Peace process in Mali at ‘crucial stage’ UN peacekeeping chief tells Security Council

6 January - Progress in the political process in Mali over the last three months has been “fairly modest”, with fighting continuing despite talks in Algiers that marked the first occasion when armed groups and the Government engaged in direct conversations, the head of United Nations peacekeeping operations said in a briefing to the Security Council today.

“We can say that the inter-Malian peace process is at a crucial stage,” said Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Hervé Ladsous, making an appeal to all parties to resolve outstanding issues in the fresh round of talks scheduled for February.

“This appeal is to everyone. There needs to be a decisive spirit here. There needs to leadership. And there must be a willingness to compromise to reach an agreement. No one should fear that,” he said.

While talks held so far had resulted in a draft peace agreement that all parties were currently examining, he pointed to an “extremely volatile” security situation in the North of the country, with “serious fighting” taking place in recent days, including an attack on Malian troops in the Ségou region, where 10 were killed, and disturbances in Gao where three were killed.

“The situation on the ground remains difficult, each side trying to escalate,” he said, pointing out that MINUSMA forces had been deployed in response to the violence, facing a situation that was “very dire and costly” for MINUSMA’s troops.

“No Mission has been as costly in terms of blood,” he said, noting that a total of 33 MINUSMA soldiers had been killed and 109 injured and pointing out that the Mission’s peacekeepers face assaults on a virtually daily basis, in the form of rocket attacks on bases and targeted attacks with improvised explosive devices.

He called on all parties to respect the ceasefire and to show good faith, both on the ground and at the negotiating table in Algiers. That required some parties to accept the need to move from their opening positions, something not everybody had done.
He said the crisis in Mali had persisted for 50 years, largely because its roots had never been addressed. That created “fertile ground for terrorism and transnational crime” and it was vital to tackle the conflict’s causes. The direct involvement of the international community, specifically the UN, made it possible to re-establish the Malian State and create lasting solutions.

“Let’s try not to fall into the mistakes of the past,” said Mr. Ladsous, calling for courage, determination and vision.

The implementation plan would be vital for the ceasefire’s credibility and MINUSMA would support the implementation, he said, acknowledging that once parties reached agreement, time would be needed for them to explain and “sell” the agreement to their constituents. The spotlight was now falling on the parties involved to show political will and energy.

MINUSMA was established by Security Council resolution 2100 (2013) to support political processes in Mali and to carry out security-related tasks. The Mission was asked to support Mali’s transitional authorities in the stabilization of the country and implementation of the transitional roadmap.

In June 2014, the Council adopted resolution 2165, further deciding that the Mission should focus on ensuring security, stabilization and protection of civilians, as well as supporting national political dialogue and reconciliation. It also works to assist the reestablishment of State authority, the rebuilding of the security sector, and the promotion and protection of human rights.

On first visit to hard-hit nations, new UN Ebola mission chief vows scaled-up support to end crisis

6 January - The new Head of the United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, arrived in Liberia today as part of his first tour of the countries in West Africa most affected by the outbreak of the virus.

On his arrival in the capital of Monrovia, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed met with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as well as UNMEER and UNMIL (UN Mission in Liberia) staff. He also discussed response efforts with the wider diplomatic community.

“I want to visit the affected countries not only to see what’s already been done – I know we have made a lot of progress – but to see what we can do to get to zero cases as fast as possible,” said Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed.

“Beyond that, we also need to scale up our efforts to re-establish basic social services, strengthen health services, support economic activity and build these countries’ resilience,” he added.

In Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, the new Special Representative of the Secretary General – who succeeds UNMEER’s inaugural chief, Anthony Banbury – is tasked with assessing response efforts to stop the Ebola outbreak, and determine urgent UN priorities going forward.

Tomorrow, he will travel to Grand Cape Mount County where he will interact with local, traditional and religious leaders, as well as Ebola survivors, before heading to Sierra Leone, which along with Guinea, is among the three front line countries battling the outbreak.

