In the headlines:

- Libya crisis ‘festering,’ UN envoy warns, urging decisive action to build national unity
- Investing in disaster resilience vital to achieving sustainable development – senior UN official
- Cooperation vital to combating wildlife crime, says UN Assembly President
- ‘Sustainability starts in Sendai,’ says Ban as new UN report urges funding boost for risk reduction
- UN health agency notes possible threat of polio spread in conflict-affected countries
- UN health agency points to ‘solid evidence’ backing its call to reduce sugar intake
- South Sudan: UN chief urges all sides to ‘show leadership’ in quest for peace
- Eradicating sexual violence in Colombia requires investment in communities – UN envoy
- Lebanon: UN envoy meets with Minister to discuss country’s security
- UN envoy meets President of Yemen amid progress on route to negotiations
- Move to repeal state law in Australia curbing peaceful assembly welcomed by UN expert
- UN special envoy joins demands for release of child soldiers by all parties in South Sudan

More stories inside

Libya crisis ‘festering,’ UN envoy warns, urging decisive action to build national unity

4 March - The overall situation in Libya is “deteriorating rapidly” amid a growing terrorist threat and continuing violence, the United Nations envoy to the country warned the Security Council today, as he urged national stakeholders to move firmly in defining the country’s future.

“Libya can no longer afford to allow the political crisis and armed conflict that has gripped the country for much of the past year to fester,” Bernardino León, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) said in a briefing to the Council earlier this morning.

“Unless Libya’s leaders act quickly and decisively, the risk to their country’s national unity and territorial integrity are real and imminent,” he added.

Mr. León’s remarks follow a series of recent political and security developments, particularly the deadly terrorist bombings in the city of Al-Qubbah and the decision of the House of Representatives in Libya to resume its participation in the political dialogue. The latest wave of violence has further rattled the war-weary nation, in conflict since the beginning of its civil war in 2011, which resulted in the ouster of late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

The attack in Al-Qubbah killed at least 45 people and injured scores of others when one bomber detonated his vehicle near a gas station on 20 February. The initial bombing was immediately followed by two car explosions near the home of Libya’s Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Government’s security headquarters.
Speaking to the 15-member Council by video link from Rome, Mr. León described the Al-Qubbah bombings as a “blatant attempt” to derail the ongoing dialogue aimed at bringing Libyan stakeholders together to build a government of national unity and forge consensus on a peaceful solution for the country.

“The sense of fear and concern in Libya regarding the threat of terrorists is very palpable,” he continued. “Libyan stakeholders have expressed grave concern about the danger that terrorism poses to Libya’s security and stability and of the very limited capacities of the Libyan state to effectively confront this challenge.”

The envoy affirmed that it remained “crucial” for the international community and the UN to address Libya’s terrorism threat. Nevertheless, he added, the country’s political leadership must take “all necessary measures” to prevent further attacks and ensure that all forces operating under its command complied with the political commitment to dialogue.

Against that backdrop, a new round of United Nations-facilitated talks aimed at resolving Libya’s political crisis will kick-off later this week as stakeholders from the North African country prepare to gather in Morocco.

UNSMIL has noted that the parties have agreed to the UN proposal for the upcoming round of talks and are prepared to focus on addressing the formation of a government of national unity, including the discussion about the future prime minister and deputy prime ministers.

“As difficult as the past few years may have been for their country, the Libyan people have not given up on their hopes and aspirations for a modern Libyan democratic state based on the rule of law and respect for human rights,” Mr. León concluded.

**Investing in disaster resilience vital to achieving sustainable development – senior UN official**

4 March - Reducing poverty, improving health and education for all, achieving of sustainable and equitable economic growth and protecting the health of our planet now depend on the management of disaster risks in the day-to-day decisions of governments, companies, investors, civil society organizations, households and individuals, according to a new United Nations report out today.

“The report is a wake-up call for countries to increase their commitment to invest in smart solutions to strengthen resilience to disasters,” according to UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative on Disaster Risk Reduction, Margareta Wahlström whose Office prepared the 2015 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction.

