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West African communities receiving Ebola’s orphans with open arms, UN agency reports

6 February - Grief among the more than 16,000 children orphaned by the Ebola outbreak in West Africa runs deep, but most of them have been taken in by families thanks to the bonds of kinship that has proven stronger than stigma and fear associated with the disease, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said today.

Andrew Brooks, speaking to reporters in Geneva on behalf of UNICEF by phone from Dakar, Senegal, said some families had taken in three to seven children, and only around 500 of the 16,600 children had had to be placed in mass care centres.

Of the latter, Mr. Brooks said 80 percent of the children had been reunified with their extended families.

“Resilience of families, communities, relatives to take in the children had been impressive,” said Mr. Brooks. “Credit should be given to communities, as they had truly rallied to help out, and to Governments for taking a strong stand on supporting family not institutional care.”

“There were fears that stigma around Ebola would isolate the orphaned children, which would mean there would be thousands of abandoned children, but that has, luckily, not materialized,” he continued, adding: “The stigma and the fear has not completely disappeared, but the bonds of kinship and traditional relations has proven to be stronger, which was why families had taken kids in.”
He said UNICEF was providing cash support, material assistance, psycho-social support, and referring families for food assistance.

“The reopening of schools in Guinea – and planned re-openings in Liberia and Sierra Leone – has been particularly important, as it will help children adjust and return to some normalcy and routine,” according to Mr. Brooks.

In other Ebola-related developments, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) reported that 22,525 people had now been affected by the disease, with deaths reaching 9,004.

In addition to reporting the first weekly increase in cases for the three hardest hit countries in 2015, WHO also warned that as the wet season approaches, there is an urgent need to end the outbreak in as wide an area as possible, especially in remote areas that will become more difficult to access.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), meanwhile, said it will provide grants totalling some $100 million to be used as debt relief to the three countries worst hit by the Ebola epidemic. Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone will use the funds to cover the cost of servicing their debt.

These grants come in addition to $130 million in emergency assistance the IMF disbursed in September under an existing loan program, as well as about $160 million in additional loans to the three countries proposed for IMF Executive Board approval later this month, according to a press release issued by the organization Thursday.

**FEATURE: ‘I’m not whole’ – female genital mutilation survivor speaks out**

**6 February** - Jaha was just a week old when she was infibulated.

*Infibulation, or type 3 female genital mutilation (FGM), entails narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner, or outer, labia, with or without removal of the clitoris.*

Born in The Gambia and sent to the United States at 15 for an arranged marriage, Jaha Dukureh was too young to remember her FGM procedure but she has never been able to shake the feeling that something is not quite right.

“I’m not whole. I’m not intact. Something was taken away from me,” she says.

Jaha was at the United Nations this week to share her story on the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation. Marked every year on 6 February, the Day aims to raise awareness of the risks of FGM, with this year’s theme focused on urging health workers to mobilize against the “medicalization” of the deeply harmful practice.

Female genital mutilation exposes girls and women to severe complications, including haemorrhage, tetanus, sepsis, urine retention, sexual dysfunction, and even death. Yet, 130 million girls and women alive today have been cut in some 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East, according to the UN. If the practice persists, by 2030, another 86 million girls will experience some form of FGM.

Prevalent in mostly least developed countries where there are also high rates of child marriage and adolescent pregnancies, FGM is deeply rooted in tradition and upheld by the unequal power relations between men and women and the desire to control women’s sexuality, according to the UN. In some communities it is believed that the practice has religious support but there is no evidence that FGM is required by Islam, Christianity or any other religion.

"Besides the physical harm that is implied on women, there is also the psychological part which when we sit with women, they mostly talk about. They feel that it's a humiliation for them to go through such a practice. Young girls are very touched when we talk to them about FGM because the most common word that we hear from women is that it's the worst day of my life,” said Mona Amin, a UN Development Programme FGM expert in Egypt.
The practice is almost universal in that country as well as in Somalia, Guinea and Djibouti, where more than 90 per cent of girls and women have been cut.

In Jaha’s home country, The Gambia, the prevalence rate for women aged 15-49 remains at 76.3 per cent, which means that 3 out of 4 women get cut in their lifetime. She says FGM is a deeply ingrained custom, one that is used to prevent girls from having sex before marriage and to keep them “clean.” And women who do not undergo FGM often are stigmatised and shunned from their communities.

“Women don’t need to be mutilated in order for them to stay virgins and I don’t think we’re unclean if we don’t go through FGM,” Jaha says. “For girls who have not gone through FGM, they’re seen as unclean, not fit to be in the same room with women who have gone through FGM. They even go as far as to say they stink when they walk into a room. It’s discrimination, basically. We’re telling women they’re not clean because a part of their body is not cut.”

At 15, Jaha had to be “reopened” in order to have sex with her husband.

