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Syria: Council members ‘outraged’ by intensifying attacks against civilians

5 June - Amid surging violence in Aleppo, the United Nations Security Council today expressed “outrage” at all attacks against civilians in Syria, as well as indiscriminate attacks.

“The members of the Security Council expressed their deep concern at the continued high level of violence in Syria and condemned all violence directed against civilians and civilian infrastructure, including medical facilities,” according to a press statement issued this afternoon.

John Ging, Operations Director of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), briefed Council members today about the recent upsurge of violence in Aleppo and other areas in the country, where “shelling and aerial bombardment, such as the use of barrel bombs, have reportedly been used extensively in recent days, leaving many dead and injured civilians, including children.”

On May 31, at least 70 civilians were killed in Syria’s northern Aleppo province by barrel bombs dropped from government helicopters.

The Council’s statement recalled that all obligations under international humanitarian law must be respected in all circumstances by all parties, in particular “the obligation to distinguish between civilian populations and combatants, and the prohibition against indiscriminate attacks, and attacks against civilians and civilian objects.”
While reaffirming that the Syrian authorities have the primary responsibility to protect the population of the country, the Council reiterated that all parties must take all “feasible steps” to ensure the protection of civilians.

Members condemned increased terrorist attacks carried out by ISIL, Al-Nusra Front and other entities associated with Al-Qaeda, and called on all parties to commit to “putting an end” to these acts.

In this context, they reminded that Member States must ensure that any measures taken to combat terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law.

“The only sustainable solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process, with a view to full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012,” Security Council members reiterated in their statement.

Volunteers can contribute to the new global development agenda’s success – UN report

5 June - Volunteers are playing a vital role in making governments worldwide more accountable and responsive to their citizens, but their potential is seriously under-valued, a new report from the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme finds.

“By creating environments for people to volunteer their time, it is possible to use their skills and knowledge for the common good in the sphere of governance,” Richard Dictus, UNV Executive Coordinator said today on the release of the report.

“Change will occur with greater civic engagement broadening the number of people who have voice, who can participate and who can hold governance actors to account.”

The State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2015 is the first global survey of the contribution of volunteers to better governance, a prerequisite for the success of the new sustainable development goals to be agreed at the United Nations in September. According to the study, the new agenda will only succeed if it looks into ways to engage communities more effectively, including through the power of volunteers and volunteering.

More than 1 billion people volunteer globally, the majority of them working in their own countries. Drawing on evidence from countries as diverse as Brazil, Kenya, Lebanon and Bangladesh, the UN report, entitled Transforming Governance, shows how ordinary people are volunteering their time, energies and skills to improve the way they are governed at local, national and global levels.

“Volunteers have a critical role to play in representing the voices of those who are often excluded from development decisions, including women and other groups who may be marginalized,” said UN Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator Helen Clark at the launch of the report in New York today.

The report finds that countries such as Peru, Mozambique and Norway that provide a supportive “enabling environment” for volunteers tend to reap the rewards of their inclusion in decision-making.

But too many others are failing to acknowledge – and leverage – the immense potential of volunteers. Therefore, the study calls on all governments to “go beyond the rhetoric of participation” and take concrete steps to help the world’s volunteers actively contribute to the decisions that affect people’s lives.

Engaging more volunteers in the process of crafting policies and putting them into action would help would be a first step, notes the report. Integrating them into national development frameworks and sustainable development goals (SDGs) strategies would be another, as well as engaging more volunteer women and marginalized groups in local and national decision-making, it concludes.
UN refugee agency seeks $13 million to beef up protections for boat arrivals in Southeast Asia

5 June - The United Nations refugee agency today announced that it is seeking $13 million to help with the needs of new boat arrivals to countries in Southeast Asia, where thousands of refugees and migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh have been risking their lives by crossing the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.

“With the monsoon season imminent, thousands of people may still be at sea,” Melissa Fleming, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told journalists at the UN briefing in Geneva Switzerland.

Ms. Fleming said the appeal, which was launched Thursday, is aimed at beefing up UNHCR’s work related to protection for the nearly 4,800 people from Myanmar and Bangladesh who have been disembarked from smugglers’ boats in the last month.

“In the latest incident, earlier this week, more than 700 people were landed in Myanmar’s Rakhine state,” she said. “They included some 120 women and children who said they had been at sea for at least three months.”

UNHCR’s appeal follows from last week’s regional meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, of countries affected by the humanitarian crisis. It also reflects elements of a 10-point plan of action proposed by UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Ms. Fleming said the funds sought by UNHCR would allow the agency to step up its response in three main areas. “Firstly by helping meet the international protection needs of new boat arrivals, secondly by enhancing information available to people considering the journey, and thirdly by targeting some of the root causes of these movements in source countries,” she said.

