the future of mankind,” he added.

Joining Mr. Feltman and Mr. Laborde today was Ambassador Abdallah Al-Muallimi, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the UN and Chairman of the Advisory Board of the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre; Ambassador Raimonda Murmokaite, Permanent Representative of Lithuania to the UN and Chairwoman of the Counter-Terrorism Committee of the United Nations Security Council; Ambassador Haifa Abu Ghazaleh, Assistant-Secretary General of the League of Arab States, and Ambassador Ahmed Fathalla, Ambassador of the League of Arab States to the UN.
Libya: UN envoy meets political actors and activists on reaching final agreement to end crisis

3 June - The only option Libya has, “the only real alternative for the future,” is an agreement, Special Representative and head of the United Nations Support Mission in the country (UNSMIL), Bernardino León said at a meeting in Algeria with Libyan political leaders and activists today.

“This is a moment of truth,” Mr. León underlined, reminding participants of the importance to reach a consensus before the month of Ramadan, “a moment of peace…of reconciliation”, in a country that is now “really at the limit.”

Opening his remarks delivering a bleak economic appraisal, Mr. Léon warned that the Central Bank of Libya and the administrations will not be able to continue to pay salaries for much longer, “maybe one month,” and maybe six weeks after that, the financial situation will be so dire that Libya will be unable to function as a state. Indeed, oil production had declined, but even if it were to recover, the current budget deficit could not be overcome and public finances would remain degraded.

“And this works for all sides, for all regions, for all cities across Libya,” he declared.

The political situation is no better, continued the UNSMIL chief, with “competing” institutions and governments so far unable to reach an agreement, “while we have seen terrorism [and the rise of] Da’esh (also known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL) in Libya, a country on the verge of becoming a “failed state” if rivals don’t set aside their differences.

On the security front, noting that today, people in both camps are fighting Da’esh, Mr. Léon said the two narratives, “the one that says [the city of] Tobruk represents the previous regime and the one that claims Fajr Libya [militias] represents terrorist organizations, are clearly finished today.”

“There is no more room for these narratives. There is only room for a moderate Libya to agree on a unity government and on the main framework and agreement that will sustain this government. I think this should be the main message from this forum. Libyans are telling us very clearly enough is enough and the time has come to make this agreement.”

Underscoring the need to recognize all the actors involved, the UN believe they can propose a new draft which will keep all the positive elements agreed so far, but also address some of the remaining concerns, said Mr. Léon.

But it should be the final draft, he said. “We could reach, maybe, the perfect agreement with draft no. 20, but if the country collapses economically and financially, and if Da’esh now controls an important part of Sirte and continues to attack and controls other cities… […], what would be the relevance of draft no. 20 if the country does not exist anymore as a functional country?”

So, he concluded, it is crucial time to make decisions and agree on “a unity government that represents all Libyans.”
UN-backed project to provide hundreds of new housing units to Palestinians in Gaza

3 June - Palestinian refugee families living in substandard dwellings and owners of homes demolished in last year's hostilities in Gaza, are among those gaining access to shelter under a United Nations-backed project to provide close to 450 newly-built housing units, which was stalled for three years due to the lack of access to construction materials.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which is mandated to provide assistance and protection some 5 million registered Palestine refugees, including in Gaza, announced today that the project, funded by the United Arab Emirates Red Crescent with $19.7 million, offers 600 new housing units in total.

“The completed dwellings are currently being handed over to refugee families living in substandard shelters that impose direct physical and/or health threats to their inhabitants in addition to other protection concerns. These families typically have very few assets or opportunities to escape from poverty and suffering,” said UNRWA Relief and Social Service Programme Chief Asem Abu-Shawish.

One of the beneficiaries, Khaled Mohammed al-Jalous, who signed for one of the housing units with this wife, Etimad Shukri al-Jalous, said his 11-member family had lived in a small, deficient shelter for almost 20 years.

“Now we are 11 persons living in a small two-bedroom shelter; soon, we will have double the size of that, and it will be healthier and bigger,” he said.

According to UNRWA, the construction of the housing units started in 2007, yet work stalled in the following three years due to the blockade. In 2010, when access to construction material became possible for the United Nations under an agreed mechanism with Israel, 151 housing units were built and have provided shelter for refugee families ever since. In 2014, UNRWA started the construction of the remaining 449 units, which were completed this spring.

Almost half of the eligible refugees are those who are living in constricted shelters in Gaza – defined narrowly as those with more than three persons living in less than 50 square meters, less than some 500 square feet, according to UNRWA.