Female genital mutilation also has a direct impact on maternal mortality. Girls and women that have undergone the procedure are 70 per cent more likely to suffer haemorrhage after giving birth and are twice as likely to die during childbirth. FGM also has a direct impact on infant mortality, as it is linked with higher rates of infant resuscitation, stillbirth and increased risk of death during and immediately after birth.

“I have three kids and every time that I’ve delivered my babies, having to go through that process, of getting stitched up because of FGM and the scars that I have and the pain that I go through when I’m delivering my baby. With all three kids that I have, my labour has been more than 18 hours and that is a direct result of FGM,” says Jaha.

Strong in her conviction, Jaha founded Safe Hands for Girls, a non-governmental organisation aiming to end all forms of violence against women, especially FGM. Women who go through FGM, she says, especially girls born in the United States, suffer from low self-esteem. “They feel they can’t enjoy sex... and if they share their stories, they will be seen as freaks.”

International migration has increased the number of girls and women living in the West who have undergone FGM. And while that can be addressed in Western countries, where the procedure is wholly outlawed, change in Africa and the Middle East where FGM is prevalent must come from within.

Many countries see people from the West advocating against child marriage and FGM as intruding on their culture and religion, Jaha says.

“But when it comes from within, when you have people like myself, when you have people from the community, saying that even though this has been our culture, it’s not putting women ahead. It’s the women that know the pain and it’s those women that are standing up to say that we do not want this.”
South Sudan: as top officials spotlight crisis, UN warns of 'dramatic' decline in food security

6 February - South Sudan is on the brink of a major food insecurity crisis as millions of people remain trapped by the country’s ongoing internecine fighting, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has warned.

“Missed crop cycles in conflict-ravaged parts of the country mean we’re now expecting household food stocks in the worst-affected counties to run out by March 2015 – much earlier than in a normal year,” said FAO Country Representative in South Sudan, Sue Lautze, in a press release today marking the UN agency’s latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) report.

The report comes as a host of senior United Nations officials, including Valerie Amos, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Ivan Šimonović, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, along with Academy Award winning actor Forest Whitaker, who is the Envoy for Peace and Reconciliation of UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Back in the country for the first time in over a year, Ms. Amos said she is “extremely concerned” about the humanitarian situation. “I hope that being here, particularly with Mr. Whitaker, we can continue to give attention to what is happening to people and use that as a way of raising resources for the urgently needed humanitarian action that we need to take this year.”

“It’s too early to tell if things will get any better this year,” she told reporters in Juba. “I’m a little disappointed that the peace talks are still ongoing. I hope that will be resolved soon because that’s the thing that is going to make the biggest difference to the people of South Sudan.”

The FAO report, which details the varying levels of food insecurity across the young African nation, spotlights the UN’s concern, noting that 2.5 million people – or, one-fifth of the population – classify as being in either “Crisis” or “Emergency” level food insecurity while an additional 3.9 million are suffering from food insecurity “Stress.”

The security situation in South Sudan has steadily deteriorated since political in-fighting between President Kiir and his former deputy, Mr. Machar, started in mid-December 2013. The hostilities subsequently turned into a full-fledged conflict that has sent nearly 100,000 civilians fleeing to United Nations bases around the country.

Although a tense ceasefire is currently in place, the FAO has cautioned that according to seasonal patterns, the food crisis is expected “to deepen and the risk of a dramatic deterioration will be greatest between April and July this year” during the country’s “lean season.”

The fragile situation in South Sudan has mobilized the entire UN system as numerous agencies are currently on the ground providing humanitarian relief. Working with the World Food Programme (WFP), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) continues to step up aid for malnourished children across South Sudan. UNICEF and partners provided therapeutic feeding treatment for almost 100,000 severely malnourished in 2014 and are aiming to reach 137,000 children under five suffering from severe acute malnutrition in 2015.

UNICEF and WFP are also flying in expert teams to remote locations that are cut off from humanitarian aid, in what is called Rapid Response Missions. During these missions, UNICEF screens children for malnutrition and refers and treats those who are moderately and severely malnourished.

Against that backdrop, the FAO has urged donors to provide an additional $32 million in funding in order to maintain and expand its current operations on the ground while also providing the agency with resources to procure supplies for the coming year.

“We have to continue to invest on two tracks,” Ms. Lautze continued. “One, provide humanitarian aid to prevent the most affected areas from sliding into greater crisis and, two, boost food production and local economies in the more stable areas.
so they can support recovery in other parts of the country.”

Over the past year, the FAO has already reached over 3.2 million people with more than 570,000 livelihood kits containing portable, essential inputs, including vegetable seeds, crops seeds and tools, animal health equipment and fishing inputs that have been reaching affected communities by truck and airdrop.

For his part, Mr. Whitaker noted that many of the schools have been shut down because of the ongoing fighting. “Right now, we’re trying to bring attention to that…and [show] that we need to advance education to allow people to heal during this process of peacebuilding that’s hopefully going to be happening. I’m hoping that we’ll be able to find a place where children can go to school and find peace in their lives and all aspects of their well-being,” he added.