More than 1,000 new Rohingya arrivals have been registered in Indonesia by UNHCR, which has distributed relief supplies and are counselling dozens of new arrivals in southern Thailand, and in Malaysia the refugee agency is scaling up to meet the needs of arrivals.

Additional resources are needed to set up mobile teams to quickly identify and help people with specific protection needs. Refugees who cannot return home will need assurance that they can stay in host countries temporarily with access to legal work until conditions are conducive for voluntary return or until other solutions are found. Where possible, UNHCR will support livelihood programmes within national structures to serve the needs of both refugees and host communities.

UNHCR said the appeal envisages training for the region’s search-and-rescue officials on international legal principles and protection, and exploration of predictable disembarkation options. The agency said it will also expand its monitoring and reporting on maritime movements to include information campaigns providing factual information to potential boat people about the risks and mistreatment at the hands of smugglers and traffickers.

Ms. Fleming said to help resolve the three-year-long internal displacement in Rakhine state, UNHCR is seeking to expand assistance to, and monitoring of, displaced families who wish to return home or establish new homes.
As Liberia's school systems recover after Ebola outbreak, UNICEF distributes thousands of learning kits

5 June - The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has begun distributing the first batches of 700,000 teaching and learning kits to thousands of schools across Liberia, where last year’s Ebola outbreak disrupted the education of over one million children. The kits will help ensure the continuity of education and learning for students in Liberia, said UNICEF’s Christophe Boulierac to the press in Geneva today. The 700,000 kits will be distributed to 4,460 schools in all counties and districts of Liberia. As schools reopened last February after a six-month closure due to Ebola, UNICEF provided infection prevention and control kits to get kids back to school and is now providing those materials to assist students and teachers return to school, teach effectively, and learn effectively using basic resources.

The agency has been exclusively responsible for packing 700,000 kits, and working with Liberia’s Ministry of Education to distribute those materials to all of the identified schools across Liberia.

UNICEF plans to distribute the teaching and learning kits using trucks and four-wheel drive vehicles to ensure timely delivery of materials to schools before the height of the rainy season. The distribution process is expected to continue for the following four months.

Over 800,000 children had returned to school since the reopening in February.

At Security Council, senior UN official urges continued political efforts to resolve Ukraine conflict

5 June - The tremendous human cost of the Ukraine conflict must be first addressed through mutual respect of the Minsk ceasefire agreement and the fulfilment of its political, economic, social and humanitarian provisions, the top United Nations political official affirmed today as he briefed the Security Council on the situation in the conflict-torn Eastern European country.

“The full implementation of Minsk is sine qua non for leading eastern Ukraine and the country out of conflict.” UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman told the 15-member Council during his briefing earlier this morning. “The continued non-implementation of various provisions of the agreement entails dangerous limbo.”

Sadly, Mr. Feltman continued, since the signing of the Minsk package in February, 400 more casualties have been lost, pushing the death toll from the fighting to over 6,400 people.

“We are either looking at a return to a deepening, intractable conflict or a momentary upsurge in parts of the conflict,” he added. “We cannot afford either scenario.”

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.

Nevertheless, despite a September 2014 cease-fire agreed in Minsk, the situation in Ukraine has since continuously deteriorated, with serious consequences for the country’s unity, territorial integrity and stability. In February 2015, the parties in Ukraine and the Trilateral Contact Group signed a “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements.”
According to conservative estimates put forward by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the World Health Organization (WHO), the hostilities have resulted in at least 6,417 people killed and 15,962 wounded.

At the same time, Mr. Feltman warned, the country’s humanitarian crisis also remained “dire” with Ukraine now ranking among the top ten countries in terms of internal displacement with over 1.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Over a year ago, the country had none, he added.

The UN’s Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recently reported, in fact, that about 857,000 Ukrainians have sought asylum, residence permits or other forms of legal stay in neighbouring countries – an increase of about 23,000 people in the past two weeks.

Life in the crisis-torn provinces of eastern Ukraine is also precarious from a healthcare standpoint as services are increasingly curtailed due to lack of medicine and medical equipment.

“Of immediate concern is the now complete lack of humanitarian access across the contact line in either direction,” the UN official said. “This is preventing life-saving humanitarian assistance from reaching those most in need.”

Mr. Feltman similarly voiced concern about the current funding shortfall facing the UN’s 2015 Humanitarian Response Plan to assist the victims of the Ukrainian conflict which, he said, when fully funded, would “ensure that the capacity and resources are in place to reach those in desperate need.”

Against that backdrop, the Under-Secretary-General expressed some encouragement about movement on the political-diplomatic front, particularly regarding the “diligent efforts” of the Trilateral Contact Group and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s good offices role which saw the UN chief recently travel to Poland, Ukraine and Russia.

The Secretary-General, he explained, would continue his good offices role and remained “open” to considering how best to further support the political process.

