Member States must ‘step it up’ on gender parity as UN sets equality targets for 2030

6 March - The past 20 years has seen halting progress on women’s rights issues and, in some areas, outright stagnation and regression, the head of the United Nations entity for gender equality and women’s empowerment said today.

Briefing journalists at a press conference at in New York as part of a wider launch of activities tied to International Women’s Day, UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka warned that the march towards gender equality had been unacceptably slow amid chronic underinvestment across all areas.

“The Secretary-General’s report makes this very clear,” Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka said, referring to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s global review of progress on gender equality, slated for full launch on 9 March at the opening of the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

“The disappointing gap between the norms and implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action points to a collective failure of leadership on progress for women. The leaders entrusted with the power to realize the promises made in Beijing have failed women and girls,” she added.

UN Women noted that the report cites some areas of progress, such as an upturn in the number of countries removing discriminatory laws and adopting legislation to stop violence against women and girls. Meanwhile, girls’ participation in education has led them to being close to half of all students in primary schools while the presence of women in the labour
force has also risen.

Nevertheless, despite the 189 countries that endorsed the Platform for Action 20 years ago in Beijing, the Secretary-General’s report notes that no country has yet achieved gender equality. In addition, it points out that despite their better education, women continue to hold some of the worst jobs while the gender pay gap remains a worldwide phenomenon.

Conflict, volatile food and energy prices, fallout from climate change, rising extremism and an insidious backlash against women’s rights due to deeply entrenched discriminatory norms – all continue to restrain advancements for gender parity.

As a result, Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka continued, UN Women was launching its “Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality” initiative to galvanize government pledges for action and as part of the wider Beijing+20 campaign.

“Today, we are calling on governments, everywhere in the world, to Step It Up,” she added. “By 2030 at the latest, we want to live in a world where at least half of all parliamentarians, university students, CEOs, civil society leaders and any other category, are women. Real progress requires 50-50.”

**Ban ‘profoundly disappointed’ over failed progress on South Sudan peace talks**

6 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today expressed profound disappointment after the unsuccessful conclusion of peace talks in South Sudan and the failure of President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar to display statesmanship and reach a power-sharing deal.

The security situation in the world’s youngest country has deteriorated steadily over the past year since political in-fighting between the two leaders erupted in December 2013. The hostilities subsequently turned into a full-fledged conflict that has sent nearly 100,000 civilians fleeing to bases around the country managed by the UN Missions (UNMISS).

Peace talks were being conducted under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), which had also set a 5 March deadline for the conclusion of negotiations between the two parties.

A statement issued this afternoon, the UN spokesperson office said that the Secretary-General has reached out to all relevant leaders over the past two days to urge the continuation of negotiations.

“He urges both parties to refrain from any attempt to escalate the conflict and reiterates that there can be no military solution or alternative to a negotiated settlement. He appreciates the efforts and vital role played by IGAD and its special envoys in bringing peace to South Sudan. He supports IGAD's intention to expand the mediation to include other partners,” the office said.

The Secretary-General also recalled recent UN Security Council resolution 2206 (2015), and the Council's intention to impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities who fail to abide by the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement of 23 January 2014.

The crisis in South Sudan has uprooted an estimated 1.9 million people and placed more than 7 million at risk of hunger and disease, a recent peace deal between the warring factions had fostered hope of a definitive end to the year-long conflict.

According to the UN, in fact, the Organization’s bases across South Sudan are currently sheltering over 110,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) with an additional 1.5 million others displaced throughout the country and 500,000 outside the country.
Ukraine: ‘the road ahead will be difficult’ UN political chief tells Security Council in briefing

6 March - As the Security Council this morning met to hear briefings from top United Nations officials on the political, humanitarian and human rights situations in Ukraine, members heard that the eastern part of the country remains “in limbo.”

“The road ahead will be difficult but it is critical that all concerned strictly adhere to and commence good-faith implementation of this agreement,” said Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

Mr. Feltman, who was joined in the Council by Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Šimonović, who briefed on the rights situation in the country, and John Ging, the Operations Director for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), who briefed on the humanitarian crisis, said a number of significant developments had occurred since his last briefing.

He pointed to the signing on 12 February by the Trilateral Contact Group and rebel representatives of the “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements” and the adoption by the Council on 17 February of resolution 2202, which he said provided a “binding international framework” for efforts to reach a lasting solution.