Stressing that strengthened disaster risk reduction is essential to make development sustainable, the report, launched today by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at UN Headquarters, comes 10 days before of the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, where some 8,000 delegates will be gathering from 14-18 March to adopt a framework to success the landmark Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), Ms. Wahlström told a press conference.

Born in 2005 out of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction, the Hyogo Framework is a 10-year plan, the first to explain, describe and detail the work that is required to reduce disaster losses.

The Sendai conference will be the first landmark meeting of a particularly crucial UN year as the Organization is set to lead the global development and climate agenda at a number of major international events: an international meeting in Paris in December on the adoption of a universal text on climate change; the UN special summit in September for the adoption of a global sustainability agenda; and the financing for development conference in July in Addis Ababa, to renew commitment to global development financing.

Ms. Wahlström told reporters the new framework to be agreed in Sendai would address technological categories such as nuclear hazards linked to natural disasters, citing the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster that occurred in wake of the
earthquake-induced tsunami in northern Japan.

She also said the new framework would include health and health hazards driven by global epidemics and pandemics in recent years such as SARS [Severe acute respiratory syndrome] and the current Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

Both Ms. Wahlström and the report’s author, Andrew Maskrey, spoke of the importance of investment with risk and resilience at the core. “We need to look at how we can get risk management fully hardwired into the DNA of development,” he said.

Mr. Maskrey said the world risks some $300 billion from disaster losses, which he said translates into $70 per working age person on this planet, which the report said “two months’ income for people living below the poverty line: an existential risk for people already struggling for survival on a daily basis.

“If we do not address risk reduction, future losses from disaster will increase and this will impact countries’ capacity to invest money in other areas such as health and education, explained Ms. Wahlström. “If we do not take the necessary measures now, it will be difficult to achieve development, let alone sustainable development.”

In response to a question from a reporter on climate change, Mr. Maskrey cited that in the Caribbean, for example, the average annual losses associated with tropical cyclone winds alone are projected to increase by as much as $1.4 billion by 2050.

And the report said that by 2050, it is estimated that 40 per cent of the global population will be living in river basins that experience severe water stress, particularly in Africa and Asia.

“You have to plan what is going to happen in the future,” Mr. Maskrey told reporters.

According to the report, an annual global investment of $6 billion in disaster risk management strategies would generate total benefits in terms of risk reduction of $360 billion. This is equivalent to a 20 per cent reduction of new and additional annual economic losses.

**Cooperation vital to combating wildlife crime, says UN Assembly President**

4 March - The President of the United Nations General Assembly called today for a coordinated international response to the trafficking of wildlife that took aim at the both the supply and demand side of poaching and the illegal trade in animals.

“We need to strengthen our commitment and enhance cooperation among Member States, the United Nations system, NGOs and civil society to curb wildlife crime,” said Sam Kutesa (Uganda) as the Assembly commemorated World Wildlife Day. “We should do more to promote adequate national legislation, improve intelligence sharing and border controls, strengthen global, regional and national enforcement, improve capabilities to combat poaching and illegal trafficking, among other initiatives.”

Mr. Kutesa underlined the impact that illegal trafficking, pointing to its effects on the resource base of local communities and entire nations, undermining human welfare, legitimate business and government institutions.

“It also compromises efforts towards sustainable development and poverty eradication,” he said. “At the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012, Heads of State and Government recognized the economic, social and environmental impacts of illicit trafficking in wildlife.”

He described “worrisome” statistics on wildlife trafficking, with the 20,000 elephants and over 10,000 pangolins illegally slaughtered and trafficked in 2013 alone contributing to an illegal trade worth billions of dollars. That was attracting
organised criminal networks, as well as rebel and terrorist groups.

“There is growing recognition worldwide that trafficking in wildlife poses a serious security risk,” he said.

Those comments were echoed by Jan Eliasson, the UN Deputy Secretary-General, who also made remarks at the event to commemorate the Day.