Other selected beneficiaries include refugee owners of houses that were demolished by military operations before the 2014 hostilities and who have not yet received an alternative dwelling unit through UNRWA, refugee families from Khan Younis refugee camp whose houses will be demolished to improving living conditions in the camp, or families of school installation attendants who are living in UNRWA schools and thus occupying space urgently needed for the growing student population, it said.
Marking 10-year partnership, UNICEF and Gucci celebrate education successes across Africa and Asia

3 June - The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is celebrating its longstanding partnership with luxury goods brand Gucci and marking a decade of successes in bringing access to quality education to more than seven million children across sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, the agency announced.

“UNICEF is grateful to Gucci and its employees for their commitment to improving children’s lives and futures through education,” UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake said in a press release. “Every child should have a fair chance in life. That begins with a fair chance to learn.”

At an event held yesterday in New York, the UN agency and the 94-year old fashion house underscored the wide reach of their accomplishments with the screening of Growing Tall – a short film directed by Brooklyn-based filmmaker Christina Voros that highlights the “power of education to transform lives, especially for girls and women.”

The issue of accessibility to quality schooling for children in the least-developed and developing world remains a critical area of concern for UNICEF. According to UN data, since the year 2000, 34 million more primary school-aged children have attended school than would have done so if earlier trends had continued. However, despite this progress, some 58 million children of primary school age remain out of school worldwide.

Over the past 10 years, in fact, Gucci’s support for UNICEF has helped train more than 8,700 teachers and educators, construct nearly 300 school classrooms, and supply 14,600 school desks. In addition, the partnership has also led to the construction of more than 1,800 water and sanitation facilities in schools, ensuring clean water for drinking and hygiene, and has facilitated government policy changes on education and improving school curricula.

The benefits, UNICEF noted in its press release, have reached more than 7.5 million children in both Africa and Asia and will now extend through the UN agency’s “Chime for Change” campaign targeting children and families affected by the Syria crisis with learning opportunities and support services.

“Through our long and successful partnership, Gucci has helped provide that chance to so many children who might otherwise be excluded – and in doing so, provided them with the tools to build a better world for themselves and their communities,” Mr. Lake added.

Child victims of violence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia rarely get justice – new UN report

3 June - Most child victims of violence in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia find themselves unable to speak up and file charges in court, according to a new United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) regional report launched today.

“Everywhere around us, every day, children are affected by violence and abuse, yet only a fraction of them have access to a fair justice system able to make decisions in their best interests,” Susan Bissell, UNICEF’s Global Chief of Child Protection, said today at a discussion that launched the report in Brussels.

“The right to access justice still seems, in the minds of many, inconceivable when it comes to children. We urge governments and key partners to include children’s specific rights and needs in justice reforms at all levels,” she added.
The event on ‘Prioritizing Access to Justice for All Children in Europe and Beyond’ brought together policy makers and legal practitioners to discuss challenges and ideas for a common way forward to ensure that all children, especially the most vulnerable, have access to fair justice.

The report, Children’s Equitable Access to Justice in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, aims to shed light on the tremendous barriers children face in seeking fair and effective solutions to put right the injustice and discrimination in their lives.

In the same vein, the findings also cite notable progress in the administration of justice. Governments in the region are increasingly adjusting their procedures in courts and police stations to protect the rights of children, in line with international standards.

Legal, paralegal and social support to children going through justice processes is increasingly being provided. Through child rights centres, children and their families can obtain information on avenues for redress, receive legal and social advice, be referred to a lawyer, doctor or psychologist. In some cases, they can receive direct legal assistance to initiate a judicial process.

The report found that child rights violations in the region are also unreported or unchallenged in court. These include denying children with disabilities the opportunity to go to school or forcibly separating them from their parents. It also includes denying children from Roma or poor families in rural areas identity cards or social welfare benefits as well as discounting the best interests of children during custody issues in divorce proceedings.

The report said that judicial decisions on these rights violations can set a precedent and have a life-changing impact on their future. Deeply entrenched social and cultural beliefs have made it unacceptable for children in the region to confide in an adult outside of the home about rights violations within the home, in school or in their community, much less bring a complaint through the judicial system citing fear of retribution for themselves and their families.

Central African Republic: UN chief to launch independent inquiry into sexual abuse case

3 June - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has announced his intention to establish an independent review panel to investigate the United Nations’ handling of sexual abuse allegations involving foreign troops in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Organization has confirmed.