“Although the road ahead would be long and arduous, full implementation of the Minsk agreements is possible if all concerned fulfill their obligations and engage in good faith,” Mr. Feltman concluded. “Neither Ukraine, nor the region nor the international community can afford to have this process fail.”

**FEATURE: How one UN volunteer found her calling**

5 June - Nothing in Piera Zuccherin’s comfortable upbringing foretold her lifelong involvement as a volunteer. But today, she is one of the more than one billion people who volunteer globally.

“In Italy, we’re mostly middle class,” Ms. Zuccherin, 41, told the UN News Centre, as she reminisced about her childhood years growing up in a small northern city near Venice.

“The first opportunity to volunteer came when a college friend mentioned an organisation called Amnesty International, which worked on cases of human rights violations,” she said.

It was the beginning of the 1990s, and Ms. Zuccherin, who had just started law school, decided to attend one of the organisation’s meetings. There, she found her calling.

“It just took realizing what was happening outside of my city and in the world for me to decide I wanted to contribute,” recalled Ms. Zuccherin, who soon got involved as a volunteer for Amnesty International.

More than 20 years and many volunteering experiences later, Ms. Zuccherin is now the head of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in Ecuador, a position she has held since February 2011.

Based in Bonn, Germany, UNV is the UN organization that contributes to peace and development through volunteerism.
worldwide. It is active in around 130 countries every year.

Based in the country’s capital, Quito, Ms. Zuccherin is in charge of promoting and developing volunteerism in the country by seeking out, selecting and monitoring volunteers throughout various initiatives.

An important part of her work is also to advocate for the implementation of a legal framework on volunteering in her host country.

“Ecuador is one of the few Latin American countries, including one of the few countries worldwide, that does not have laws surrounding volunteerism,” said Ms. Zuccherin.

**What it means to be a UN Volunteer**

The decision to serve as a UN Volunteer, at home or abroad, is based on a commitment to the United Nations and to the UN’s contribution to peace, development and human rights in support of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

As a UN Volunteer you have the extraordinary opportunity to create beneficial change and have a positive impact on people’s lives. Even if your UNV assignment is fairly short, it can have a long-term impact and achieve a ripple effect that extends far beyond the immediate beneficiaries of your efforts. Learn more

For all her contact with Government officials, Ms. Zuccherin is never as thrilled as when she manages to convert volunteerism sceptics.

“What I enjoy the most is to inspire others who were not necessarily sold on the idea in the first place to join and start volunteering,” she said with enthusiasm, adding that the act of volunteering should not be restricted to well-to-do people.

“Everybody can be a volunteer; it’s not something that has to do with your income,” she said. “You simply need some time and to be into a specific problem.”

Ms. Zuccherin also noted that people who want to contribute do not necessarily have to do it with the UN, but can get involved with any kind of organization, at the local or national level.

Oftentimes, the simple fact of convincing a few people creates a snowball effect, she explained, recalling an environmental campaign she led in Ecuador with the UNV programme back in 2012 and 2013. The purpose of the initiative was to gather middle-school children within “ecology clubs” and get them to understand the environmental impact of their actions.

“After that, they came back to their own community and neighbourhood and explained to others why volunteering was important for the environment,” Ms. Zuccherin said, before proudly adding that the concept of “ecology clubs” then became a best practice in relation to anti-poverty targets known as the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

While Ms. Zuccherin is now fully acclimated to the UN system and her host country, she had to go through an adjustment period upon taking office in 2011. When she was first contacted by the UNV Programme for the position in Ecuador, she’d been working for eight years as a volunteer for various non-profit organizations in Mozambique.

“I came directly from Africa to Ecuador, without even making a halt in Italy,” she said, highlighting her quick transition between one of the world’s poorest countries and a middle-income economy. “It was weird for me to find myself in a supermarket with various brands for the same type of product,” she commented about her first days in Ecuador.

Coming from the world of NGOs, Ms. Zuccherin also had to get used to UN formalities and various internal processes, though the fact that she was immediately thrown into the arena helped her, in retrospect, adjust to her new job.

“Within the first month of my arrival, I had to organize a world meeting on volunteerism that Flavia Pansieri [the former head of the UNV programme] was scheduled to attend, so I had to prove myself right away,” she recalled.
Now Ms. Zuccherin is fully immersed into the Ecuadorian reality and has created ties with local authorities. Two weeks ago, she was invited by the Ministry of the Environment along with all of the UNV team of volunteers in Ecuador – 30 people across the country – to participate in a national initiative called “Siembraton,” which involved planting trees in the outskirts of Quito.

“Ecuador beat the world record for most trees planted at the same time and we were a part of it,” she said with excitement.