He noted, however, that despite the agreements, fighting continued in Debaltseve, with innocent civilians caught in the cross-fire.

“The rebels’ unabated attacks for control over this strategic area were in clear violation of the agreement they had signed only five days prior,” said Mr. Feltman, who went on to note that the situation had since calmed, though the ceasefire remained fragile and was not firmly in place throughout the region. “Sporadic violations are reported frequently, including south, near Mariupol, and once again near Donetsk airport,” he added.

The Under-Secretary-General also pointed to monitoring of troop withdrawals conducted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Monitoring Mission but noted that lack of access and freedom of movement of its monitors left the Mission unable to verify the true extent of the process.

Adding that Ukraine’s President, Petro Poroshenko, had said he would request a UN-mandated peacekeeping force for eastern Ukraine, he said discussions had been held but that the decision was one for Council members.

“The Secretariat would be guided by its decision,” he said. “To date, no formal request has been received from Ukraine.”

Briefing on human rights in eastern Ukraine, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Šimonović said the situation “remained alarming” and “grave” despite the ceasefire. A “stark escalation” of hostilities in January and the first half of February led to “increased violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, with a sharp spike in casualties and devastating consequences for the local population.”

He noted that full reports on casualties, especially near Donetsk airport and in the Debaltseve area, were still pending but said the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) estimated the total number of people killed was now passed the 6,000 mark.

He drew attention to several “disturbing trends,” including the increased use of sophisticated and heavy weaponry and continued indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas by both sides. Such attacks were taking an escalating toll on civilians, he
said, adding that deliberate targeting of civilians may constitute a war crime, and could amount to a crime against humanity if widespread or systematic.

“Hospitals, schools and kindergartens have been shelled, in both Government and armed groups controlled areas, limiting access to healthcare and education,” he said. “The situation is aggravated by the alleged continued inflow of heavy weaponry and foreign fighters from the Russian Federation.”

Other trends included the fact that civilians have remained trapped in the conflict zone, with ongoing and severe restrictions on freedom of movement, and a clear deepening of the “divide in Ukrainian society,” which was illustrated most clearly by the terrorist attack in Kharkiv that killed four people, and 14 attacks in Odessa since December that targeted pro-Maidan offices and supporters.

“Against this backdrop, it remains absolutely crucial that the Government shows resolve and commitment to fight corruption and to render impartial justice and accountability for all human rights violations, regardless of the perpetrators or the victims,” said Mr. Šimonović. “Impartial accountability can help deter future human rights violations, preserve the confidence of the people in their Government, and contribute towards the healing of psychological wounds.”

That point was taken up by John Ging, OCHA Operations Director. He said five million people across the country are now in need of humanitarian assistance – two million in Government-controlled areas and three million in non-Government-controlled areas.

“One year ago Ukraine had no displaced people,” said Mr. Ging. “Now, as a result of the conflict, there are almost 1.1 million people registered as internally displaced, more than 100,000 of them in the last month. And more than 670,000 people have fled to neighbouring countries.”

With the pause in fighting, people who were previously trapped had fled, adding to the total numbers. While the ceasefire remained fragile, it allowed some humanitarian access to get through.

“Most recently, 62 tons of humanitarian aid was delivered to Donetsk city by UN convoy on 19 February,” he said. “Supplies included essential hygiene items, warm clothes, blankets, condensed milk powder, drinking water, and medicines.”

He stressed the importance of allowing aid and aid workers safe and unimpeded passage and access to those in need of life-saving assistance and he underlined the fact that needs still far outweighed the combined capacity of the humanitarian community and Government of Ukraine to respond.

“Additional funding to address the immediate humanitarian needs of those affected by this conflict is urgently needed,” he said. “Ukraine’s Humanitarian Response Plan, launched on 24 February, calls for $316 million to reach 3.2 million people in the most dire humanitarian need. To date, only 13 per cent of this appeal – $42.2 million – has so far been either received or pledged.”

Ban welcomes 'important step forward' towards Mali peace

6 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has welcomed the progress made towards the establishment of an inclusive peace in Mali in an effort to resolve the country's ongoing crisis, the United Nations spokesperson confirmed today.

In a statement released this afternoon, Mr. Ban's spokesperson said the Secretary-General commended Malian stakeholders for “the progress achieved to date” and expressed his gratitude to both Algeria, for hosting the peace process, and members of the international community for their “dedicated efforts in support of the resolution of the conflict.”