In a statement issued this afternoon, the UN Spokesperson’s Office explained that the External Independent Review would examine the treatment of the specific report of abuse in the CAR as well as “a broad range of systemic issues related to how the UN responds to serious information of this kind.”

“As has been stated over the past few weeks, the Secretary-General is deeply disturbed by the allegations of sexual abuse by soldiers in the CAR, as well as allegations of how this was handled by the various parts of the UN system involved,” today’s statement continued.

“His intention in setting up this review is to ensure that the United Nations does not fail the victims of sexual abuse, especially when committed by those who are meant to protect them.”

The statement added that the Secretary-General would announce in the next few days who will lead the review and its terms of reference.

Just last weekend, the UN High Commissioner for Human Right, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, reported that his Office had taken “a deeper look” into “the revelations of alleged serious sexual abuse of children” in the CAR despite the fact that the forces involved in the incidents were not operating as peacekeepers under the United Nations flag.
Moreover, the High Commissioner said that in addition to requesting concerned States to provide more information about
the steps they have taken to investigate the allegations, and prosecute anyone found to have committed crimes, he is sending
a team from his Geneva headquarters to the African country to look into possible further measures to address violations.

“The punishment must fit the crime, and some other incidents were reported that may not have been fully followed up on by
the States concerned, and we need to get to the bottom of what precisely was done by whom and when,” Mr. Zeid
emphasized. “There must be accountability for serious crimes, no matter who commits them.”

**UN agriculture agency and IKEA join forces for sustainable forest management**

3 June - The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has teamed up with big-box retailer IKEA to launch a new initiative aimed at promoting the sustainable management of forest plantations and empowering forest-reliant communities in Viet Nam.

The joint effort – rolled out earlier this morning with the signing of a cooperation agreement – will see the two partners undertake an initial analysis to evaluate options for advancing forest certification schemes and sustainable forest management in the Southeast Asian country's northern regions.

“Millions of people rely on forests for their food and incomes, and certification schemes can offer them a tool for safeguarding their interests and preserving their forests, as well as fairer access to new markets,” FAO’s Assistant-Director General for Forestry, Eduardo Rojas-Briales, said in a press release.

According to the UN food agency, certification can also provide an additional mechanism for monitoring the sustainability of forest management and for tracing timber and other forest products through supply chains before they are used in a wide-range of products, including furniture.

Mr. Rojas-Briales noted, however, that certifications often pose “special challenges” to small-growers and communities for whom the cost of the certification process may be too high.

As a result, the planned IKEA-FAO joint venture will explore options and barriers to effective forest certification, including assessing local legal and regulatory frameworks and the quality of local forest resource assessments; locating communities and producer organizations that could potentially benefit from participating in a certification scheme to access IKEA supply chains; and identifying barriers to the certification process and issues which have been or are currently hindering it.

The initial study will also probe the potential for scaling up and replicating the initiative elsewhere.

“We are glad to be partnering with IKEA to look at how hurdles to forest certification can be overcome, with the wellbeing of forest communities featuring front-and-centre,” added Mr. Rojas-Briales.
UN health agency warns rainy season now hampering Ebola response in West Africa

3 June - The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) today reported an increase in the intensity and geographic area of Ebola transmission in Guinea and Sierra Leone, warned that the onset of the rainy season “from now onwards” will make field operations more difficult and noted that community engagement remains a challenge in both countries.

Meanwhile, Peter Graaff, the Acting Special Representative and head of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), told the UN News Service that the rainy season “creates problems because it will bring other diseases like malaria that often shows similar symptoms to Ebola.”

Mr. Graaff said the rainy season “makes things more complicated because for the time being, people showing those symptoms have to be dealt with as if they are potentially Ebola patients, therefore have to be tested.”

As a consequence, he warned that the number of people to be tested for Ebola will go up “quite dramatically” over the next few weeks.

The latest update on Ebola noted that since 10 May, when a 10-month low of nine cases of Ebola were reported, both the intensity and geographical area of transmission have increased.

In the week ending 31 May, 25 cases were reported from four prefectures of Guinea and three districts of Sierra Leone, and several cases in both countries arose from unknown sources of infection in areas that have not reported confirmed cases for several weeks, indicating that chains of transmission continue to go undetected, according to WHO.

“Rigorous contact tracing, active case finding, and infection prevention and control must be maintained at current intensive levels in order to uncover and break every chain of transmission,” it said. “However, the onset of the rainy season will make field operations more difficult from now onwards.”