**INTERVIEW: Senior UN relief official warns no room for complacency until Ebola is eliminated**

6 February - Having recently visited the West African countries worst affected by the current Ebola crisis, John Ging, Operations Director of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), returned feeling confident that the outbreak can be completely eliminated, the humanitarian situation addressed and the countries’ resilience to future outbreaks boosted.

This week, the UN News Centre met with Mr. Ging, a veteran UN relief official and asked him about his trip to the hardest-hit countries – Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone – and his hopes and plans for the next phase of the Ebola response.

UN News Centre: What can you tell us about your recent trip to West Africa?

**John Ging:** Well, as you might expect, it’s been something that has impressed me. The scale, of course, of this crisis is unprecedented, with 22,000 people across three countries affected by the virus and over 9,000 dying tragically. But of course, [there is] also this dimension of fear because there is no cure although a lot of people have survived, and also how contagious it is, how rapidly it spreads.

Now, what has impressed me is the degree of community mobilization in the face of this massive tragedy. It’s been incredible to see how communities have faced this fear and actually overcome it. There’s been very impressive international engagement, heroic international staff in so many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), also public servants who have gone out there, medical workers, and military being deployed, by the United States and the United Kingdom in particular. All on the front line.

This endeavour has been a team effort – locally, nationally and internationally. And thankfully now, the crisis has been turned from Ebola having the initiative and being out of control to the international and national endeavour having the initiative and working towards the elimination of the crisis.

UN News Centre: And going forward, OCHA’s about to deploy Emergency Response Teams. What can you tell us about that?

**John Ging:** Well, OCHA has deployed over 166 staff in this crisis, so we’ve been there throughout but we have been integrated in UNMEER (UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response) for example and also in support of the resident coordinators in each of the countries. We now look at the situation of course as in transition from the immediate effort to combat the advance of Ebola, to the next phase, which is the elimination of Ebola, which is the hardest mile, I might add, in that effort. It’s very tough, so [there’s] no room for complacency.

But for us on the OCHA side, there are other humanitarian consequences that are now falling out from this crisis: 10,000 orphans; the stigmatisation of the Ebola survivors and their psychosocial and physical issues; kids are all out of school for again the past year almost. It’s livelihoods, the people who have died are predominantly from those who are breadwinners of families. There’s a lot of humanitarian consequences at the grassroots level. The health systems have collapsed in the face of
this crisis. They were very weak to begin with. Health workers are the ones that have been most exposed and, sadly and tragically, hundreds have died.

So there’s a massive recovery here that is required, and on the OCHA side, we have to play our role in supporting our humanitarian partners, international NGOs, and UN agencies in this next phase of this endeavour.

UN News Centre: Can you tell us a little more about the wider humanitarian situation in the affected countries?

John Ging: Well, the first impact of course is on the families themselves [as] most of the people who’ve lost their lives are in the category of being the breadwinner for families. Now, those families are very vulnerable because they have lost their source of income. We also have a situation where survivors – the orphans – some 10,000 children, have lost one or both parents. Also, the delivery of public services, basic public services in healthcare and education and other services have basically been overrun by the consequences of this crisis.

So, medical centres are not functioning. They all have to be re-established. Schools have been closed. They have to be re-opened. There’s a huge amount of work to do at the community level – humanitarian work to help people to recover, in terms of their health, education, and livelihood support. And that’s where we on the OCHA side want to work and support our partners in helping them on the things that we do around coordination, fundraising and international advocacy.

UN News Centre: Earlier you mentioned that there is “no room for complacency.” What exactly do you mean by complacency? What are we trying to avoid?

John Ging: Well, the fight against Ebola has been going on now for over a year. It’s been at a heightened pace of response for the last six months or so, but the first case broke out in Guinea in December 2013, so the communities have been living with this and aid workers on the front line have been fighting this for well over a year. And one can understand that there’s exhaustion. There’s exhaustion mentally and also physically at the community level. They wish it was over; they wish they could get back to their normal lives. There’s exhaustion also among aid workers who have been on the front lines for so long.

But we have to make sure that we are giving the international support needed to conclude this fight, because if there is any complacency now, then this virus will come back very quickly. We have seen that. We’ve seen how powerful it is in terms of its ability to spread quickly and infect very large numbers of people. It does not respect borders. So there has to be a lot of effort now in this phase towards elimination, to get to zero cases in all of the affected countries – following through on, first and foremost, keeping the communities motivated.

They’re the key. People identifying when they’re sick…coming forward for treatment. Therefore, they’re protecting their families but they’re also increasing their chances of surviving. That’s also important in our messaging – survival is possible. Thousands have survived. Early detection, early treatment, that’s the key to survival. And then, of course, that we’re providing support for them in treatment and also for their families. It’s also important that communities are not allowed to lose hope. And that’s where we need tangible support around the other issues – livelihood support, public services, healthcare, education, and so forth. This will ensure that people feel international solidarity is not just with them for the fight against Ebola, but with them in the recovery effort as well.

