In the headlines:

- Security in Central African Republic improves, but situation remains fragile – UN envoy
- Head of UN watchdog discusses Iranian nuclear issues with US lawmakers
- Civilians continue to bear brunt of Afghan conflict, new UN report reveals
- Condemning new death sentence, UN rights chief highlights alarming use of capital punishment in Iran
- Myanmar: UN food agency delivers aid to 82,000 people in flooded areas
- UN allocates $70 million from emergency fund to assist millions uprooted by crises
- Kiribati: UN backs new vaccine to protect children from life-threatening diarrhoea
- UN experts urge Pakistan to strengthen protection of children after latest execution
- UNESCO chief condemns killing of Mexican photojournalist

Security in Central African Republic improves, but situation remains fragile – UN envoy

5 August - Political progress combined with the deployment of United Nations peacekeepers in nearly 40 localities have contributed to the improvement of the overall security situation in Central African Republic (CAR), which nonetheless remains precarious, the top UN envoy in the country told the Security Council today.

“The current improvement of the situation on the ground has allowed internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return and the economic activity to recover,” said Babacar Gaye, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of the UN peacekeeping mission, known as MINUSCA.

Mr. Gaye noted that many parts of CAR are still targeted by armed groups. “MINUSCA often reports harassment, racketeering, arbitrary detention and serious violations of human rights such as inhuman treatments in cases of witchcraft accusations,” he stated.

In the western part of the country, a recent increase of violent incidents on the main road between the capital, Bangui, and Cameroon has been of concern, said Mr. Gaye, noting that since May, three peacekeepers were injured in the area, and on 18 July, gunmen opened fire on a World Food Programme vehicle escorted by MINUSCA, killing a driver.

In the centre of the country, clashes between the former Séléka and anti-Balaka groups continue to pose threats for the local populations, while in eastern CAR, the ex-Séléka continue to have a significant military presence. In addition, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) continues to operate in the south-eastern part of the country.

“MINUSCA is establishing three temporary operating bases in this area to further limit the LRA’s ability to operate,” the Special Representative said.
“Security is gradually improving in Bangui, where signs of normal life lend a sense of confidence and gradual returns from the airport IDP camp to other areas of the city indicate a positive, but fragile, trend,” he went on.

Despite the Mission’s efforts, the humanitarian situation remains a significant concern, he acknowledged, with more than 2.7 million people in need of assistance, some 450,000 refugees, and close to 400,000 displaced persons inside the country.

“Howver, only 30 per cent of the humanitarian appeal has been funded. Against this background, I urge Member States to sustain the positive developments in the country by responding to the humanitarian appeal.”

At the political level, the envoy continued, the main success of the recently held Bangui Forum is the “spirit of dialogue, inclusivity, and the sense that the good of the country eventually prevail.” He welcomed the UN Peacebuilding Fund’s support of $10 million that will be allocated to priorities identified by the Forum.

Against this backdrop, the recent vote of the National Transition Council to deprive the refugees from their right to vote represents an alarming step back and a reminder that more effort should be focused on reconciliation, he emphasized.

After the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) decided to consider positively an extension of the CAR political transition until the end of 2015, the CAR authorities announced the following electoral calendar: a constitutional referendum on 4 October, the first round of presidential and legislative elections on 18 October, and a second round on 22 November.

In the meantime, 330,000 voters have registered, primarily in Bangui, and the process is getting underway in the rest of the country. Restoration of State authority and the electoral process are being supported by MINUSCA through the provision of transport, training and administrative kits.

Noting a remaining $11 million funding gap to close the electoral budget, Mr. Gaye called on international donors to make additional commitments to this “critical element” of the peace process. He made a similar appeal to support the Special Criminal Court that was established by the transitional authorities to investigate serious crimes committed since 1 January 2003.

Despite progress towards voluntary disarmament of the ex-Séléka in Bangui, MINUSCA has yet to disarm the combatants throughout the country. “Indeed, most of the signatories would like to respect their commitment as per the agreement, but recent political developments have raised doubts, in particular among the ex-Séléka,” he warned.

In the meantime, MINUSCA is working closely with the transitional authorities to move the process forward in order to establish a situation conducive to “calm and transparent elections,” the envoy stated.

**Head of UN watchdog discusses Iranian nuclear issues with US lawmakers**

**5 August** - The head of the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) met with United States lawmakers today in Washington, D.C. to discuss the important role the Agency can play in monitoring and verifying nuclear activities in Iran.

The Agency’s role under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the agreement concluded in Vienna on 14 July by the so-called E3+3 [China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States] and Iran – as well as the Road-map agreed between the IAEA and Iran were among the issues discussed at the meeting between Director General Yukiya Amano and members of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

“I explained why the two agreements will significantly strengthen the Agency’s verification work in Iran,” Mr. Amano said in a statement to the media after the meeting.
The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, he said, will enable the Agency to implement the Additional Protocol in Iran, giving the inspectors wider access to information and sites. “It will also require Iran to take other transparency measures. As a result, we will know much more about the nature of Iran’s nuclear activities.”