“The initialling on 1 March in Algiers of a draft agreement on peace and reconciliation in Mali by the Government of Mali and the Plateforme coalition of armed groups is an
important step forward,” said the statement. “The political will and ownership of all Malian parties is essential for sustainable peace.”

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, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) and its “blue helmets” have come under repeated violent attack.

In addition, the country has been consumed by a series of humanitarian crises. Addressing journalists in Geneva last week, Jens Laerke, from the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), noted that at the peak of the crisis, more than 500,000 people had left the north of Mali to seek refuge in the south or in neighbouring countries. Although nearly 400,000 had already returned, they continued to face challenges in restarting their lives as communities had become more vulnerable, livelihoods had deteriorated, and social services were working only partially, especially in rural areas.

At the same time, Mali continued to face a high level of food insecurity and malnutrition – a problem affecting countries throughout Africa's Sahel region. According to UN estimates, nearly 2.6 million people in Mali, or 15 per cent of the total population, will suffer from food insecurity this year while more than one in 10 children would be affected by acute malnutrition.

The UN spokesperson declared the Organization's continued commitment to supporting Malians in their search for peace, security, justice and development through the “full and timely implementation of a future agreement” and said Mr. Ban called on all parties “to engage to reach a final settlement.”

Also today, the Secretary-General announced the appointment of Major General Michael Lollesgard of Denmark as the new MINUSMA Force Commander.

Mr. Lollesgard succeeds Major General Jean Bosco Kazura of Rwanda to whom Mr. Ban expressed his gratitude for his “dedicated and exemplary service during his tenure.”

According to the UN spokesperson's office, Mr. Lollesgard brings to his new role 30 years of national and international experience including deployments in peace support operations in the Balkans and Iraq.

**UN kicks off International Women’s Day celebrations with appeal for gender equality**

*6 March* - Despite great strides in the advancement of gender parity, women still lag behind men across an array of critical areas, from political representation and wage equality to education – a gender gap that the United Nations is once again tackling head-on as it kicks off its annual observance of International Women’s Day.

Speaking at the High-Level Thematic Debate on Advancing Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls for a Transformative Post-2015 Development Agenda this morning, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon admitted that the world had seen “important advances” for gender equity over the past two decades as women’s participation in political life has increased, maternal mortality has dropped, and the gender gap in primary education has closed.

According to UN Women, in fact, approximately 50 per cent of women worldwide are in paid employment – an increase from 40 per cent more than 20 years ago. In the international sphere, meanwhile, the global community has widely acknowledged the need to increase women’s role in peacebuilding in post-conflict countries, boosting women’s presence in area traditionally dominated by men.
Nonetheless, the data also paint a startling picture: today, only one in five parliamentarians is a woman while, at the present rate of progress, it will take an estimated 81 years for women to achieve parity in employment. At the same time, the pandemic of violence against women and girls affects one in three women worldwide.

“The gains have been too slow and too uneven. We must do far more to accelerate progress everywhere,” Mr. Ban said. “We must acknowledge the gaps and chart the way forward.”

The Secretary-General told those gathered that there are still five countries where not a single woman is represented in parliament while eight countries still lack a woman in the cabinet. The scourge of early and forced marriages continues to violate the rights of girls; women still do most of the world’s unpaid and low-paid work; and many women around the world are still denied their sexual and reproductive health rights.

“This year we have a unique opportunity to end these wrongs and deliver on the promises of Beijing,” he continued, referring to the upcoming 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, the “international blueprint” for gender equality and women’s empowerment.

“Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are essential to our sustainable future,” he added.

As the UN prepares for the upcoming 20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Organization will lead the charge on gender issues over the next week through a number of major events, including an International Women’s Day march that will wind its way from UN Headquarters to New York’s Times Square on 8 March.

In addition, the Organization has been generating significant momentum and urgency in the lead-up to next week’s annual session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the two-week event exclusively devoted to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women which will bring representatives of UN Member States, civil society groups and UN entities together to take stock of where women stand today.

Addressing the meeting as a special guest, UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka urged governments to adopt a three-pronged approach in order to remove the root causes of gender equality. She said that only with “tireless political will, increased resources, and strong accountability” could the global community formulate a bold enough agenda to pursue gender equality by 2030.