UN News Centre: This week, we have seen a spike in the numbers of Ebola cases. What does that mean for the response?

John Ging: Well, it means that’s the reality of the fight against this virus. This virus is not going to give up easily and if anyone wants evidence against complacency, there [it is]. People are working day and night, around the clock and yet this was not a good week. But hopefully, next week will be a better week because when one looks back over the last months, one can have confidence. There’s a heroic effort going on, superb leadership – at the community level, at the national level and also in the international engagement. It’s effective, and again, if it continues to get the support in resources, [the response effort] will succeed. But again, the message out there from everybody is ‘no room for complacency.’ Success is not achieved until Ebola is eliminated.

UN News Centre: Once eliminated, once we reach zero cases, how do we stay there?
John Ging: This is where the development of the healthcare systems is key, and also having the capacity to respond much more quickly and much more effectively if there is another outbreak. You know, there are countries like the Congo where it’s endemic, but outbreaks do not result in a catastrophe. They are managed because people know what to do and there is the competence to deal with it.

I do feel, of course, that communities have been very sensitized to the dangers of this virus in West Africa so there is a high level of awareness. But then, [we must ask] is the medical system capable to actually deal with that? So, there must be a legacy here of our engagement that we have helped to capacitate the medical systems in these countries so that if they face new cases in the future, they will have the response capacity to quickly contain the outbreak and bring it back to zero.

In addition of course, we also need to realize that the wider healthcare system is key, because this region [is] malaria endemic and the symptoms are very common in the initial phase between malaria and Ebola. So you need very competent health workers [that remain] vigilant at all times. And that’s why we’ve been saying that part of the recovery and the legacy of this outbreak have to be to that we build back better in support of the communities and the countries themselves, particularly on the healthcare side.

UN News Centre: What specifically is OCHA’s focus going forward?

John Ging: Well, OCHA’s focus is, as it is everywhere, [to] support humanitarian organizations in three principle functions. One is on the information side, so we are facilitating the information that our partners need to know what the situation is…who’s doing what where to avoid overlap and duplication. And also to generate effective advocacy around the response that is needed. The second thing we do is we facilitate the operational coordination, bringing people together so again that we can help to support the best focused [response] in efficiency and effectiveness.

And finally, in humanitarian financing – the fundraising dimension to all this. OCHA manages the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), also launches the global appeals for our humanitarian partners and we see that as something that is going to be very important moving forward – that we continue to be able to generate the international engagement – the generosity of our Member States to help these people who have been so devastated by this crisis to recover. And it is possible in the short term to actually support a recovery here, so it’s an investment that’s worth making. The people [in the affected region] most definitely deserve our support.

‘World must act responsibly,’ say UN advisors urging restraint following latest ISIL atrocity

6 February - Members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) need to know that they will be held accountable for their crimes, two senior United Nations right officials declared today, adding that recent murder of Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh was “yet another example of a deliberate grave abuse of human rights and international humanitarian law” perpetrated by the extremist group.

In a joint statement released this afternoon, the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Genocide, Adama Dieng, and the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, Jennifer Welsh, condemned the murder of Mr. al-Kasasbeh, who was immolated by the group earlier this week, and cautioned the international community against “the escalation of incitement in rhetoric” as a response to the pilot’s shocking death.

According to media reports, the terrorist group released a 22-minute video on 3 February purporting to show the execution of the Jordanian pilot by burning him alive. This latest murder comes on the heels of last Saturday’s beheading of a Japanese journalist and adds to the group’s long-standing reputation of committing atrocities against civilians.

“As we speak, thousands of civilians remain at the mercy of this group; members of minority groups continue to be killed and threatened in a systematic way; tribal leaders and others who dare to oppose ISIL in the areas it controls continue to be murdered; women and children are being specifically targeted, and religious and cultural symbols are being destroyed,” the Special Advisers said in a joint statement.
ISIL’s actions have shocked and outraged the international community, drawing widespread condemnation from the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, UN Security Council, and world leaders alike. As such, the Special Advisers urged “all those with influence” to exercise and encourage restraint and to “refrain from incitement to hostility or violence, even in moment of outrage.”

“At this time, we must unite in the fight against terrorism and uphold international law,” the UN officials continued.

“The use of hate speech by influential personalities at a moment like this may only trigger further violence. An escalation of inflammatory rhetoric could ultimately serve the interests of terrorists.”

In addition, they called on all religious leaders to “act responsibly” and refrain from fuelling tensions with any provocative language.

Both Advisers recalled that the 2005 World Summit outcome document commitment by Member States to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity includes a commitment to prevent the incitement of these crimes.

**Ban joins Arab League Secretary-General in urging donors to honour Gaza pledges**

6 February - Expressing deep concern about the situation in Gaza, the Secretaries-General of the United Nations and the League of Arab States made an urgent appeal today, asking donors to honour and disburse as soon as possible the financial commitments they made at an October 2014 conference convened to kick-start reconstruction in the war-torn enclave.