Meet some volunteers supporting different projects such as the improvement of literacy in the country's Andean region, or raising health awareness in the Amazonian region. Credit: UNV

Reflecting on her passion for volunteerism and what drew her to the area of development following her first involvement with Amnesty International, Ms. Zuccherin explained: “For me, it was a way of feeling less powerless in the face of the great challenges that exist in the realm of development worldwide.”

But it was not until she was first deployed to the field, assisting vulnerable children in Mozambique, that she truly realized the value of volunteer work.

“Then I was able to see how small actions can change people’s lives,” she said.

**UN invites world’s seven billion people to become agents of change on World Environment Day**

5 June - With many of the earth’s ecosystems nearing “critical tipping points,” the United Nations invited each of the seven billion people on the planet to mark this year’s World Environment Day by making one change towards a more responsible consumption of resources – “be it refusing to buy single-use plastic bags or riding a bike to work.”

“Humanity continues to consume far more natural resources than the planet can sustainably provide,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in this year’s message for the Day, observed annually on 5 June. “It is time for us to change.”

“The goal of sustainable development is to increase the quality of life for all people without increasing environmental degradation and without compromising the resource needs of future generations,” he noted. “We can do this by shifting our consumption patterns towards goods that use less energy, water and other resources and by wasting less food.”

The theme of this year’s Day – “Seven Billion Dreams. One Planet. Consume with Care,” – emphasizes the personal responsibility each person bears for enabling inclusive and sustainable economic development while stabilizing and reducing the rate of resource use.

Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), invited “everyone to imagine what the world would be like if each of the seven billion people made one change towards a more responsible consumption of resources.”

“I would like you to hold on to that vision and strive to make it reality – be it refusing to buy single-use plastic bags or riding a bike to work,” Mr. Steiner said in his message.

Noting “it is easy to underestimate the power of individual action,” Mr. Steiner said “our daily decisions as consumers, multiplied by billions, have a colossal impact on the environment – some of them contribute to the further depletion of natural resources, others help to protect fragile ecosystems.”

“We must ask ourselves what the consequences of this pace of consumption and trajectory of population growth – forecasted to reach nine billion by 2050 – will be,” he said.
“Under current trends, global extraction of resources is set to reach 140 billion tonnes by 2050, compared to around 7 billion tonnes in 1900,” said Mr. Steiner. “This will probably exceed the availability and accessibility of resources, as well as the carrying capacity of the planet to absorb the impacts of their extraction and use.”

World Environment Day “is the opportunity for everyone to realize the responsibility to care for the Earth and to become agents of change,” Mr. Steiner said.

Italy is the host of this year's celebrations of the Day which are taking place at Expo Milano 2015, which runs from 1 May to 31 October and is expected to include over 140 countries plus a significant number of international organizations.

**Reformulation of HIV treatment will save more children’s lives – UN agencies**

5 June - The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved a new antiretroviral formulation that can be mixed with food, making it easier for children living with HIV to take their life-saving medicines, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) announced today.

“Treatment innovations such as this that replace unpleasant and bad tasting medicines are a real breakthrough, accelerating access to treatment for children and keeping our youngest healthy,” said Executive Director of UNAIDS, Michel Sidibé. “It is unacceptable that only 24 per cent of children living with HIV have access to antiretroviral medicines,” he added.

Manufactured by Indian generic medicines manufacturer CIPLA, the oral pellets contain an antiretroviral formulation of lopinavir and ritonavir that can be mixed into a child’s food, the joint press release explains.

The treatment is heat stable and more palatable than medicines currently available, making it particularly suitable for treating very young children.

“This new formulation is a step in the right direction towards saving more lives of children living with HIV,” said Craig McClure, UNICEF’s Chief of HIV/AIDS section. “We expect it to greatly improve treatment access for many more children and support UNICEF’s equity focused programming aimed at reaching the most disadvantaged children throughout the world.”

HIV infection progresses rapidly in children and, in highly impacted countries, is a major contributor to child morbidity and mortality. Without treatment, one in three children who become infected with HIV will die before their first birthday. Half will die before their second birthday.

Early initiation of antiretroviral treatment in children substantially reduces the risk of death. Many countries have not been able to fully implement this World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation because of the challenge of not having a more appropriate, heat stable and palatable paediatric formulation of lopinavir/ritonavir used as part of the treatment options for children under 3 years of age.

Despite global efforts to accelerate access to HIV paediatric care and treatment, fewer than 800,000 of the 3.2 million children living with HIV worldwide had access to antiretroviral medicines in 2013.
UN agency boosting presence on Greek islands to deal with spike in refugee arrivals

5 June - The United Nations refugee agency today announced that it is stepping up its presence in the eastern Aegean islands of Greece where in recent weeks, sea arrivals have been averaging some 600 people a day from countries like Syria, Afghanistan Iraq and Turkey, severely straining local reception capacities.