Mr. Amano also spoke about the Road-map which the IAEA and Iran agreed to on 14 July, following the agreement reached between international negotiators and Tehran.

“The Road-map will help us clarify outstanding issues relating to possible military dimensions to Iran’s nuclear programme. It is robust and has strict timelines,” he stated.

“With these two agreements, we have a unique opportunity to resolve past issues and undertake a wide range of verification activities. I am confident that we have the expertise and experience to do the job,” he added.

Under the Road-map, Iran is required to provide written explanations to the IAEA by 15 August regarding a number of outstanding issues that have yet to be resolved.

**Civilians continue to bear brunt of Afghan conflict, new UN report reveals**

5 August - Civilians continued to bear the brunt of the Afghan conflict in the first half of 2015, the United Nations reported today, noting that casualties are projected to equal or exceed the record high numbers documented last year.

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have documented 4,921 civilian casualties (1,592 deaths and 3,329 injured) in the first half of 2015. This is a one per cent increase in total civilian casualties compared to the same period in 2014.

The vast majority – or 90 per cent – of civilian casualties resulted from ground engagements, improvised explosive devices, complex and suicide attacks and targeted killings, according to the 2015 Mid-year Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, which was released today.

“This report lays bare the heart-rending, prolonged suffering of civilians in Afghanistan, who continue to bear the brunt of the armed conflict and live in insecurity and uncertainty over whether a trip to a bank, a tailoring class, to a court room or a wedding party, may be their last,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

“Impunity for serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law has been reigning for too long in Afghanistan, and fuelling the cycle of violence. There need to be urgent, concrete steps towards accountability to break this venomous cycle.”

The report finds that 70 per cent of civilian casualties are due to the activities of anti-Government elements, who continued to cause the most harm despite a slight reduction in total civilian casualties.

Civilian deaths and injuries caused by pro-Government forces caused 16 per cent of civilian casualties (15 per cent from Afghan National Security Forces and pro-Government militia and one per cent from international military forces).

The report notes with concern that this is a 60 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2014, mostly due to increased civilian casualties caused by pro-Government forces during ground engagements.

Fighting between the parties to the conflict that could not be attributed to one specific party caused 10 per cent of civilian casualties, while unattributed explosive remnants of war caused the remaining four per cent.

Ground engagements between parties to the conflict caused 1,577 civilian casualties – a 19 per cent decrease – yet remained
the leading cause of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. Similarly, improvised explosive devices caused 1,108 civilian casualties – a 21 per cent decrease – while remaining the second leading cause of civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

The UN said that the slight rise in civilian harm recorded in the first half of 2015 is primarily a result of increased civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks and targeted killings. There was a 78 per cent increase in suicide and complex attacks executed by anti-Government elements, compared to the first six months of 2014.

Civilian casualties from targeted killings increased by 57 per cent and became the leading cause of civilian deaths.

“Afghan civilians have suffered far too long from this destructive conflict. The devastating consequences of this violence against civilians as documented in this report should serve to strengthen the broad conviction that peace is urgently needed,” said Nicholas Haysom, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of UNAMA.

“Until peace is achieved, all parties to the conflict must fulfil their obligations under international humanitarian law to minimize the impact of the conflict on civilians and match their public statements on the protection of civilians with concrete actions,” he said.

In the first six months of 2015, UNAMA documented a 23 per cent increase in casualties among women and a 13 per cent increase in casualties among children.

“The rise in the numbers of women and children killed and maimed from conflict-related violence is particularly disturbing,” said Danielle Bell, Director of Human Rights at UNAMA.

“This year, UNAMA recorded the highest number of children and women casualties compared to the same period in previous years. All parties to the conflict must undertake stronger measures to protect civilians from harm. When the conflict kills or maims a mother, child, sister or brother, the repercussions for families and communities are devastating and long-lasting.”

The report outlines key steps to be taken by parties to the conflict to mitigate casualties and protect civilians from harm, including that anti-Government elements cease the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian locations; that the Government cease firing mortars, rockets and grenades into civilian-populated areas; and that international military forces continue to take steps to protect civilians during ground and aerial operations.

**Condemning new death sentence, UN rights chief highlights alarming use of capital punishment in Iran**

**5 August** - The top United Nations human rights official today expressed alarm at the imposition of the death penalty on Mohammad Ali Taheri, the founder of a spiritual movement, writer and practitioner of alternative medicine theories used in Iran and abroad.

“Taheri's multiple convictions on a variety of vague charges, his alleged detention in solitary confinement and now his sentencing to death bring into stark focus serious issues with the administration of justice and the terribly worrying use of the death penalty in Iran,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a press release.