“There is growing evidence of the increased involvement in this illicit and insidious trade by organized crime networks and non-State armed groups,” he said. “Illegal wildlife trade has become a mushrooming transnational form of crime, following in the footsteps of other pernicious examples, such as trafficking in human beings, in drugs and in counterfeit items.”

Mr. Eliasson said the issue was a grave economic, social and security challenge and concern, and pointed to the threat it posed to all three pillars of the UN – peace and security, sustainable development and human rights.

He called for “swift action” to combat the illegal trade and outlined the work of the UN system to tackle it, including coordinated efforts by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to promote alternative livelihoods, raise awareness, strengthen the rule of law and improve the data and evidence base for interventions.

Alongside the necessary enforcement efforts, he stressed the need to address the demand for illegally traded wildlife.

“Distorted demand is a key driver of the poaching of elephants and rhinos,” he said, calling for comprehensive and effective public information campaigns to raise awareness and knowledge. “Wildlife products are widely used as medicines, food, building materials, furniture, cosmetics, clothing and accessories. Getting serious about wildlife crime means enrolling the support of all sectors of society involved in the production and consumption of wildlife products.”

Both Mr. Eliasson and Mr. Kutesa stressed that some progress was being made in combating illegal wildlife trade and that more would need to be done. Mr. Kutesa stressed that local communities must be encouraged to take a vested interest in protecting wildlife resources.

“Around the world, communities are dependent on wildlife; whether for sustenance, economic activities, or cultural identity,” he said, stressing the need to raise public awareness about the disastrous implications of wildlife crime and of efforts to promote wildlife preservation.

“Let us use this commemorative meeting to reflect on how we can effectively combat illegal wildlife trade in all its forms,” he said.

‘Sustainability starts in Sendai,’ says Ban as new UN report urges funding boost for risk reduction

4 March - A new United Nations report urging greater investment in risk prevention has underscored disaster risk reduction as a building block for future sustainable development, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon affirmed today as the Organization prepares for a pivotal upcoming global conference on the issue.

Delivering remarks at the launch of the 2015 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction, the Secretary-General told those gathered that as the world was experiencing “more frequent and more intense natural disasters,” overall momentum was growing for a sustainable and disaster-resilient future.

“The report shows how investing in risk prevention pays high dividends while saving lives. It charts a path toward a more disaster-resilient future,” explained Mr. Ban at a headquarters press briefing. “We have to act. Disaster risk reduction saves lives and cuts losses.”
The report’s release comes just two weeks ahead of the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, scheduled to take place from 14-18 March in Sendai, Japan when Member States and UN officials will meet to broker the follow-up to the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) and chart a global course on disaster risk reduction for the coming decade.

The Sendai conference is also the first landmark meeting of a particularly crucial UN year as the Organization is set to lead the global development and climate agenda at a number of major international events: an international meeting in Paris in December on the adoption of a universal text on climate change; the UN special summit in September for the adoption of a global sustainability agenda; and the financing for development conference in July in Addis Ababa, to renew commitment to global development financing.

Mr. Ban acknowledged that the course towards global sustainability will inevitably start in Sendai for three major reasons – disaster risk reduction inherently involves forward planning; investments in this area advance both sustainable development and climate action; and the vision for development and climate action is a universal one.

“We are working for a life of dignity for all,” he continued. “That means helping the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries to manage disaster risk. When we do that, we honour our pledge to leave no one behind.”

Along with the devastating loss of life, disasters also rack up extraordinarily high costs for affected nations, reaching up to a global total of $300 billion in annual losses, further burdening local economies.

In the Caribbean, for instance, the average annual losses associated with tropical hurricane winds alone are projected to increase by as much as $1.4 billion by 2050. For small island developing States, expected future disaster losses are not just disproportionately high but also represent an existential threat amid rising sea waters and eroding coastlines.

According to UN estimates, these countries are expected to lose 20 times more of their capital stock each year compared to their European and Central Asian counterparts. Meanwhile, droughts caused by climate change are affecting maize production in countries such as Kenya, Malawi and Niger and negatively impacting the countries’ gross domestic product which largely depends on agriculture.