“This support should also include funding for UN agencies that are carrying out vital operations in Gaza, in order to prevent a further deterioration in the already dire humanitarian situation,” said the Secretaries-General in a joint statement issued by their spokespersons.

“The pace of reconstruction in Gaza remains slow,” continued the statement. “It is crucial now to expand the scope of reconstruction efforts thus far to bring hope to the people of Gaza and ensure stability, based on international responsibility in reconstruction and lifting the siege.”

The conference, held on 12 October in the Egyptian capital, saw pledges from some 50 countries amounting to about $5.4 billion.

The statement also noted progress made so far under the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, which aims to enable construction and reconstruction work at the large scale now required in the Gaza Strip. So far, the Mechanism has enabled access to construction material for some 55,000 Gazan homeowners in support of shelter repairs.

The Mechanism was agreed in the aftermath of last summer’s conflict in the war-ravaged enclave. According to a recent UN assessment, as it stands now, over 100,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, affecting more than 600,000 people. Many people still lack access to the municipal water network. Blackouts of up to 18 hours per day are common.

The UN says that the operations of the Mechanism are ready to be scaled up to facilitate the swift implementation of major large-scale projects.
UN refugee agency says ‘over a million’ may already be displaced by eastern Ukraine violence

6 February - Nearly 1 million people may have now been displaced by the conflict in eastern Ukraine, with the recent upsurge in violence causing massive destruction of buildings and infrastructure, the collapse of basic services and a spike in the numbers fleeing fighting, the United Nations refugee agency reported today.

“As more homes and other civilian infrastructure is damaged or destroyed, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expects more people to be displaced to areas in central, southern and western Ukraine under the control of the Ukrainian Government, but also to non-government controlled areas in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions,” said spokesperson Adrian Edwards.

Last week, UNHCR reported at least 943,500 internally displaced persons (IDPs), with Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policy today counting some 980,000 people as currently internally displaced, expecting that figure to rise as fighting continues.

William Spindler, another spokesman for UNHCR added to Mr. Edwards’s comments by saying that numbers of IDPs are growing daily as more people register.

“Some of these people are recently displaced, which leads us to believe that the actual number might be over a million displaced inside Ukraine,” he said. “To those we need to add those who have fled to neighbouring countries.”

Currently, over 600,000 Ukrainians have fled the country, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, particularly the Russian Federation, but also Belarus, Moldova, Poland, Hungary and Romania, since February 2014.

“Local authorities have begun to evacuate people from conflict areas, but many are still trapped by the fighting, including in basements and buildings under constant bombardment. The evacuations are being organized by the Government helped by local volunteers,” Mr. Edwards said.

So far, more than 2,800 civilians, including about 700 children and 60 people living with disability, have been evacuated from the towns of Debaltseve, Avdiivka and Svitlodar, which have seen fierce combat. Several incidents of shelling of buses carrying the evacuees have been reported.

Evacuees are being taken to government-controlled towns to the north of Donetsk such as Slovyansk, Sviatohirsk, Kramatorsk and Grorivka, as well as to the nearby Kharkiv region, but the Ukrainian Government has expressed concerns that areas close to the frontline are unable to accommodate new arrivals because of the heavy shelling they are under, and they warn that people will have to be moved further away to central, southern and western parts of the country.

Organized evacuation is mainly done by bus or car, with the most vulnerable taking trains. Train carriages at the railway station in Slovyansk are used as temporary accommodation for evacuees as they await onward transportation.

Other civilians flee conflict areas by their own means, facing numerous dangers along the way. UNHCR teams on the ground report many of the recently displaced arriving with very few belongings and very few winter clothes.

“We have been assisting some of these evacuees with warm clothing, with blankets, and other urgently needed everyday items,” said Mr. Edwards. “But we are also operating in the areas that are not under the control of the Ukrainian Government, where we are also assisting the civilian population.”
The agency has been working closely with local non-governmental organization (NGO) networks to distribute relief items, such as blankets, sleeping bags, bed linen, warm clothes and jerry cans, in northern areas of the Donetsk region, the main place of arrival of IDPs from the conflict areas. It has also assisted around 1,600 newly arrived IDPs from Debaltsevo and Vuhlehirsk in conflict-affected areas which are not controlled by the Government.

The lack of access to public services previously provided by the central authorities has drastically worsened the plight of the civilian population in areas not under government control, UNHCR reports, pointing to further aggravation of the crisis due to restrictions on the movement of people and goods.

“UNHCR maintains its call on all parties to the conflict to refrain from any actions that might endanger the life of civilians and to adhere to the principles of international humanitarian law,” Mr. Edwards stressed.

**Breaking silence, disproving myths first steps towards eliminating female genital mutilation – UN chief**

6 February - On the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, marked every year on 6 February, and this year focused on ending the 'medicalization' of the procedure, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called on health workers around the world to eliminate what he called a 'deeply harmful' practice.