“Governments are the primary duty bearers,” Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka explained. “Governments must repeal discriminatory laws that inhibit the ability of women to obtain credit, own land, move freely, and take responsibility for their own bodies and health.”

The transformative social changes necessary to push forward gender parity must not exclude the private sector either, she observed, noting that it had “a very significant role to play in investing in the economic empowerment of women.”

“Employers must make far-reaching changes to employment terms and conditions for women: Equal pay for equal, decent work.”

Meanwhile, echoing the Secretary-General, Sam Kutesa, the President of the UN General Assembly, similarly warned that the persistent issues of gender inequality needed to be addressed through “frank conversations” and “bold decisions” for the international community to successfully reach the future sustainable development goals.

“The deep-seated norms, beliefs and practices that contribute to gender-based discrimination must be confronted and changed,” Mr. Kutesa declared. “We must support a zero tolerance policy on the structural causes of discrimination against women and eliminate the laws and practices that perpetuate gender inequalities.”

“There is no shortage of evidence that when we support the fundamental freedoms of women and girls, they are able to realize their full potential to engage in, contribute to and benefit from sustainable development,” he continued. “In doing so, we will all reap the benefits; in our homes, throughout our communities, and across our nations.”
In a wide-ranging keynote address, Michaëlle Jean, Secretary-General of La Francophonie and former Governor General of Canada, stressed that gender equality and women’s empowerment, including in the economic sphere, access to quality education and training, enhanced participation in decision-making and complete access to sexual and reproductive health services, are not only the business of women.

“All this must be a matter for women and men and requires an early awareness of young minds, because these are the prerequisites for a sustainable economic and social situation, to the entrenchment of democracy and the rule of law, as well as peace,” she said, adding: “These are, above all, fundamental and inalienable human rights.”

It is through this prism that the world must, 20 years later, look at the record of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. “It is through this prism that we must understand the post-2015 development agenda,” Ms. Jean said, noting that indeed, through the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) process, there has been progress in achieving targets in the areas of girls’ education, access to employment and parliamentary representation.

“But are we entitled to congratulate ourselves as millions of women and girls are still excluded?” she asked, noting that normative advances and “declarations and resolution we adopt year after year,” are nothing without implementation, “if the principles and laws made thereunder are not applied and if the support structures needed to achieve them are not created.”

Much more needs to be done. At a time when new steps are being taken, “we urgently need to move forward, Ms. Jean declared, emphasizing: “So do not give in to those who would, in the name of custom, culture, religion undermine the hard-won rights and principles…do not give to those who question the universality of values and principles that honour human family.”

It is that spirit, and with the tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights squarely at the fore, that the international community must find, preserve, revitalize and relentlessly pursue efforts to recognize in practice, equality between women and men, as well as a recognition of the specific rights of women. “The goal is ambitious, but it is achievable!”

**Funding shortfall forces UN to scale back food aid to Syrian refugees in Turkey**

**6 March** - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) today said “a critical shortage of funding” has forced it to reduce the number of Syrian refugees it can assist through an innovative electronic voucher system in Turkey, which hosts the largest number of asylum-seekers fleeing fighting in neighbouring Syria.

WFP spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs told reporters in Geneva today that in January, her agency had been able to assist 220,000 refugees in 20 camps throughout Turkey, but that last month, it had been forced to reduce that number to 154,000, after having to withdraw from 9 camps.

Ms. Byrs said predicting donation amounts is a “real challenge” as it is necessary to know those amounts before informing refugees outside of camps that WFP would launch assistance, but knowing that WFP would require $9 million each month for its assistance to Syrian refugees, a funding shortfall of $71 million in donations is being projected for all of 2015.

Since 2011, WFP has been providing food assistance to the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in Turkey through an innovative electronic voucher (e-food card) system, Ms. Byrs said, adding that the system has made it possible for refugees to buy their food in shops like anybody else.

“Unfortunately,” she explained, “due to a critical shortage of funding, WFP is unable to provide assistance at the same levels as before.”

Ms. Byrs emphasized how important that system is for refugees, saying that Turkey has welcomed the highest number of Syrian refugees, estimated at 1.7 million in 20 camps across the country.
Turkey had already spent $4.5 billion to protect and assist the refugees since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, and that since 2011, she said, WFP had injected almost $700 million into the Turkish economy through its e-food card program and large-scale food purchases.