Mr. Ban observed that low-income countries were almost always hit the hardest by disasters and risked losing five times as much of their building stock as richer countries. In addition, he said, the “staggering price tag” affected the ability of governments to provide basic services to their already vulnerable citizens.

“It diverts funds from critical infrastructure,” he observed. “Businesses suffer. There are fewer jobs and less income.”

“If we do not address risk reduction, future losses from disaster will increase and this will impact countries’ capacity to invest money in other areas such as health and education,” the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative on Disaster Risk Reduction, Margareta Wahlström, added in a press release. “If we do not take the necessary measures now, it will be difficult to achieve development, let alone sustainable development.” Ms. Wahlström, who’s office (UNISDR) will lead the Sendai Conference, is briefing the press in New York later today.

According to the report, an annual global investment of $6 billion in disaster risk management strategies would generate total benefits in terms of risk reduction of $360 billion, equivalent to a 20 per cent reduction of new and additional annual economic losses.

“The report is a wake-up call for countries to increase their commitment to invest in smart solutions to strengthen resilience to disasters,” said Ms. Wahlström, adding that Member States would have the opportunity to take action in Sendai.

In his remarks at the report’s launch, Mr. Ban agreed.

“Sustainability starts in Sendai,” he said. “And it continues in Addis, New York and Paris. This is our journey to reach a life of dignity for all.”
UN health agency notes possible threat of polio spread in conflict-affected countries

4 March - An emergency meeting convened by the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) noted today that Pakistan had become the 10th country to be ‘infected’ by polio and that “the possibility of international spread still remains a global threat worsened by the expansion of conflict-affected areas, particularly in the Middle East and Central Africa.”

“Furthermore, countries affected by conflict inevitably experience a decline in health service delivery that leads to deterioration of immunization systems in a number of such at-risk countries,” said the statement on a meeting of the agency’s Emergency Committee regarding the international spread of wild poliovirus, dated 27 February and released by WHO today.

The meeting “noted that the international spread of wild poliovirus has continued with one new exportation from Pakistan into neighbouring Afghanistan documented after 13 November 2014.”

“Although there is seasonal decline in the number of reported cases in Pakistan, transmission is ongoing in each of the four provinces and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas,” the statement said, but “assessed the risk of international spread from Pakistan to be sustained.”

Referring to Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, Ethiopia, Iraq, and Israel, the statement said: “Although the risk of new international spread from the nine other infected Member States appears to have declined, the possibility of international spread still remains a global threat worsened by the expansion of conflict-affected areas, particularly in the Middle East and Central Africa.”

The Committee assessed that the spread of polio still constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and made a series of recommendations to prevent further spread and to eradicate the highly infectious viral disease, which mainly affects young children.

According to WHO, the virus is transmitted by person-to-person spread mainly through the faecal-oral route or, less frequently, by a common vehicle (e.g. contaminated water or food) and multiplies in the intestine, from where it can invade the nervous system and can cause paralysis.

Initial symptoms of polio include fever, fatigue, headache, vomiting, stiffness in the neck, and pain in the limbs. In a small proportion of cases, the disease causes paralysis, which is often permanent. There is no cure for polio, it can only be prevented by immunization.
UN health agency points to ‘solid evidence’ backing its call to reduce sugar intake

4 March - New guidelines released by the United Nations health agency today recommended that adults and children worldwide reduce their daily sugar intake to boost health and stave off non-communicable diseases.

The World Health Organization (WHO) says intake of ‘free’ sugars – monosaccharides (such as glucose, fructose) and disaccharides (such as sucrose or table sugar) – should make up less than 10 per cent of daily energy intake, while a reduction below five per cent of energy intake per day would provide additional benefits.

“We have solid evidence that keeping intake of free sugars to less than 10 per cent of total energy intake reduces the risk of overweight, obesity and tooth decay,” said, Dr. Francesco Branca, Director of WHO’s Department of Nutrition for Health and Development. “Making policy changes to support this will be key if countries are to live up to their commitments to reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases.”