“In the first five months of 2015, over 42,000 people arrived by sea to Greece, most of them refugees,” the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said today. “This is six times the level of the same period last year (6,500) and almost the same as the total for all of 2014 (43,500).”

More than 90 per cent of the people arriving are from refugee-producing countries, principally Syria from where over 60 per cent of people came this year, followed by Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Eritrea, UNHCR said.

“The refugees cross the eastern Aegean Sea from Turkey in small, flimsy boats and inflatable dinghies,” UNHCR spokesperson Melissa Fleming told the UN news briefing in Geneva, Switzerland. “They are landing in as many as 15 different Greek islands or being rescued at sea by the Greek Coast Guard.” Ms. Fleming said. “The largest arrivals have been on Lesvos, Chios and Samos and the Dodecanese Islands, particularly Kos and Leros. Smaller numbers of refugees have also been crossing through Greece's land border with Turkey at Evros.”

On Kos, where some 7,000 refugees have arrived so far this year, there are no official facilities for those awaiting registration, and conditions are particularly dire.

“In the absence of alternatives, refugees have had to move into an abandoned hotel with no electricity or running water. Hundreds of women, children and men are sleeping in cramped and unsanitary conditions,” she said.

Ms. Fleming went on to say that the large numbers of refugees arriving has led to bottlenecks, as the authorities struggle to identify, register and fingerprint them.

“Refugees awaiting registration, including families with children, have no choice but to sleep in the open,” the spokesperson said. “In addition, many refugees landing on remote beaches, including elderly people and small children, have to walk for miles carrying their meagre belongings because of the lack of transport.”

“There is no regular provision of food or drinking water to refugees, unless they are accommodated in police-run facilities for registration and processing,” she said, noting that “in some of the islands, local volunteers have organised themselves spontaneously and have asked local restaurants and bakeries for food donations to distribute to the refugees who are sleeping rough or in unused buildings.”

To respond to the critical situation in the Greek islands, she said the refugee agency is increasing its personnel in Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Kos, Rhodes, Leros and Evros.

UNHCR is already helping local authorities to improve reception conditions, identify additional accommodation for refugees, provide legal information and counselling to new arrivals and distribute sleeping bags and mats, soap, sanitary towels and other relief items to the most needy.
As of the end of May, almost 90,000 refugees and migrants had crossed the Mediterranean in 2015, including some 46,500 who landed in Italy and the 42,000 in Greece. Smaller arrivals numbers have been recorded in Spain at 920 and Malta at 91, according to UNHCR, which also reported that 1,850 refugees or migrants have died or are missing at sea.

**FEATURE: Nepal’s heritage sites on shaky ground after devastating quake**

5 June - Against the backdrop of Nepal’s humming capital of Kathmandu, in a centre just off Durbar Square, it would be difficult to miss the elderly woman smiling warmly in a bright red sari. She is among those offering traditional, homespun goods, the cultural heritage of the country that is part of the allure that, for centuries, has compelled travellers to visit in droves.

On 25 April, the Square’s customary hustle and bustle – along with the rest of the country and some neighbouring States – was jolted by a violent earthquake that shattered lives and reduced structures that have stood for decades, some even centuries, to rubble. The disaster, which has left more than 8,000 people dead and thousands of others injured, led the Nepalese Government to declare a state of emergency.

Not three weeks later, amid ongoing rescue and relief efforts, another powerful temblor shook the country, ravaging more lives and dealing another brutal blow to the crippled infrastructure. Adding to the human tragedy was an immense cultural loss that has registered both locally and globally.

According to a preliminary assessment by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the earthquake has severely impaired Nepal’s cultural heritage, particularly in the Kathmandu Valley – a World Heritage Site known for its unique temples, stupas and historic houses – where more than half have either collapsed or been seriously damaged.

In a message expressing her deep condolences on the magnitude of human loss, UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova also voiced shock at the earthquake’s “devastating impact on the unique cultural heritage in the country, in particular extensive and irreversible damage at the World Heritage site of Kathmandu Valley.”

Kathmandu Valley is composed of seven groups of monuments and buildings representing a broad range of historical and artistic achievements. The Valley is world famous for the three Durbar Squares of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan, as well as the Buddhist stupas of Swayambhu and Bauddhanath, along with the Hindu temples of Pashupati and Changu Narayan.

The capital city of Kathmandu – the political, commercial and cultural hub of the country – stood for centuries as a colourful showcase of a culture rich in art and tradition. Encircled by a range of green terraced hills dotted with clusters of red tiled-roofed houses, one legend says that the valley was once covered by a lake until the Bodhisattva Manjushri raised his sword of wisdom and sliced a passage through the mountain walls, draining the water and creating the first settlements.

Today that passage has been shaken to its core. Christian Manhart, the director of UNESCO’s Kathmandu office, described the extent of the damage to the country’s cultural heritage, particularly in the Kathmandu Valley, as “absolutely dramatic.”