WFP’s Syria Crisis emergency response, which provides life-saving food assistance to more than four million Syrians who have been displaced across all 14 governorates of Syria in addition to at least two million Syrian refugees in the Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, in addition to Turkey. Inside Syria, WFP provides food rations, while refugees in the neighbouring countries primarily receive assistance through WFP’s electronic food vouchers programme that allows them to buy the food they need from local shops.

Security Council condemns use of chemical weapons in Syria

6 March - The Security Council today adopted a resolution strongly condemning the use of any toxic chemical, such as chlorine, as a weapon in Syria and stressing that those who use such weapons must be held accountable.

According to the adopted resolution –put forth by the United States– the Council expressed deep concern that toxic chemicals have been used as a weapon in Syria which was the conclusion with a “high degree of confidence” by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapon (OPCW) Fact-Finding Mission. To that end, the Council reiterated that the use of toxic chemicals as a weapon would constitute a violation of Council resolution 2118 (2013).

Under the text, the Council recalled its decision that Syria “shall not use, develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile or retain chemical weapons, or, transfer, directly or indirectly, chemical weapons to other States or non-State actors.” Member also reiterated that no party in Syria should use, develop, produce, acquire, stockpile, retain, or transfer chemical weapons.

Additionally, the Security Council expressed support for the OPCW Executive Council decision of 4 February 2015 to continue the work of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission, in particular to study all available information relating to allegations of use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Members welcomed the intention of the OPCW Director-General to include further reports of the Mission as part of his monthly reports to the Security Council.

Stressing that those individuals responsible for any use of chemicals as weapons, including chlorine or any other toxic chemical, must be held accountable, the Council called on all parties in Syria to extend their full cooperation to the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission.

Lastly, the Council also recalled its decisions in resolution 2118, and in this context decides in the event of future non-compliance with resolution 2118 to impose measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.
Ahead of global risk reduction conference, UN review finds vast majority of disasters climate-related

6 March - The United Nations office dedicated to disaster risk reduction today appealed to world leaders ahead of a major gathering in northern Japan next week to provide clear, action-oriented guidance to tackle the underlying drivers of risk, such as climate change, which now accounts for 87 per cent of the disasters that have killed some 700,000 people over the past decade.

“Despite many successes and greatly improved performance in disaster management, it is sobering to note that 700,000 people have died in disaster events over the last ten years,” Margareta Wahlström, head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, said in a press release issued today.

“A total of 1.7 billion people have had their lives disrupted in some way,” Ms. Wahlström said. “It is of great concern that economic losses in major reported disaster events come to $1.4 trillion.”

She went on to explain that while 70 per cent of deaths are caused by earthquakes, climate-related disasters now account for over 80 per cent of all disaster events and contribute enormously to economic losses and short and long-term population displacement triggered by disaster events.

“It is very important that the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction which opens on March 14, should provide clear, action-oriented guidance to governments, local governments, the private sector and civil society in general on how best to tackle the underlying drivers of risk such as poverty, climate change, poorly planned urban growth, land use and the decline of protective eco-systems,” Ms. Wahlström said.

Thousands of government leaders and civil society representatives will be gathering in the northern Japanese city of Sendai at the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction from 14-18 March to broker the follow-up to the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), and chart a global course on disaster risk reduction for the coming decade.

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

Women farmers pillar of food security – UN agencies

6 March - Ahead of International Women’s Day, United Nations food relief agencies gathered to remind the world that women farmers play a central role in achieving food and nutrition security, urging countries to step up efforts to empower rural women who too often do “backbreaking work” to harvest food.

“Women are the backbone of rural societies as they grow and process food and make sure their families are well-fed and well-nourished,” said

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) President Kanayo Nwanze in his opening remarks at an event in Rome, where the UN food-related agencies are headquartered.

“A rural women need more opportunities to participate, improve their skills, gain access to assets, and be involved in
agricultural production and marketing. Let us all work together to empower women to achieve food and nutrition security. For their sake and the sake of their families and communities,” he added.

Joining the IFAD President were leaders from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to share their approaches to empowering rural women, promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment in an effort to reduce rural poverty.

This year’s International Women’s Day – celebrated around the world 8 March – also marks the 20th anniversary of the landmark Beijing Platform for Action. However, despite that historic agreement by 189 governments, no country in the world has yet achieved gender equality.

The food agencies highlighted the “feminization of agriculture,” a new trend sparked by the migration of men in developing countries to urban centres. Approximately half of the agricultural workforce worldwide is now made up of women.