The WHO’s recommendations are based on evidence showing that adults who consume less sugar have lower body weight and that increasing the amount of sugars in the diet is associated with a weight increase. It also shows that children with the highest intakes of sugar-sweetened drinks are more likely to be overweight or obese than children with a low intake of sugar-sweetened drinks.

Around the world sugar intake varies, with adult consumption in Europe ranging from about 7-8 per cent of total energy countries like Hungary and Norway, to 16-17 per cent in countries like Spain and the United Kingdom.

Children’s intake is much higher, from 12 per cent in countries like Denmark, Slovenia and Sweden, to nearly 25 per cent in Portugal, while setting can also result in variations. Intake in rural South African communities was 7.5 per cent, while for the urban population the figure was 10.3 per cent.

The strength and quality of the supporting evidence is such that the WHO says they can be adopted as policy in most situations and they can be used to develop measures to decrease free sugars intake, through public health interventions like food and nutrition labelling, consumer education, regulation of marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages that are high in free sugars, and fiscal policies targeting foods and beverages that are high in free sugars.

The agency first made the recommendation to reduce free sugars intake to less than 10 per cent of total daily energy intake in 1989, with a joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation in 2002 further elaborating the call. The updated guidelines recommend reduction of free sugars below the five per cent mark if possible.

The new guidelines do not apply to the sugars in fresh fruits and vegetables, and sugars naturally present in milk, because there is no reported evidence of adverse effects of consuming these sugars, but rather to those added to foods and drinks by the manufacturer, cook or consumer, and sugars naturally present in honey, syrups, fruit juices and fruit juice concentrates.

Many of those are “hidden” in processed foods that are not usually seen as sweets. For example, 1 tablespoon of ketchup contains around 4 grams (around 1 teaspoon) of free sugars. A single can of sugar-sweetened soda contains up to 40 grams (around 10 teaspoons) of free sugars.

Updating the guideline on free sugars intake is part of WHO’s ongoing efforts to update existing dietary goals to prevent non-communicable diseases. The sugars guidelines should be used in conjunction with other nutrient guidelines and dietary goals, in particular those related to fats and fatty acids, including saturated fat and trans-fat.
South Sudan: UN chief urges all sides to ‘show leadership’ in quest for peace

4 March - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has urged South Sudanese political rivals President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar to resolve their differences and move towards a lasting peace ahead of an impending mediation deadline.

In a statement issued late yesterday evening, the UN spokesperson's office said the Secretary-General strongly urged Mr. Kiir and Mr. Machar “to show leadership” and put the “well-being of South Sudanese ahead of all other interests.” Moreover, he added, the two leaders should work to make “the necessary compromises to conclude a power sharing agreement that paves the way for a comprehensive settlement of the conflict in South Sudan.”

Mr. Ban's appeal comes just days before a 5 March deadline set by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) for the conclusion of negotiations between the two parties.

The UN spokesperson also reported that the Secretary-General took note of the unanimous Security Council resolution adopted yesterday morning establishing a sanctions regime on South Sudanese officials blocking peace efforts in the country.

The move is the UN body's latest step towards ending a conflict that has killed thousands in the world's newest country.

In particular, the resolution voiced deep concern at the “failures” of both parties to engage in a palpable peace process which would lead to political resolve and bring an end to the violence. The text underscored the Council's “willingness to impose targeted sanctions in order to support the search for peace.”

While no listings were made, the resolution sets out a series of listing criteria. The sanctions are expected to apply to those responsible for, complicit in, or engaged directly or indirectly in actions or policies threatening the peace, security or stability of South Sudan.