Taheri was sentenced to death on Saturday by the Revolutionary Court on a charge of Fesad fel Arz (corruption on earth).

“Iran's use of the death penalty has long been problematic, with many executions on drug offences, several executions of people who were below the age of 18 when the crime was committed, as well as other cases where broad, ill-defined charges led to the imposition of capital punishment,” Zeid added.

The High Commissioner stressed that under international law, and in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Iran, in countries which have not abolished the death penalty, it may only be used for “the most
serious crimes” which has been interpreted to mean only crimes involving intentional killing. Even then, the case has to meet stringent fair trial standards.

“I call on the Iranian authorities to immediately withdraw the charges against Taheri and ensure his unconditional release. For an individual to be sentenced to death for peaceful exercise of freedom of expression, religion or belief is an absolute outrage – and a clear violation of international human rights law,” High Commissioner Zeid stated.

Iran has reportedly executed more than 600 individuals so far this year. Last year, at least 753 people were executed in the country.

“I urge the Government of Iran to immediately impose a moratorium on all executions and to work with us and other partners on alternative strategies to combat crime,” the UN rights chief demanded.

For its part, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, urged the Iranian authorities to immediately commute the death penalty handed down to Mr. Tehari.

“It is unacceptable and a clear violation of international law for an individual to be imprisoned and condemned to death for peacefully exercising his rights to freedoms of religion and of expression,” the UN expert stressed.

Mr. Shaheed's call has been endorsed by the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt; on torture, Juan E. Méndez; on extrajudicial executions, Christof Heyns; on freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye; and on human rights defenders, Michel Forst.

The UN opposes the use of the death penalty in all circumstances and the global trend is towards abolition.

**Myanmar: UN food agency delivers aid to 82,000 people in flooded areas**

5 August - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) today announced that it has delivered aid to 82,000 people in the most flood-affected parts of western Myanmar, and is now working to reach 200,000 people.

“With so many areas cut off, we are still trying to get a clear picture of how these floods have affected people in Myanmar,” said WFP Country Director Dom Scalpelli. “Food security will be seriously affected. Thousands have lost homes, livelihoods, crops and existing food and seed stocks. We are acting quickly to provide emergency relief and prevent this disaster from exacerbating existing food insecurity and malnutrition.”

Efforts are underway to provide emergency assistance in Bago, Chin, Kachin, Magway, Mon, Rakhine and Sagaing, after Cyclone Komen made landfall last week, causing extensive damages, points out a press release issued today.

Working with the Government, UN agencies and local NGOs, WFP has now reached 82,000 people with food since the start of the response on 2 August. The authorities and local airlines are assisting with free transport of WFP’s food to areas inaccessible by road.

Flooding and landslides caused by heavy monsoon rains have impacted more than a quarter of a million people in 12 out of Myanmar's 14 states and nearly 208,000 people are now estimated to be in need of immediate food assistance. Both of these figures are expected to rise as further information becomes available.

WFP is appealing for additional resources to respond to the floods emergency. Some $3 million per month is required to meet the currently-estimated flood needs, on top of existing operations in the country. Funding needs are expected to grow as the number of affected people increases.
The Organization's largest programme in Myanmar before the flooding was the ongoing distribution of food assistance to displaced people in Rakhine State, where floodwaters are hindering an accurate assessment of food needs at this time.

**UN allocates $70 million from emergency fund to assist millions uprooted by crises**

5 August - The United Nations humanitarian chief today allocated $70 million to help provide a lifeline to millions of men, women and children forced from their homes by violence and instability.

The money comes from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), which has provided immediate financial resources, since 2006, for life-saving humanitarian action at the onset of emergencies, in rapidly deteriorating situations and in protracted crises that fail to attract sufficient resources.

“With almost 60 million people forcibly displaced around the world, we face a crisis on a scale not seen in generations,” said Stephen O’Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

“These funds from CERF’s Underfunded Emergencies window will help sustain life-saving relief in some of the world’s most protracted and chronically under-funded emergencies,” added Mr. O’Brien, who heads the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which manages the Fund.

Some $21 million from the CERF allocation will allow humanitarian partners in Sudan and Chad to sustain basic services and protection activities for millions of people from Sudan’s Darfur region where the crisis has entered its 13th year.

In the Horn of Africa – home to some of the most vulnerable communities facing recurrent cycles of conflict and climatic shocks – humanitarian agencies in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia will receive $33 million. In Somalia, over 730,000 people continue to require emergency food and nutrition assistance, a dire situation now further compounded by the needs of people fleeing conflict in Yemen.

Another $8 million will help relief agencies provide assistance, including emergency shelter and improved access to healthcare, for neglected communities and displaced people in Myanmar and Bangladesh. A further $8 million will help sustain humanitarian operations in Afghanistan, where a lack of adequate funding has forced relief agencies to reduce their operations at a time when needs are increasing because of intensified fighting.