WFP’s Purchase for Progress (P4P) initiative has in five years tripled women’s participation in P4P-supported farmers’ organizations in 20 countries, impacting some 300,000 women.

“By purchasing crops traditionally cultivated by women, such as beans and soya, WFP demonstrated the key role rural women play as we work together to achieve a world with zero hunger,” Ertharin Cousin, WFP’s Executive Director, said.

“While acknowledging the success of this programme we must scale up the lessons learned to ensure greater opportunities for more women.”

Food security overall would improve significantly if women were empowered with the same opportunities that men have, but it is a complex problem that needs a comprehensive approach, stressed FAO’s Marcela Villarreal.

“While significant progress has been made in improving the lives of women since the Beijing conference, we’re concerned that rural women are lagging behind in every development indicator – both behind rural men and urban women.”

**Sustainable development needed to transform Asia-Pacific’s least developed countries – UN**

6 March - Transforming the lives of some 300 million people in the least developed countries in Asia and the Pacific “is not about ticking the boxes on a few variables,” but to ensure that economic growth and development is sustainable to lift the millions above the extreme poverty line, a senior United Nations official in the region said today.

That was among conclusions at the three-day High-Level Asia-Pacific Dialogue on the Implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) for the Decade 2011-2020 in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

“Graduation is not about ticking the boxes on a few variables alone to move beyond least developed country status,” said Dr. Shamshad Akhtar, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

“It’s about real transformation of the lives of the 293 million people living in our 12 LDCs, of whom 113 million remain below extreme poverty line, with high exposure to natural disasters, and about the 130 million who have yet to enjoy access to education, health and other basic services,” Ms. Akhtar said.

According to ESCAP, the greatest challenge facing the Asia-Pacific least developed countries is to promote inclusive and sustainable growth and development for reducing poverty and improving the quality of life of the people.

“In these countries, such growth requires measures to accelerate growth with structural transformation, diversifying their
economies towards manufacturing and services, along with a focus on increasing agricultural productivity and promoting rural development, strengthening social protection, and enhancing financial inclusion especially of the poor and disadvantaged groups,” ESCAP said.

A clear message from the three-day meeting was that least developed countries, development partners and the UN system must meet the commitments and implement the actions agreed in the Istanbul action plan, including those related to mobilizing financial resources for development and capacity building.

The meeting’s outcome document will be delivered by the Government of Cambodia to ESCAP’s 71st Commission session for its consideration as the basis for the regional mid-term review ahead of the global mid-term review of the programme of action to be held in 2016.

The Fourth UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries, held in Istanbul, Turkey in 2011, adopted the Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020.

It sets out actions to be undertaken by the least developed countries and their development partners in eight priority areas of action, each supported by concrete deliverables and commitments. These priority areas are: productive capacity; agriculture, food security and rural development; trade; commodities; human and social development; multiple crises and other emerging challenges; mobilizing financial resources for development and capacity-building; and governance at all levels.

**Lebanon: UN to boost humanitarian funding to ease Syria crisis burden**

6 March - The continuing influx of refugees fleeing from the Syrian conflict is burdening Lebanon’s infrastructure and economy and threatening the country’s stability, the United Nations humanitarian chief said today.

“Lebanon has shown generosity in hosting some 1.2 million refugees from Syria. No country can handle such a burden on its own,” Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos said in a press release issued following her recent visit to the Middle Eastern country.

“I hope that in the upcoming Kuwait 3 pledging conference support will be given to Lebanon to assist the Government in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable Lebanese and refugees from Syria.”

According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Lebanon is the country with the highest ratio of refugees per capita in the world and is increasingly beleaguered as the Syrian crisis stretches into its fifth year. The country’s public services are overstretched, economic growth has slowed and unemployment is rising. As social tensions grow, OCHA noted, Lebanon “needs international support to maintain its stability.”

During her visit to Lebanon, Ms. Amos met with Prime Minister Tammam Salam and assured him that the UN is committed to supporting the country’s stability by scaling up international assistance and implementing the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, which aims to deliver protection and humanitarian assistance to displaced Syrian families and encourages investment in Lebanese social services. The Plan itself seeks $2.14 billion and seeks to reach up to 2.9 million people.