“Change is coming from within the communities. Breaking the silence and disproving the myths around female genital mutilation are the first steps along the way to eliminating it altogether,” said Mr. Ban in his message on the Day.

“If everyone mobilized – women, men and young people – it is possible, in this generation, to end a practice that currently affects some 130 million girls and women in 29 countries where we have data,” said Mr. Ban. “I call for all people to end FGM and create the future we want where every girl can grow up free of violence and discrimination, with full dignity, human rights and equality.”

According to the United Nations, FGM has no health benefits, and it harms girls and women in many ways. It involves removing and damaging healthy and normal female genital tissue, and interferes with the natural functions of girls' and women's bodies.

Immediate complications can include severe pain, shock, haemorrhage (bleeding), tetanus or sepsis (bacterial infection), urine retention, open sores in the genital region and injury to nearby genital tissue.

Long-term consequences can include recurrent bladder and urinary tract infections, cysts, infertility, an increased risk of childbirth complications and newborn deaths, and the need for later surgeries.

“I am truly inspired by actions already being taken by health professionals, such as the Mauritanian Association of Midwives, which refuses to practice female genital mutilation and actively promotes the abandonment of the practice,” the Secretary-General said.

“We must also ensure that parents do not seek to bypass health workers in finding alternative methods of subjecting their daughters to FGM,” he added.

Today's commemoration is co-organized by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) along with the International Confederation of Midwives and the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO). A joint statement released by all four organizers said that the support of health workers in the global efforts to end FGM is critical.

“Health workers also have a deep understanding of the harmful consequences of this practice. They see the urinary, menstrual, and obstetric complications – including haemorrhage, infection and death – caused by it. And, they also witness
the emotional wounds FGM inflicts, trauma which often lasts a lifetime,” they co-conveners said.

According to UNICEF, around one in five girls have been cut by a trained health-care provider. In some countries, this can reach as high as three in four girls. Countries with the highest number of FGM cases performed by health workers are – Egypt (77 per cent), Sudan (55 per cent), Kenya (41 per cent), (Nigeria, 29 per cent), and (Guinea, 27 per cent).

“Female genital mutilation (FGM) violates the human rights and undermines the health and well-being of some 3 million girls each year,” said the joint statement. “FGM is illegal in many countries, and medical providers who perform it in these places are breaking the law. But in every country, whether legal or not medical providers who perform FGM are violating the fundamental rights of girls and women.”

FGM reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. It is nearly always carried out on minors and is a violation of the rights of children, the UN says.

The practice, concentrated in some 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East, from Yemen and Gambia to Somalia and Mauritania, also violates a woman's rights to health, security and physical integrity, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and the right to life when the procedure results in death.

Nearly one in five women who has undergone FGM lives in Egypt. The practice is almost universal in Somalia, Guinea, Djibouti and Egypt, where more than 90 per cent of girls and women have been cut.

UNFPA and UNICEF are jointly implementing the largest global programme to accelerate the abandonment of FGM.

Kosovo: UN envoy calls on parties to engage in dialogue, make ‘hard choices’ for regional stability

6 February - Citing recent violent protests, the United Nations Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Kosovo told the Security Council today that leaders must engage seriously in ongoing dialogue and make the hard choices required for regional stability.

“From its inception, the European Union-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina has been about making hard choices between the past and the future, between stagnation and progress and between consolidating political power and doing what is in the best interest of the people in the region,” Farid Zarif told the 15-member Council via video teleconference from Pristina, ahead of a debate on the issue.

Introducing the Secretary-General’s latest report, Mr. Zarif, who is also the Head of the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK), said that, in December 2015, a new Kosovo government was formed as the result of an alliance between two major political parties.

Over the past weeks, however, the government has responded to mass protests in Pristina on 24 and 27 January that caused scores of injuries and destruction of property, he said. The protests demanded the resignation of a Kosovo Serb minister over remarks attributed to him at previous protests and the reversal of law asserting public ownership of a large mining enterprise. It also seemed to be fuelled by discontent with the economic situation.

Calling peaceful protest a right, but violence deplorable, Mr. Zarif commended the proportional reaction of the Kosovo police and the condemnation of the violence by political and civil leaders in Kosovo. Unfortunately, a small number of political figures, mostly from the opposition, attempted to exploit the situation. He called for “measured” discussions of the issues that sparked the protest, so that the new government could make progress on its stated objectives.

On dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, set to resume on 9 February in Brussels, he highlighted the need for the Kosovo side’s early commitment to the establishment of an “association/community of Serb-majority municipalities,” as well as the importance of delving into new areas.
Praising “sensible choices in priorities” of the new coalition government and the Kosovo Assembly, he urged the swift completion of actions required for justice, reconciliation and economic progress. Applauding also the swift drafting of a law criminalizing participation in armed conflicts outside Kosovo, he urged further consideration of the draft in consultation with concerned representatives of the international community. Noting that dozens of terror suspects had been arrested, he encouraged the continuation of a multidimensional approach to the problem that included engagement of religious and political leaders.