“Half of the temples in Patan Durbar Square have collapsed. Eighty per cent of the temples and historic structures in both Bhaktapur and Kathmandu Durbar Squares have been destroyed. The walls on two wings of the former Royal Palace in Kathmandu, which is now a museum, have totally disintegrated from the corners and we have, as yet, not saved the objects inside,” he said.

Mr. Manhart explained that two teams of structural engineers deemed it was unsafe to enter the Palace Museum and that it must be demolished. “We have plans to remove the roof and use a crane to take the objects from top to bottom out of these wings and then to demolish the building.”

As per the Government’s request, UNESCO has begun evaluating and consolidating monuments. “We have assessed the
monuments inside the Kathmandu Valley and I have sent out a team to more remote areas where standing temples are at risk of collapsing when the monsoon comes,” Mr. Manhart said.

Regarding the stupa of Swayambhunath, on a hill in Kathmandu, the devastation was palpable, the UNESCO official noted, adding that while “the earthquake did not trigger an anticipated landslide, important cracks on the level of the steep slope in the south of the precipice may widen during the rainy season – in three to four weeks – sparking a landslide that would be very damaging.”

He pointed out that hotels are not safe and most of them are closed at the moment, bringing to light another harsh impact of the earthquake on the fragile country – plummeting tourism, a main source of income for Nepal.

“Many hotels in the Himalayas’ Sagarmatha National Park in the Mt. Everest area are destroyed, especially by the second earthquake, whose epicentre was under Mt. Everest. The base camp has been destroyed – keeping away any potential trekking tourists.”

Those who come for the heritage monuments will also think twice, now that a big part of them has been reduced to dust. “This will have a medium and maybe even a long-term impact on tourism,” Mr. Manhart noted.

Nepal is not unfamiliar with the devastation wrought by earthquakes or the subsequent reconstruction. In 1934, an earthquake destroyed 20 per cent of the buildings in the Kathmandu Valley and one-quarter of those in the capital. Back then, stone and wooden features were salvaged and used later for restoration.

Mr. Manhart is optimistic. “Today, in addition to plans, drawings, photographs and measurements, we have very detailed documentation of not only the World Heritage Sites but most of the historic houses.”

As centuries of existence crumbled overnight, the strength of an ancient people remains determined to rise from the ashes, to bequeath to future generations a way of life handed down through the ages.

Citing ‘horrifying acts of cruelty’ in Nigeria, UN rights chief urges justice for victims

5 June - The human rights situation in Boko Haram-held areas of northern Nigeria is one of “absolute terror” and “grave” violations, the top United Nations human rights official said today amid a wider call for Nigerian authorities to thoroughly investigate reports of abuses committed by the country’s armed forces.

“Civilians in northeast Nigeria have been living through horrifying acts of cruelty and violence by Boko Haram,” High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said in a press release. “These include wanton killings, summary executions, forced participation in military operations – including the use of children to detonate bombs, forced labour, forced marriage and sexual violence, including rape.”

The High Commissioner cited a series of eyewitness reports which recounted incidents in which children who were suspected of theft had had their hands amputated; of a man stoned to death on accusations of fornication; and mass executions of captives whose hands and legs were bound and who were dumped into rivers and wells.

According to the press release, in another case of Boko Haram's particular brutality, the militant group ordered the inhabitants of Kwajafa village in Borno state to gather and hear them preach. When the villagers did gather, the insurgents opened fire.

The extremists allegedly perpetrated a similar crime against the male inhabitants of Mararaba Madagali in Adamawa state in...
late 2014 when they assembled and killed at least 1,000 men and boys who had refused to join the group’s “depraved cause,” the UN official added.

Against that backdrop, the High Commissioner voiced concern over what his office described as “extremely worrying reports” regarding the actions of Nigerian armed forces during their anti-Boko Haram offensive.

“My predecessor, Navi Pillay, during her visit to Nigeria last year said that many of the people she met openly acknowledged that human rights violations had been committed by the security forces, and that these have served to alienate local communities and created fertile ground for Boko Haram to cultivate new recruits,” he continued.

“Since then we have continued to receive reports of arbitrary arrests and detention, torture and summary executions, as well as of a failure to take adequate measures to ensure the protection of civilians during counter-insurgency operations.”

The High Commissioner acknowledged the enormous challenges facing the Nigerian Government and voiced encouragement over the efforts of newly-elected President Buhari to “leave no stone unturned to promote the rule of law and ensure justice and the protection of human rights while countering terrorism.”

Nevertheless, he urged the Government to establish “proper independent inquiries” into alleged violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law by the Nigerian armed forces, including into the “deeply disturbing allegations” that thousands of people have died or been killed while held in detention by State institutions.