Mr. O’Brien urged donors to support relief efforts in these protracted and all but forgotten crises, saying that while the CERF grants represent a life-line for some of world’s most vulnerable populations, the needs will continue to increase.

CERF pools contributions from donors – mainly governments, but also, foundations, companies, charities and individuals – into a single fund, and then releases them for urgent needs. Since 2006, the Fund has allocated more than $4.1 billion to support humanitarian operations in 95 countries and territories.
Kiribati: UN backs new vaccine to protect children from life-threatening diarrhoea

5 August - The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are supporting a new vaccination campaign announced today by the Government of Kiribati to protect children from a potentially killer virus.

The rotavirus vaccine – which will help prevent severe and life-threatening diarrhoea among infants – is now part of routine immunizations which are part of a comprehensive child survival package.

In the past five years, the Pacific island nation has experienced repeated diarrhoea outbreaks, many caused by rotavirus, leading to hospitalization and even deaths of children under the age of five.

“Rotavirus affects nearly every child under the age of five years and globally is the leading cause of severe, dehydrating diarrhoea in infants. Introducing this vaccine will help to reduce the number of children in Kiribati dying from preventable illness,” UNICEF Pacific Representative Karen Allen said in a news release.

UNICEF will provide technical and financial support to the Kiribati Government for the next three years to strengthen links between immunization, especially the rotavirus vaccine, and existing programmes focused on nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, Dr. Allen noted.

In addition to the rotavirus vaccine, UNICEF pointed out that nearly 90 per cent of child deaths due to diarrhoea can be prevented with simple solutions. Breastfeeding provides vitamins and nutrients that help infants to avoid diarrhoeal disease and recover more quickly.

Good sanitation and hand washing with soap are other low-cost and highly effective ways to protect children from diarrhoea, the agency added.

The rotavirus vaccine, announced by the Kiribati Ministry of Health and Medical Services, will be introduced across all provinces in the country.

UN experts urge Pakistan to strengthen protection of children after latest execution

5 August - United Nations human rights experts today condemned the execution in Pakistan of Shafqat Hussein, who was reportedly 14 years old when he was convicted of murder, and called on the country to strengthen the protection of children.

The execution of Shafqat Hussein is regrettable and in flagrant contravention of Pakistan’s national and international obligations,” stated the Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Benyam Dawit Mezmur, in a news release.

According to media reports, the lawyers for Mr. Hussain, convicted of killing a child in 2004, say he was 14 when found guilty and his confession was extracted by torture. However, Pakistani officials say there is no proof he was a minor when convicted.

The jurisprudence of the Committee on the Rights of the Child states that: “[if] there is no proof of age, the child is entitled to a reliable medical or social investigation that may establish his/her age and, in the case of conflict or inconclusive evidence, the child shall have the right to the rule of the benefit of the doubt.”
“The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which Pakistan has ratified, are clear, as is Pakistani law: the death sentence should not be imposed on a defendant who was under 18 at the time of the crime,” said Mr. Mezmur.

The Secretary-General’s Special Representative on Violence against Children, Marta Santos Pais, said the execution is “deeply saddening and goes against Pakistan’s commitments to children’s rights.”

Pakistan, she recalled, was one of the main supporters of the World Summit for Children in 1990, and was amongst the first States to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

“It is deplorable that Shafqat Hussein was executed following a trial that reportedly did not comply with the most stringent requirements of due process and that there was not a proper investigation into allegations he confessed under torture,” both she and Mr. Mezmur stated.

They urged the Pakistani authorities to reinstate the moratorium on the death penalty, conduct rigorous investigations into reported cases of children on death row, and adults on death row for offences committed while below the age of 18, and ensure a prompt and impartial investigation into all alleged acts of torture.

“We stand ready to support Pakistan in its efforts to strengthen the protection of the rights of the child across its justice system,” they said in the statement, which was also endorsed by the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Christof Heyns.

**UNESCO chief condemns killing of Mexican photojournalist**

5 August - The head of the United Nations agency charged with promoting press freedom today condemned the killing of photojournalist Ruben Espinosa, who was found dead in Mexico City on 1 August.

“Such attempts to stifle press freedom must be firmly and thoroughly investigated with the perpetrators brought to justice and punished,” Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), said in a news release.

“We must stand clearly alongside those courageous journalists who are working to keep citizens informed,” she added.

Mr. Espinosa worked for the news agencies AVC Noticias and Cuartoscuro, as well as for the investigative magazine Proceso in the south-eastern state of Veracruz, where he covered local politics and often spoke out against the harassment of fellow journalists.

Statements issued by the Director-General on the killing of media workers are posted on a dedicated webpage, UNESCO condemns the killing of journalists.