During the visits, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed is scheduled to meet with the Presidents of Sierra Leone and Guinea, as well as other UN Ebola Response partners. He will also visit Ebola Treatment Units and national Ebola Response Centres to see how UNMEER’s coordination efforts are playing out on the ground.

As of 31 December 2014, seven of Liberia’s 15 counties had reported no new Ebola cases. Still, 22 new cases were reported in Grand Cape Mount, 88 in Montserrado, and 14 in Margibi.

“The UN is wholly committed to supporting all affected and at-risk communities to contain the Ebola outbreak and end this crisis,” Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed said today in a release.
“We need to pay special attention to the border areas. Zero cases – in Liberia and this entire region – must be everyone’s goal,” he added, pledging UNMEER’s support to ‘stand together’ with the people affected and their governments until the crisis ends.

According to the latest World Health Organization (WHO) update, as of today, 06 January, 20,712 people have been reported infected and 8,220 have died from the Ebola outbreak.

UN Mission chief applauds joint operations against armed groups in eastern DR Congo

6 January - A joint operation by United Nations troops and the Congolese army (FARDC) took control of the main bases used by an armed group actively threatening security and stability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s long-troubled eastern region.

FARDC troops backed by attack helicopters and the Force Intervention Brigade of the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) took control of bases used by the National Liberation Front, known by the French acronym FNL, in an area of restive South Kivu Province.

“The joint operation FARDC-MONUSCO against FNL is a strong signal for all armed groups, including the FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda): the only way toward peace is through voluntary disarmament,” said MONUSCO chief, Martin Kobler.

His comments come as MONUSCO prepares to launch military operations against the FDLR, another armed group operating in eastern DRC, which missed a deadline for the unconditional surrender of its forces on 2 January.

They follow also a joint FARDC-MONUSCO attack against the rebel Ugandan Allied Democratic Forces in North Kivu and the arrest of Cobra Matata, leader of the Force de Résistance Patriotique de l’Ituri (FRPI) which took place over the weekend.

The FNL is a Burundian group that is deemed to pose an unacceptable threat to the security and stability in the eastern DRC and the joint offensive launched against the group was part of an operation initiated in late 2014 aiming to disarm armed groups operating in the Ruzizi plain and nearby areas.

The FNL’s neutralization is considered of paramount importance for MONUSCO and the FARDC to ensure civilian security in South Kivu.

“We are prepared to fight all armed groups and protect civilians,” said Major General Jean Baillaud, MONUSCO Force Commander ad interim. “This military success clearly shows FARDC and MONUSCO’s capacities to conduct joint actions and their common determination to neutralize all armed groups.”
**Darfur: UN-African Union mission peacekeepers attacked in spate of violence**

**6 January** - The Joint United Nations and African Union Mission in Darfur has reported that its peacekeepers came under two separate attacks today while on patrol, both times by unidentified gunmen.

The first attack occurred in the Burumburum area, about 11 kilometres north-east of Khor Abeche, in South Darfur. Two attackers were killed in the firefight, according to the Mission, known as UNAMID.

“There was no injury to any of the peacekeepers or damage to mission property.

The Mission reports this is the second attack on UNAMID in this area in as many months,” the Secretary-General’s spokesperson told reporters at a Headquarters briefing this afternoon.

UNAMID’s Acting Joint Special Representative, Abiodun Oluremi Bashua, commended the peacekeepers for their robust response to the attackers and called on the Government of Sudan to speedily investigate the incident and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Also today, another UNAMID patrol was attacked at a water point by a group of unidentified assailants about 5 kilometres south-west of the Mission team site in Habilla, in West Darfur.

The peacekeepers did not sustain any injuries but the attackers seized a water tanker and a vehicle.

**New Year offers little chance for children’s education in Syria, warns UNICEF**

**6 January** - Recent school closures in Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zour governorates and parts of rural Aleppo in Syria have disrupted the education of some 670,000 children of primary and lower-high school age, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reported today.