“Investigations into human rights violations must be conducted in a transparent manner, in order to inspire confidence and deter further violations,” the High Commissioner concluded. “This is crucial to ensure that victims of Boko Haram’s crimes are not doubly victimized by their own Government.”

Libyan political dialogue round set for Monday in Morocco – UN mission

5 June - The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) announced today that the next round of Libyan political dialogue sessions in Skhirat, Morocco, will commence on Monday, 8 June.

“The Mission has received thousands of messages from Libyans gravely concerned about the deteriorating conditions in their country,” said a statement released by UNSMIL today.

They are demanding the swift resumption of the dialogue talks and expressed hope that Libyan political actors would seize the opportunity and expedite the dialogue process in order to quickly conclude a political agreement that will bring an end to the conflict in Libya.

The meeting in Skhirat will discuss a new draft of the political agreement based on the latest input of the parties.

UNSMIL is of the firm conviction that this round will be “decisive,” it said.

The Mission is also urging Libyan stakeholders to engage in the forthcoming discussions in a spirit of reconciliation and compromise, as well as a determination to reach a political agreement to bring peace and stability to Libya.

This is a “critical juncture” of the political dialogue process, UNSMIL said, calling on all parties in Libya to shoulder their historic responsibilities to uphold their country’s higher national interest, and reminded them that there can be no military solution to the current conflict in Libya, and there is no other solution outside the political framework.

UNSMIL also commends the efforts of the parties which have given their remarks on the draft political agreement in recent days. UNSMIL has also commended the recent decision by the General National Congress (GNC) in Tripoli to participate in
the next round of dialogue.

**Crackdown on journalist and activists jeopardize human rights in Iran, UN expert warns**

5 June - The arbitrary and unlawful arrest and prosecution of journalists and activists in Iran weakens the protection of human rights of all in Iran, a United Nations expert said today.

“Silencing these critical voices is unacceptable – it undermines public debate and deprives Iranians and the rest of world of important information on the reality in the country,” declared UN Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed, who is mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to monitor and report on the situation in Iran.

“The recurrent use of vague references to threats to national security, propaganda against the system and insult to authorities to prosecute and detain journalists or activists is in contradiction to both international norms relating to freedoms of expression and association and the principle of legality,” Mr. Shaheed stated.

The independent expert expressed special concern at the arrest, detention and trial of Jason Rezaian, a *Washington Post* reporter, and his wife, Yeganeh Salehi, a correspondent of the United Arab Emirates newspaper *The National*.

Mr. Rezaian’s trial began last week in Teheran behind closed doors on charges of ‘espionage, collaboration with hostile governments, gathering classified information and disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic.’ The journalist has been arbitrarily detained since July 2014, including for a number of months in solitary confinement, and wasn’t formally charged for nearly 10 months.

“Journalists must be protected, not harassed and prosecuted for doing their jobs. The detention and trial of Mr. Rezaian and Ms. Salehi not only violate their individual rights, but also intimidates those working in the media in Iran,” he stressed.

The independent expert was equally disturbed by the detentions of Atena Farghdani and Nargis Mohammadi, known for their human rights activism. Ms. Farghdani, a children’s rights defender and artist, was recently sentenced to a 12 years and nine months prison term for ‘spreading propaganda against the system, gathering and colluding against national security and insulting members of the Parliament and the Supreme Leader.’

As for Ms. Mohammadi, the former Vice-President of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre and one of the founders of the group ‘Step-by-Step to Stop the Death Penalty,’ she was arrested on May 5 in order to serve the remainder of the six-year prison sentence she had received in April 2012 on charges of ‘assembly and collusion against national security, membership in Defenders of Human Rights Centre, and propaganda against the system.’

“Human rights defenders play a fundamental role in ensuring a democratic society which respects human rights,” the expert said, reminding the Iranian Government of its responsibility to ensure human rights defenders do not face prosecution for promoting and advancing human rights in the country.

Mr. Shaheed’s call has been endorsed by human rights expert Mads Andenas, who currently heads the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, as well as the UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights defenders, Michel Forst; on freedom of expression, David Kaye; on independence of the judiciary, Gabriela Knaul; and on torture, Juan E. Méndez.

They jointly urged the Iranian authorities to release all journalists and rights defenders who have been arbitrarily and unlawfully arrested, and currently face detention and prosecution.

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.
UN refugee agency concerned by abduction of Eritrean asylum-seekers in eastern Sudan

5 June - An armed group opened fire on a convoy transporting Eritrean asylum-seekers in eastern Sudan and kidnapped 14 of them, including six boys and one girl, the United Nations refugee agency reported today and urged the Sudanese Government to spare no effort in apprehending those responsible and bringing them to account.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said the incident occurred on Thursday when an armed group in a pickup truck opened fire on a convoy organized by the Sudanese Commissioner for Refugees (COR), which was transporting 49 Eritrean asylum-seekers from Wad Sharifey reception centre near Kassala to Shagarab refugee camp.