In the statement, which commended and supported the regional efforts facilitating the negotiation process, the UN spokesperson also said the Secretary-General reminded both parties that “the best way” to avoid the enactment of actual sanctions by the Security Council, would be to “strictly adhere” to the Cessation of Hostilities agreement of 23 January 2014, fully comply with International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, extend their full cooperation to UN and humanitarian personnel in the discharge of their mandates and duties, and conclude a Comprehensive Peace Agreement that places South Sudan “back on the path to stability and prosperity.”
Eradicating sexual violence in Colombia requires investment in communities – UN envoy

4 March - In eradicating sexual violence related to Colombia’s internal armed conflict, the main challenge now is translating resolve into tangible solutions in communities where the crime continues to occur, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Sexual Violence said at the conclusion of her trip to the Latin American country.

“There is a direct correlation between poverty, access to justice, and sexual violence,” Zainab Hawa Bangura said in a statement issued yesterday, emphasizing the need to protect poor and uneducated women and girls who are especially vulnerable.

She summarized initiatives undertaken to address conflict-related sexual violence in Colombia including the adoption of what she called “groundbreaking legislation” in guaranteeing access to justice for victims of sexual violence. In meetings with the Minister of Defense and Chief of the Army Staff, Ms. Bangura pledged continued UN collaboration with the army and police to ensure implementation of policies to eradicate sexual violence.

During the four-day visit, she also met with communities and said that all the women and girls she spoke with had one common and resounding message: “They want sexual violence crimes that have been perpetrated against them to be acknowledged by all the parties involved in the conflict, and they want perpetrators to ensure that sexual violence will not be repeated.”

On her visit to Chocó, an area known for its Afro-Colombian population, she was distressed to hear about the clear links between armed groups, illegal mining, narco-trafficking and sexual violence. The sexual violence that is happening in Chocó must be understood in the context of the conflict and addressed as such.

This will require crucial institutional reforms. She said the Havana peace process has put in place an important mechanism to ensure a gender perspective and urged both the Government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC) to ensure that the ongoing peace process and the eventual peace agreement explicitly address gender issues and sexual violence in the conflict. This must be a central priority of any poverty reduction and development strategy going forward, Ms. Bangura added.

“The women and girls who have experienced sexual violence also told me that to be able to pick up the pieces of their lives and reclaim their dignity, they must have opportunities for entrepreneurship and livelihood support for themselves and their families.”

She said she found it disturbing to hear about children between ages 12 and 15 years being forced by members of non-state armed groups and criminal gangs to serve as sex workers in mining areas. “These children were often referred to as ‘packages’ to service mining operations, and that they were replaced by ‘new packages’ when they become ‘too used’ or ‘too sick.’”

Ms. Bangura also expressed extreme concern about the “silent issue” of children born out of rape and urged that more be done to find out their unique challenges including psychosocial needs and support they require. After decades of conflict in Colombia there are several generations of such children and adults.

While the will and capacity exists to prosecute sexual violence crimes, the barriers for survivors to report and access justice are significant. It must be a priority to create the necessary protective environment for survivors to come forward, and the stigma of sexual violence must be redirected from the victims to the perpetrators.
Equally important is addressing the genuine fears communities harbor about the reintegration of fighters: “There is one question I asked the communities in Chocó: Are they ready to accept the young people of the armed groups back into their communities; and are those young people ready to come back to their communities? The answer to both questions was ‘NO!’”

On the flip side, the demobilized members of armed groups that Ms. Bangura met with have genuine concerns about being reintegrated into situations of poverty and destitution. Reconciliation cannot begin after the peace agreement is reached. It must be an immediate priority and requires investment at community level. Ultimately that is what will ensure durable peace.

Ms. Bangura also warned against “a deep culture of silence and denial” which still exists, emphasizing that breaking the silence on sexual violence in Colombia must be a conscious effort, and represents a critical step toward eradicating this scourge.

**Lebanon: UN envoy meets with Minister to discuss country’s security**

4 March - The United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Sigrid Kaag, met today with the country’s Defence Minister, Samir Moqbel, in Beirut to discuss the security situation, with a particular focus on Lebanon’s eastern border.

Ms. Kaag praised efforts by the Lebanese Armed Forces and security forces to safeguard Lebanon’s security and stability from the threat posed by extremist militants, according to a briefing held by the Secretary-General’s spokesperson this afternoon.