Welcoming steps to address social inequality, high unemployment and the growing illegal emigration to Western Europe, Mr. Zarif urged the Pristina authorities to proceed judiciously in those matters and continue availing themselves of the many sources of advice the international community could offer.

Finally, he noted progress in protection of cultural heritage, calling for enhanced local dialogue to resolve remaining challenges, and urged that political will be mustered to bring about swift closure of the 1,655 outstanding cases of missing persons.

### Marking World Interfaith Week, top UN officials hope for collaboration on sustainable development

6 February - At a special event today which marked World Interfaith Week, top United Nations officials celebrated the importance of dialogue among different faiths and religions to enhance mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation among people.

The President of the General Assembly told the event, titled “World Interfaith Harmony: Multi-religious Partnership for Sustainable Development,” that the message of peace and goodwill was as important as ever in light of the recent disturbing rise of intolerance and prejudice in many of our communities.

“As intolerance, bigotry and hatred continue to fuel conflicts, violence and extremism in many corners of the world, we need to strengthen our efforts to foster respect and mutual understanding between cultures, religions and ethnic groups,” said Sam Kutesa. “Every time we chose dialogue and reconciliation over confrontation, we take a step forward on our collective path to lasting peace.”

He referred to the Assembly’s recent meeting on the rise of anti-Semitic violence and said he would convene a high-level thematic debate in April on promoting tolerance and reconciliation.

He also looked ahead to the world’s “historic journey” towards formulation of an inclusive and transformative future development agenda, saying 2015 is a year of hope and opportunity, representing an unprecedented chance to set the world on a path toward sustainable development and to eradicate poverty and hunger.

“The task ahead of us is momentous and will require profound shifts in how we think and act,” he said. “Interfaith collaboration can not only help promote common values shared by all humankind; it can also serve as an important foundational element for the advancement of our post-2015 development objectives.”

Speaking on behalf of the Secretary-General, the UN’s new communications chief, Christina Gallach, also pointed to the principles of tolerance and respect for the others that are deeply rooted in the world’s major religions.

At the same time, she called for solidarity in the face of those who spread misunderstanding and mistrust.

“Too many communities around the world face violence and discrimination based on their religious identity,” she said. “Cowards are attacking civilians. Political figures and others are using emotive appeals to manipulate people based on their religious affiliations. Those who go down the path of violence and hatred may invoke the name of religion – but they only distort those faiths and bring shame upon themselves.”

She noted the immense influence of religious leaders and communities and highlighted the power they have to build...
cooperation, learning, healing and sustainable development.

“They can set an example of dialogue, and unite people based on precepts common to all creeds,” she said. “And they can point the way toward addressing underlying causes of disharmony, including poverty, discrimination, resource scarcity and poor governance.”

**As Central America drought causes food shortages, UN agency calls for urgent funding**

6 February - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) voiced concern today over the impact a “severe and prolonged” drought in four Central American States may have on food and nutrition security across the region.

Speaking at a press briefing in Geneva, WFP Spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs told journalists that more than 2 million people in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua are in need of food assistance following a drawn-out dry spell during the first crop cycle of 2014.

According to Ms. Byrs, an Emergency Food Security Assessment conducted by the WFP and other UN agencies in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador reported that families had resorted to negative coping strategies such as reducing health and education expenditures, consuming seed reserves, decreasing expenditures on agricultural inputs, begging, selling breeding livestock, and selling land.

Numerous households in the three countries had also reported the migration of at least one family member over the two months preceding the Assessment.

The four Governments have requested international help to provide the affected areas with food assistance, and WFP is currently on the ground supporting Guatemala’s response for some 180,000 people. In Honduras, the UN agency has reached an estimated 56,000 while in El Salvador, the WFP has focused its response on providing nearly 40,000 people with conditional transfers of cash and vouchers.

Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, WFP and the Government had provided food to over 270,000 people affected by the dry spell.

Nonetheless, Ms. Byrs warned, a funding shortfall of $20 million was putting the next three months of essential food assistance at risk.

**DR Congo: UN rights office urges release of illegally detained protestors**

6 February - The United Nations human rights office today raised serious due process concerns over the detention of at least 300 people – some for as long as three weeks and with no access to a lawyer – following recent demonstrations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The mass arrests occurred when protests broke out in the capital, Kinshasa, and Lubumbashi, the second largest city in the DRC, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) told journalists in Geneva.

Of those currently being held, at least 11 are believed to be in ‘incommunicado’ detention, including prominent civil society representative Christopher Ngoyi Mutamba. His family members and defence lawyers have had no news of him for more than two weeks, said spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani.

“The UN joint human rights office in the DRC has been working with the authorities to secure the release of all those who
have been illegally detained, as they enter their third week of detention without access to lawyers,” she added.

OHCHR reiterates its call to the authorities to release all those imprisoned for exercising their right to peaceful assembly, for expression of their views, for their affiliation with the opposition or for disagreeing with the amendments to the electoral bill.