WHO also reported that response efforts have been complicated by active and passive resistance from communities in Guinea and also Sierra Leone.

“Community engagement has continued to be challenging in several chiefdoms in Kambia, with UNICEF reporting a large number of incidents of resistance to response measures in the district,” according to the update.

And “community engagement has proved challenging in all 4 affected prefectures of Guinea, with several reported incidents of violence directed at field staff during the past week,” it said.

Given the proximity to Guinea-Bissau of the recent cluster of cases in the north-west Guinean prefecture of Boke, two response teams from Guinea-Bissau have been deployed to the border with Guinea to assess several points of entry and sensitize the communities.

As of 31 May, there have been 27,181 Ebola cases, mostly in West Africa, with 11,162 deaths.
UN experts urge Philippines to tackle ‘chronic’ prison overcrowding

3 June - The United Nations torture prevention body is urging the Philippines to deal urgently with prison overcrowding and improve independent monitoring of places of detention as part of efforts to protect people deprived of their liberty against torture and cruel treatment.

The call came at the end of the first visit to the Philippines by the Sub-Committee on the Prevention of Torture (SPT), when the six member delegation presented its confidential preliminary observations to the Filipino authorities.

“We hope, and expect, that the Government of the Philippines will use our report to improve the conditions of people deprived of their liberty, in particular by dealing with the chronic problem of overcrowding in places of detention. We encourage the Government to find solutions to overcrowding as a priority,” Suzanne Jabbour, who headed the SPT delegation, said in a statement.

The SPT also highlighted the importance of the Philippines enacting a law to establish an effective national independent monitoring body, known as a National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) as soon as possible this year.

“We believe that an effective, independent and well-resourced National Preventive Mechanism will be crucial to prevent torture and ill-treatment and to improve conditions of detention through a system of regular visits,” said Ms. Jabbour.

She also noted that the Philippines, to meet its treaty obligations, should have set up such an NPM by April 2013 and encouraged the Government to move swiftly to establish such a body this year.

Among the places the experts visited during their 10 days in the Philippines were police stations, pre-trial facilities, prisons, a juvenile rehabilitation centre, correctional institute for women and a psychiatric hospital.

Members of the delegation carried out private and confidential interviews with law enforcement officials, medical staff and persons deprived of their liberty. The SPT delegation met the relevant authorities, including the Senate, the House of Representatives, members of government departments, and civil society representatives.

Following the visit, the SPT will submit a report to the Government, containing its observations and recommendations on prevention of torture and ill-treatment of persons. As with all other States, the SPT is encouraging the Philippines to make this report public.

The SPT delegation was composed of Suzanne Jabbour, Arman Danielyan, Marija Definis-Gojanovic, Lorevan González Pinto, Milos Jankovic, and Aneta Stanchevska.
UN rights office calls on Myanmar to release jailed columnist and guarantee free expression

3 June - Appalled at the two-year prison sentence handed down to U Htin Lin Oo on charges of insulting religion, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) today urged the Myanmar authorities to release the columnist and guarantee freedom of expression and opinion in the country.

“We urge the authorities to release U Htin Lin Oo unconditionally and to take all necessary measures to ensure that those who conduct peaceful advocacy, legitimately exercising their rights to freedom of expression and opinion, do not face reprisals,” said OHCHR spokesperson, Ravina Shamdasani, during a press briefing in Geneva.

According to the media, U Htin Lin Oo, a former official at the National League for Democracy party, was sentenced to two years of jail and hard labour on Tuesday for a speech meant to discourage Buddhist extremism.

“U Htin Lin Oo courageously spoke out against the use of Buddhism as a tool for extremism. His treatment and conviction are in stark contrast to the treatment of those in Myanmar who are clearly inciting violence against minority communities, particularly the Rohingya,” Ms. Shamdasani added.

“Rather than prosecuting individuals, who brazenly call for the Rohingya to be killed, for hate speech and incitement to violence, the authorities have jailed a peaceful advocate who dared to question the misuse and manipulation of religion for extremist ends,” the Spokesperson stated.

High Commissioner Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein has previously raised U Htin Lin Oo’s case, warning Myanmar against creating “a new generation of political prisoners” by jailing people who seek to enjoy the democratic freedoms they were promised in the reforms the country has undergone over the past two years.

Calling on the Government of Myanmar to send a “clear message” against hate speech and incitement to violence, OHCHR said that any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence in this country should be prohibited by law.