She said the international community would continue to stand firmly behind the Lebanese Armed Forces and security forces.

The Special Coordinator also expressed her appreciation for the countries which already provide support and encouraged further assistance.

When touring that region last month, Ms. Kaag called on all parties to exercise maximum calm and restraint, refrain from any action that could undermine the stability of the area and act responsibility to prevent any escalation in line with their commitment to resolution 1701.

Last week, she also visited the country’s north-eastern Bekka Valley- home to some 410,000 Syrian refugees – and met with the region’s officials to discuss the humanitarian challenges of the area.

**UN envoy meets President of Yemen amid progress on route to negotiations**

4 March - The United Nations Special Adviser on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, met with the country’s President, Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, in Aden today, according to an announcement made by the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General.

Mr. Benomar briefed the Security Council yesterday during closed consultations, Stéphane Dujarric told reporters at UN Headquarters today, pointing to a statement released by Mr. Benomar in which he revealed that he told Council members that progress is being made on the status of the UN-brokered negotiations. The Special Adviser also warned that there are extremists within many sides who want for these negotiations to fail.

“Mr. Benomar said that no side has the ability to impose control by force over the entire country,” Mr. Dujarric continued. “Any side that would want to pursue a military solution would be inviting a protracted
conflict in the vein of a Libya- or Syria-like scenario.”

The statement released by Mr. Benomar also emphasized that peaceful dialogue is the only way forward, adding that the UN is engaged with all parties in a manner that neither gives legitimacy to those who used force to disrupt the political process, nor diminishes the legitimacy of the President and government, nor harms the impartiality of the United Nations.

**Move to repeal state law in Australia curbing peaceful assembly welcomed by UN expert**

4 March - A United Nations rights expert praised today the move made in Australia to repeal restrictive laws that regulate protests, and encouraged the reversal of any legislation that curtails the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly.

Maina Kiai, who was appointed Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in May 2011, said he welcomed the government of Victoria’s intention to revoke the state’s 2014 controversial ‘move-on laws,’ which grant police extensive powers to move protesters who might be obstructing buildings or traffic or ‘causing people to have a reasonable fear of violence.’

“Public space must be made available for individuals and groups in order for them to exercise their fundamental freedoms,” said Mr. Kiai. “Authorities not only have the duty to protect public safety and order as well as the rights and freedoms of others, but also the obligation to facilitate the holding of peaceful assemblies.”

The 2014 ‘move-on laws,’ which expanded Victoria’s original Summary Offenses Act, allows authorities to impose harsh penalties on offenders, including arrest, fines, and exclusion orders banning individuals from entering specified public spaces for up to a year.

“Enforcing the law includes the implementation of human rights law, without which there would be no security, no justice,” said Mr. Kiai, who has previously served as Africa Director of Amnesty International among other prominent positions.

A debate on the bill to revoke the laws is due to take place in Victoria’s state Parliament on 5 March and the Special Rapporteur called on the authorities to ensure they laws respect and protect the right of peaceful assembly. He said he would follow the debate closely and looked forward to an outcome that complies with international human rights law.

**UN special envoy joins demands for release of child soldiers by all parties in South Sudan**

4 March - The United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, today demanded the release of hundreds of child soldiers forcibly recruited by militias and groups aligned with the warring factions or the South Sudan Government, saying “there needs to be accountability for child recruiters and those who commit grave violations against children.”

“The recruitment and use of child soldiers continues to be a major challenge in South Sudan, despite commitments by the Government and the opposition led by former Vice-President Riek Machar, to protect children from the impact of conflict,” said Ms. Zerrougui in a statement issued later yesterday by her Office.

Ms. Zerrougui was quoted as saying that “No children have been released from the SPLA or Riek Machar’s opposition.”

“Instead, we are receiving reports of hundreds of new recruitments of child soldiers by militias and groups aligned with the Government or the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) in Opposition,” according to the Special Representative.
Scores of children, some as young as 13, were seized by armed men in South Sudan last month and remain in captivity, despite intensive efforts to locate them.