“Humanitarian workers in Syria are supporting people caught between the warring parties, and who continue to be subjected to extreme violence and brutality,” Ms. Amos continued. “Millions of people have been displaced multiple times inside the country and millions more have fled to neighbouring countries. They are desperate to find security and safety.”

The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan will also help provide a boost to assistance already funded by the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) which covers humanitarian work throughout the Middle East and beyond. The vast majority of CERF money — some $77.5 million — will be directed towards countries affected by the Syria crisis. Syria itself will receive the largest single allocation, at $30 million, with the number of people there who need humanitarian assistance snowballing...
Ban urges restraint after Palestinian leadership suspends security cooperation with Israel

6 March - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today expressed concern regarding the 5 March decision by the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) Central Council to suspend all forms of security coordination with Israel.

The PLO Executive Committee will report on implementation of this decision to the PLO Central Council in three months which still provides a “window of opportunity” for both sides to take necessary actions to honour their obligations, said a statement released by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson this afternoon.

The Secretary-General urged both parties to exercise utmost restraint and “reverse unhelpful cycle of actions and counter-actions” and repeated his call on Israel to resume the transfer of tax revenues legally due to the Palestinian Authority as per the Paris Protocol.

“In the absence of effective international engagement, the situation may further unravel,” Mr. Ban said, urgently calling on the international community, including the Security Council, to exercise leadership and help create conditions for a negotiated final peace agreement.

Such an agreement will have to end the Israeli occupation and realize the creation of a viable Palestinian state, living in peace and security alongside Israel, he added.

Climate change ‘threatens self-determination’ of citizens in island States, UN rights council told

6 March - In the United Nations Human Rights Council today, senior UN officials joined high-level delegates from Pacific Island States that are on the frontline of the global battle against sea-level rise to examine the potentially devastating impact of climate change on human rights.

The President of Kiribati and the Prime Minister of Tuvalu were joined by Deputy UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Flavia Pansieri, who opened the discussion, telling the Geneva-based Council that human-induced climate change is not only an assault on the world’s shared ecosystem but it also undercuts “the rights to health, to food, to water and sanitation, to adequate housing and – for the people of small island states and coastal communities – even the right to self-determination.”

The spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Rupert Colville, briefed the press on the discussions, saying that continued sea level rise at their current rate, could result in low-lying Pacific Island States, including Kiribati and Tuvalu being submerged within decades. He noted that some citizens have already been forced from their homes, while the two Governments struggle to supply people with adequate supplies of food and clean drinking water.

According to a Government minister from Kiribati who briefed the Council in January, preparations are underway for a time when climate change “refugees” might exist. The Government of Kiribati has been buying land offshore and providing people with the skills to “migrate with dignity” when their islands were no longer habitable, Mr. Colville said.
Survival is one thing but if the islands of Kiribati and Tuvalu do disappear, the spokesperson said, gone with them will be all the trappings of a modern state – Government buildings, courts, hospitals and schools. That will undermine those States’ peoples’ right to self-determination.

Their leaders will have to find ways of reconstituting their States elsewhere, or persuade another government to provide their citizens with passports, welfare and protection. If they can’t do this, these “climate change refugees” will become stateless.

“We are calling for human rights standards to be put front and centre of discussions on mitigating the negative impacts of climate change,” said Mr. Colville. “Any action designed to limit climate change must have people’s rights at its core. This should be taken into account when the UN Climate Change Conference convenes in Paris later this year to draw up a new global agreement.”

UN condemns destruction of Nimrud heritage site in northern Iraq

6 March - The United Nations agency mandated with protecting cultural heritage around the world today strongly condemned the destruction of the archaeological site of Nimrud in Iraq, deploring such “criminal chaos” as yet another attack against the Iraqi people.

“Nothing is safe from the cultural cleansing under way in the country: it targets human lives, minorities, and is marked by the systematic destruction of humanity's ancient heritage,” Irina Bokova, Director-General at the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), said in a statement released today.

“We cannot remain silent. The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage constitutes a war crime,” she said, calling on all political and religious leaders in the region to stand up and remind everyone that “there is absolutely no political or religious justification for the destruction of humanity's cultural heritage.”

All of those who can, especially youth, in Iraq and the wider region, must do everything possible to protect this heritage, to claim it as their own, and as the heritage of the whole of humanity, Ms. Bokova said. She also urged all cultural institutions, museums, journalists, professors, and scientists to share and explain the importance of the Mesopotamian civilization.