Internet and mobile text messaging services have also been restricted for more than two weeks now, causing great disruption, particularly to vulnerable communities.

“We urge the Government to promptly re-establish these services and to create a space for civil society discussion, to avoid entrenching the divisions in the country ahead of the upcoming elections,” Ms. Shamdasani stressed.

**Jailing of Burundian journalist raises concerns ahead of elections – UN rights office**

6 February - The imprisonment of Burundian journalist Bob Rugurika raises serious concerns about the exercise of the freedom of expression in Burundi, particularly ahead of the upcoming elections, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said today.

Mr. Rugurika, the Director of the independent *Radio publique africaine* (RPA), was arrested on 20 January following RPA broadcasts that included allegations about the involvement of senior intelligence officials in the killing of three Italian nuns, according to OHCHR.

Today’s statement follows the refusal by a court in the Burundian capital of Bujumbura on Feb. 4 to hear a request by his lawyers for his provisional release. Mr. Rugurika could face long-term imprisonment for complicity in murder, among other charges that could be considered, according to OHCHR.

OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani called on the authorities to ensure that Mr. Rugurika’s case would be handled in line with international due process standards and fair trial guarantees, in accordance with Burundi’s international commitments.

“No one should be prosecuted for legitimately exercising his fundamental right to freedom of expression and opinion,” the spokesperson was quoted as saying.

The UN Human Rights country office in Burundi had visited Rugurika in prison, had held discussions with the authorities and would continue to monitor the case, Ms. Shamdasani told reporters at a press briefing in Geneva today.

“Mr. Rugurika’s case raises serious concerns about the exercise of the freedom of expression in Burundi, particularly ahead of the upcoming elections,” she said.

OHCHR said it had previously urged the Government to review the Media Law, which required journalists to reveal their sources when they reported on issues such as state security and public order, legislation that could lead “all too easily to infringements of freedom of expression.”
Security Council demands end to Mali violence, urges parties to reach peace deal

6 February - Demanding an immediate end to all hostilities in Mali, the United Nations Security Council today urged Malian parties to “engage with sustained political will and a spirit of compromise” and make the necessary concessions to engage in talks towards a comprehensive, inclusive peace deal that addresses the root causes of the years-long crisis in the country.

The Government of Mali and the signatory and adherent armed groups of the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement must resume without delay the inter-Malian negotiation process in Algiers, the 15-member body urged in a Presidential Statement approved this morning.

“The parties have a responsibility to the Malian people and the international community to reach a durable peace agreement,” the Security Council stressed, calling on all actors who have influence on the Malian leaders to urge them “to negotiate seriously and in good faith.”

“The Security Council urges the parties to seize the historic opportunity offered by the inter-Malian negotiation process in Algiers, in which all neighbouring countries and relevant regional and international partners are involved, to support lasting peace in Mali,” the Council said.

In the meantime, those involved in the Malian conflict must “refrain from any action, whether direct or conducted through proxies, that jeopardizes prospects for peace,” the Council stressed, emphasizing that it would consider appropriate measures, including targeted sanctions, against those who resume hostilities and violate the ceasefire.

Underscoring that only a comprehensive peace agreement can bring lasting security to Mali, the Council deplored the continued violence in the north of the country and demanded all parties respect the ceasefire agreed to on 23 May 2014, as well as the declaration of the Cessation of Hostilities signed in Algiers on 24 July 2014.

The Security Council emphasized that the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Mali, Mongi Hamdi, and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) should play a leading role, in conjunction with the other members of the international mediation team, to oversee implementation of a peace deal, of which primary responsibility rests with the Malian parties.

The Council acknowledged the sacrifices of MINUSMA’s troops and condemned all attacks against its peacekeepers. Such attacks may constitute war crimes under international law, the Council noted, calling on MINUSMA to implement its mandate using all necessary means within its capabilities, including preventing the return of armed factions, protecting civilians, and responding to attacks against its personnel.

“The Security Council welcomes the decision of the Secretary-General to launch an independent inquiry to determine the facts surrounding the tragic incidents that took place on 27 January 2015 during a violent demonstration in front of the MINUSMA base in Gao, in the North of Mali, and the reported death of at least 3 protesters,” the statement said.

Drawing on lessons from the previous peace agreements, which did not achieve a durable peace in Mali, the Council urged Malian parties – and called on the members of the international mediation team – in Algiers to devise “concrete oversight mechanisms that will ensure the full, faithful and immediate implementation of a future comprehensive and inclusive peace agreement.”

In addition, the provisions relating to the participation of women, sexual violence and child protection must be taken into
account during the on-going negotiations and any possible outcome.

The Government in Mali has been seeking to restore stability and rebuild following a series of setbacks since early 2012, including a military coup d’état, renewed fighting between Government forces and Tuareg rebels, and the seizure of its northern territory by radical Islamists. Throughout much of this time, Mali’s north has remained restive and, in recent months, MINUSMA and its “blue helmets” have come under repeated violent attack.