The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has repeatedly demanded their immediate release, with its representative in Sudan saying the agency fears the children are being sent to the frontlines.

“The children abducted are reportedly receiving training and could be on their way to the frontlines,” echoed Ms. Zerrougui, adding: “I am very concerned and I call on the Government of South Sudan to take action to prevent this from happening.”

The Special Representative’s Office reports that South Sudan is one of seven countries involved in the campaign “Children not Soldiers,” which aims to end the recruitment and use of children in Government armed forces in conflict by 2016.

Led by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and UNICEF, the campaign mobilizes global support and financial resources so the seven government armed forces listed in the UN Secretary General’s annual report on ‘Children and Armed Conflict’ become and remain child-free.

As the leaders of the Government and opposition meet once again to negotiate peace, Ms. Zerrougui urges them to act on their commitments to protect children and include, as a priority, the release of all children recruited and used by the parties to the conflict.

A militia led by Johnson Oloni, a commander integrated into the SPLA, is reportedly responsible for the abduction of the children, but the SPLA has stated it has no control over Oloni’s militia.

“There will be no lasting peace if we exclude children, who are the majority of the population. They need to be released, and there needs to be accountability for child recruiters and those who commit grave violations against children,” Ms. Zerrougui said.

‘No evidence death penalty deters any crime,’ senior UN official tells Rights Council

4 March - Despite progress in recent years to universally abolish the death penalty, major challenges persist, the United Nations top human rights official said today at a high-level debate in Geneva, expressing concern that the death penalty, in practice, is “too often applied to the poor and marginalized foot soldiers” rather than the powerful organizers of the drug business.

“We can do better. We need not kill immigrants, minorities, the poor and those with disabilities to show that we are committed to fight crime,” Ivan Šimonović, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, said in his opening remarks to the UN Human Rights Council on the third day and final day of meetings.

The Council kicked off its three-day High-Level Segment on Monday. This is the 47-member body’s 28th session.

At this afternoon’s meeting on regional efforts aiming at the abolition of the death penalty and challenges faced, Mr. Šimonović underscored the need for a unified approach to the global abolition of what he called an “inhuman and outdated punishment.”

“Several countries continue to use the death penalty for drug-related crimes, with the argument that this harsh punishment is needed for deterrence purposes. However, there is no evidence that the death penalty deters any crime,” he emphasized in his remarks.

The Americas were the first to abolish the death penalty in Venezuela in 1867. Following that, many other countries in the region abolished the death penalty leading to the 1990 adoption of the Protocol to the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights.
In Africa, many States have taken an abolitionist stance. Meanwhile, in the past sixteen years, no death sentence has been carried out in any of the 47 member States of the European Union. And in the Middle East and Asia, national human rights institutions and civil society are moving the abolitionist movement forward.

As it stands now, some 160 countries have either fully abolished the death penalty or do not practise it. In the last six months, the death penalty was abolished in Chad, Fiji, and Madagascar.

However, despite these strides some countries are seeing a move towards the preservation and even reintroduction of the death penalty, said Mr. Šimonović, pointing out that in 2013, there were more executing States and more victims of execution than in 2012.

“Some States justify the death penalty on the grounds that it is demanded by a large majority of the population, or that without it, it is impossible to fight drug trafficking or terrorism,” he added.

While the need to tackle drug-related offences has to be acknowledged, the focus of crime prevention should be on strengthening the justice systems and making it more effective. And while public opinion cannot be ignored, a country concerned with human rights should not merely accept opinion polls as a reason for retaining the death penalty.

“Indeed, there is clear evidence of mistakes, abuses and discrimination. It has been empirically proved that the more the population is informed on facts, the less it supports the death penalty.”

In recognition of the crucial role that regional organisations play in promoting the abolition of the death penalty, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) plans to hold several regional seminars on moving away from the death penalty this year.

“We hope to gather State officials, lawmakers, practitioners and civil society to discuss at the regional level the challenges faced in moved away from the death penalty and ways to overcome them,” Mr. Šimonović said.