“We must respond to this criminal chaos that destroys culture with more culture,” Ms. Bokova said, adding that she had alerted president of the Security Council as well as the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. “The entire international community must join its efforts, in solidarity with the government and people of Iraq, to put an end to this catastrophe.”

UNESCO is determined to do whatever is needed to document and protect the heritage of Iraq and lead the fight against the illicit traffic of cultural artefacts, which directly contributes to the financing of terrorism. At stake is the survival of the Iraqi culture and society, she also said.

The city of Nimrud was founded more than 3,300 years ago. It was one of the capitals of the Assyrian empire. Its frescos and works are celebrated around the world and revered in literature and sacred texts. The Iraqi government has confirmed that the site was attacked by armed extremists using bulldozers on 5 of March.

Just three weeks ago, the UN Security Council adopted a measure which urged global cooperation in targeting sources of funding for ISIL and Al-Nusrah Front (ANF), and condemned those buying oil from the groups, banned all trade in looted antiquities from Iraq and Syria, and called on States to end ransom payments.

The resolution, which called on UNESCO, Interpol, and other international organizations to assist in such efforts, was at the time welcomed by Ms. Bokova as a “milestone for enhanced protection of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria.”
Echoing Ms. Bokova's sentiment, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in a statement released by his spokesperson this afternoon, strongly condemned the "continuing acts of terror and systematic destruction" of cultural sites like Nimrud.

"The Secretary-General is deeply disturbed by these events and calls on political and religious leaders in the region to raise their voices in condemnation of these unacceptable attacks," the statement said. "The deliberate destruction of our common cultural heritage constitutes a war crime and represents an attack on humanity as a whole."

The Secretary-General will meet today with Ms. Bokova to help reiterate the UN's call on the international community to ensure these attacks will not continue and that the illicit traffic of cultural artefacts, which also directly contributes to the financing of terrorism, will be prevented.

**Despite progress, UN labour agency says women’s workplace equality may take ‘decades’**

6 March - Women earn on average 77 per cent of what men earn, the United Nations labour organization said today, noting that “without targeted action, pay equity between women and men will not be achieved before 2086, or at least 71 years from now.”

"Are working women better off today than they were 20 years ago?" asked Director-General of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Guy Ryder in a press release ahead of Sunday’s International Women’s Day, marked annually on 8 March.

"The answer is a qualified yes. Has this progress met our expectations? The answer is a decidedly no. We need to be innovative, to reframe the debate and to intensify the focus on ensuring the rights of women at work," he declared.

While access to maternity protection has improved – the percentage of countries offering 14 weeks or more maternity level has increased from 38 per cent to 51 per cent – more than 800 million women workers globally still do not have adequate maternity protection. That’s 41 per cent of the female workforce worldwide.

Progress in implementing the Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference in Women in Beijing in 1995 has been mixed, the ILO said in a briefing note, on the heels of also releasing a new report that found that the “motherhood pay gap” that “imposes a wage penalty often over and above the age gap already experienced by women worldwide.”

According to The motherhood pay gap: A review of the issues, theory and international evidence, mothers often earn less than women without children. Despite policy and international labour standard adjustments, women continue to experience widespread discrimination and inequality in the workplace.

"The overriding conclusion 20 years on from Beijing is that despite marginal progress we have years, even decades to go until women enjoy the same rights and benefits at work,” said Shauna Olney, Chief of the Gender and Equality and Diversity Brand of the ILO.

In developed countries, the wage gap increases when a woman has more than one child. In developing countries, however, girls and young woman are more like than their male counterparts to be kept at home to help with household and caring tasks. And across both poor and rich nations, violence against women remains a major factor undermining their access to decent work.

"In most parts of the world, women are often in undervalued and low-paid jobs; lack access to education, training, recruitment; have limited bargaining and decision-making power; and still shoulder responsibility for most unpaid care work,” said the ILO note.

The good news is that more countries are recognizing men’s care responsibilities – the number of countries providing some type of paternity leave has doubled from 38 per cent in 1994 to 56 percent in 2013.
But despite this, “women continue to shoulder most of the responsibility for family care, often limiting their access to paid employment completely, or confining them to part-time positions, which are typically not as well paid,” the ILO said.

Today women own and manage over 30 per cent of all businesses but tend to be concentrated in small enterprises. On a more macro level, women sit on 19 per cent of board seats globally, and hold only five per cent of CEO positions at the world’s largest companies.