In a press release, UNHCR said 14 asylum-seekers were kidnapped: seven unaccompanied children (six boys and one girl), five women and two men.

In addition, it said, six asylum-seekers suffered from minor injuries when they jumped from the truck in an attempt to escape.

UNHCR is providing support to the survivors and is in contact with the Sudanese authorities, who are investigating the case.

The refugee agency said it “welcomes this investigation and has asked the Government that no effort be spared in apprehending those responsible and bringing them to account.”

UNHCR also urges that all movements of asylum-seekers be systematically accompanied by a security escort.

Prior to this incident, there had been a reduction in kidnappings and trafficking in the east as a result of ongoing cooperation between UNHCR and the Government.

Pakistan: UN experts urge halt to execution of child offender, reinstatement of death penalty moratorium

5 June - The Government of Pakistan must halt the execution of a man convicted of a crime committed as a child and reinstate the country’s moratorium on the death penalty, three United Nations human rights experts have urged.

In a press release issued from Geneva, Christof Heyns, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Benyam Mezmur, the Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and Juan Mendez, the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, called on Pakistani authorities to reverse a decision regarding the execution of Shafqat Hussain, scheduled for 9 June.

Mr. Hussein was arrested, tried and convicted at the age of 14 for kidnapping and involuntary manslaughter. According to his lawyers, however, Mr. Hussein’s confession was obtained after being tortured for at least nine days while in police custody.

“To proceed with Mr. Hussain’s execution without proper investigation into the allegation that his confession was coerced under torture, and in spite of evidence that he was a child at the time of his alleged offence and of his possible innocence would be utterly unacceptable and in flagrant contravention of Pakistan’s national and international obligations,” the UN
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experts warned.

“Under Pakistani law and articles 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and 37.1 the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the death sentence cannot be imposed on a defendant who was under 18 at the time of the crime,” they added. “Testimonies obtained under torture are also inadmissible.”

Mr. Hussain was originally due to be executed in March 2015 but his sentence was stayed while authorities conducted an inquiry into his age at the time of the crime and on the torture allegations. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) which led the investigation ultimately concluded that Mr. Hussain was not a child at the time of the killing however both the legitimacy of the inquiry and the initial trial has been contested.

“In light of reports that the trial against Mr. Hussain and the FIA inquiry fell short of such standards, we call once again upon the Pakistani authorities to ensure a fair retrial of Shafqat Hussain, and to immediately halt the scheduled execution,” the three experts continued.

In addition, they urged Pakistan’s Government to reinstate the country’s death penalty moratorium and carry out “serious investigations” all cases of children on death row.

Since Pakistan’s moratorium was lifted in December 2014, 140 prisoners have been executed while reports indicate that more than 8,000 people are currently on death row of whom several hundred may have been sentenced for crimes they committed as children.

UN health agency dispatches team to Seoul after fourth death reported from MERS

5 June - The World Health Organization (WHO) today announced that in light of the outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus, or MERS-CoV, resulting in four deaths in the Republic of Korea, it will send a team to Seoul to conduct a joint mission to look into the situation and assess public health response efforts.

“Based on current data and WHO’s risk assessment, there is no evidence to suggest sustained human-to-human transmission in communities and no evidence of airborne transmission,” WHO said a press release. “However, MERS-CoV is a relatively new disease and information gaps are considerable.”

“The joint mission will bring us a step closer to gaining a better understanding of the nature of this virus,” it said.

WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier told reporters at the UN briefing in Geneva, Switzerland, that so far, 41 cases of MERS-CoV in China and the Republic of Korea, including 4 deaths, had been reported.

The global figures now stand at 1,193, including 446 deaths, a total made up not only by cases in the Republic of Korea and China, but also by Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia, according to Mr. Lindmeier.

In the press release, WHO said that in light of the recent MERS-CoV outbreak, the agency and the Republic of Korea’s Ministry of Health and Welfare will conduct a joint mission in the Republic of Korea.

“The pressing objective of this joint mission is to gain information and review the situation in the Republic of Korea including the epidemiological pattern, the characteristic of the virus and clinical features,” it said. “The team will also assess the public health response efforts and provide recommendations for response measures going forward.”

The WHO team will be led by Assistant Director-General for Health Security, Dr Keiji Fukuda, and be comprised of experts in epidemiology, virology, clinical management, infection prevention and control, as well as public health officers who have previously handled other MERS-CoV outbreaks in the Middle East.
Since the outbreak, WHO said it has been working closely with the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention on response measures.

“Given the lack of evidence of sustained human-to-human transmission in the community, WHO does not advise special procedures at points of entry, or travel or trade restrictions with regard to this event,” the press release said.