Briefing the press in Geneva today, UNICEF’s Christophe Boulierac warned that as the conflict enters its fifth year, 2015 will offer little chance for children’s education.

Between January and December 2014 alone there were at least 68 attacks on schools across Syria, reported Mr. Boulierac. Those attacks reportedly killed at least 160 children and injured 343. But the real numbers are likely to be higher.

By the end of 2014 the conflict had affected more than eight million children, 5.6 million children inside the country and 1.7 million children living as refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and other countries in North Africa.

For its part, the agency continues to call on parties to the conflict to uphold their responsibility to protect children, schools and other civilian infrastructure, a call which was repeated with even greater urgency as a new year began.

Now more than ever, children in Syria face the most terrible threats to their safety, wellbeing and their education, said Mr. Boulierac.

Responding to a question about the total number of children out of school in Syria, Mr. Boulierac said the latest UNICEF Education Sector analysis, carried out in partnership with the Syrian Ministry of Education estimated that between 2.1 and 2.4 million children in Syria were out of school and/or not attending school regularly.
Another journalist asked who controlled the three governorates where schools had been forced to close to which Mr. Boulierac replied that the Islamic State was believed to have control in the areas where these schools are located.

However, although the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) had ordered the closure of schools in the affected governorates, UNICEF was not necessarily reporting that the ISIL had full control of that region, he clarified, since the situation on the ground kept changing.

Responding to another question about reasons for the school closures, Mr. Boulierac said in December the ISIL issued a decree ordering education in areas under its control to be stopped, because it wanted to change school curricula.

**UN health agency says no Ebola detected in Iraq, calls reports of cases ‘rumours’**

**6 January** - Despite reports of Ebola cases in Mosul in several Iraqi media sources last week, the Iraqi Ministry of Health and the United Nations health agency have confirmed today that no cases of the disease have so far been found in the country.

As well as confirming that laboratory facilities in Mosul do not have the necessary capabilities to diagnose and confirm Ebola, the Health Ministry and the UN World Health Organization (WHO) investigated through “existing surveillance networks” and through contacts in local health authorities and hospitals in Mosul.

“All sources contacted have negated the existence of any suspected cases of Ebola,” said the WHO in a statement today, which also described the media reports as “rumour.”

“The Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization remain vigilant and have scaled up surveillance efforts to ensure early detection and safe management of any eventual suspected EVD cases in the country,” the statement continued, stressing the precautionary measures being taken to ensure effective preventive programmes are in place.

The statement lists actions taken by the WHO and the Ministry of Health, including assessments of international entry points like airports and ports, strengthened surveillance at health facilities, and the development of a contingency and response plan.

**Wilfried Lemke reappointed as UN Special Adviser on Sport for Development, Peace**

**6 January** - The Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace, Wilfried Lemke, stressed that he would continue striving to raise awareness and promote the use of sport as a tool for development and peace as his appointment to the position was extended for another year today.

Mr. Lemke, who has held the position of Special Adviser since April 2008, said he would use the year to explore ways in which sport could be used to promote positive social changes and development.

“Sport is a powerful symbol which eliminates barriers and provides opportunities for rapprochement,” he said. “It does not have the power to stop tanks, but is capable of bringing people together and can be an excellent platform to open up dialogue, unite people and build trust. Sport is a bond to make a positive change in the world.”

The Special Adviser is tasked with reaching out further to the world of sport, as well as leading and coordinating UN system efforts to promote understanding and support for sport as an instrument in the advancement of development and peace objectives, including the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
After a year of a football World Cup and the Winter Olympics and Paralympics, the focus in 2015 shifts to realization of the MDGs and to establishment of the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

Sport will play a continued and crucial role in the achievement of the new agenda and the Special Adviser’s role as advocate and representative of the UN and sport’s role in development is expected will remain of great importance.

Mr. Lemke will be assisted in his work over the coming year by the UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP), which acts as the UN gateway in fostering support for sport as an efficient tool in the pursuit of humanitarian, development and peace-building objectives.