Trapped civilians ‘more desperate than ever’ amid fighting in Yarmouk camp, warns UN agency chief

6 April - The current escalation is “more desperate than ever” for civilians in Yarmouk displaced persons camp which is currently housing thousands of Palestinians on the outskirts of Damascus, the head of the United Nations agency concerned with the well-being of Palestinian refugees warned today.

“The situation has been turned upside down. Currently, it’s simply too dangerous to access Yarmouk,” said Pierre Krähenbühl, Commissioner-General at the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), as he briefed the press at UN Headquarters in New York via video-link.

“Right now, what is on the mind of people at Yarmouk is bare survival,” he added, recalling his visit to the camp several weeks ago. “I just saw people waking up with so much despair in their eyes, waiting for their meagre assistance.”

He spoke of “unbearable suffering” that he saw and civilians queuing up in line to get aid, scenes of elderly people saying that they’re hungry, and a pregnant woman in the queue fainting.

Earlier this morning, Mr. Krähenbühl, also via-video link, briefed the Secretary-General and Security Council on the unfolding situation in Yarmouk, a Palestinian Refugee camp near the Syrian capital.

He said during the briefing he called on international bodies to remain seized of the urgent situation and also called on parties to cease all activities that put civilians in danger and allow humanitarian access. Member States must also uphold the UN Charter.

Failure to do so could lead to the gravest and most appalling of consequences for the more than 18,000 civilians who have
been trapped in Yarmouk for over two years. Since 1 April, it has been the scene of intense fighting and it is virtually impossible for civilians to leave, as any attempt to move in the open brings high risk.

Among the besieged residents of Yarmouk are 3,500 children, who have been reliant on UNRWA’s irregular distributions of food and other assistance for over a year. In some areas interruptions of humanitarian operations has left thousands of people without aid for months.

And with the situation deteriorating even further, the unbearable environment must be addressed through human and political terms, he said. What is happening in Yarmouk is an opportunity for the international community to work together and use concerted action to influence behaviour.

On a regional level, he expressed gratitude to neighbouring countries for accepting Syrian refugees and also Palestinian in recent years, as well as most recently as fighting in Yarmouk continues.

“Many refugees have been displaced to other areas in Damascus – temporary shelters, schools, and our compounds,” he added.

But people must be protected and assisted wherever they are, and for those who do wish to leave Yarmouk, organizing the evacuation is important but incredibly challenging as violence and fighting between armed groups increases.

“This is highly complicated especially in an environment that is increasingly dangerous.” Mr. Krähenbühl said, adding that it is very difficult for civilians to move around freely. Moving a large group of people out of the camp is very challenging.

“However challenging that may look at the present, it may be the only way to save lives in Yarmouk,” he said, reminding that it is the responsibility of all parties to the conflict to protect civilians.

The international community must influence political and religious leaders to promote and uphold fundamental messages.

“Respect for life is not just an element of international law but also a fundamental principle. Leaders must exert their power to influence all parties to cease hostilities and reach a humanitarian truce,” he emphasized.

Answering a question about how much of the camp is controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Mr. Krähenbühl said it was difficult to give a percentage of how much of the camp is controlled by armed groups. But it is “safe to say” that a significant percentage of civilians are now in the area controlled by armed groups. It is difficult to give a full description of the number of armed groups and militia that are fighting for and against the government.

He recalled how UNRWA has been present in Syria for over 60 years dealing with the Palestinian refugee population throughout the country. During that time many of the Palestinians integrated into Syrian life, got jobs, became self-sufficient and sent their children to UNRWA schools.

“Now you have 95 per cent of the Palestinian population in Syria dependant on UNRWA,” he said.
Civilian casualties, humanitarian concerns mounting as Yemen fighting continues - UN

6 April - The violence in Yemen continues to wreak havoc upon the country's civilian population and restrict humanitarian access to those most in need amid a spate of aerial attacks and ground incursions, the United Nations has reported.

In the last 24 hours alone, air strikes aimed at halting rebel activities have hit the Yemeni cities of Aden, Al Dhale'e, Sana'a, Sa'ada, Al Hudaydah, and Hajjah Governorates killing at least eight civilians, according to information provided today by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the press.

At the same time, clashes are continuing in the country's south as Houthis and Government forces battle in Aden and Ma'ala, where a number of civilian targets have reportedly been destroyed including four residential buildings and a number of bridges connecting two major roads from Aden.

The situation in Yemen has been rapidly deteriorating since the country formed a new Government in November 2014 aimed at ending a period of political turbulence and bringing about a full transition towards democracy. The country continued to be plagued by violence and political demonstrations despite UN efforts to bring about a peaceful political resolution.

As the fighting has ratcheted up in intensity, the World Health Organization (WHO) today released its estimates suggesting that more than 540 people have been killed and some 1,700 others wounded by the violence in Yemen since 19 March.

In a press release issued this afternoon, the WHO also deplored the deaths of health care workers and damages to health facilities in Yemen as a result of the conflict and voiced concern about “the serious implications of these attacks.”

The UN agency reported that on 4 April two volunteer paramedics with the Yemen Red Crescent Society in Aden were shot when their ambulance was hit by gunfire while, in another incident, one security guard was killed and two nurses were injured in the health centre of Al-Mazraq camp for internally displaced persons.

“In times of crisis, it is vital that [health care workers] be allowed to continue their work without additional risk,” the WHO declared. “Health facilities and ambulances must be treated as neutral premises and should never be exploited for military purposes.”

The Geneva-based health agency added its emphasis that all combatants respect the protection of health facilities under international humanitarian law and underscored that patients be guaranteed their basic right to health without further endangerment to their lives.

On a similar note, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) voiced concern about the escalating number of child deaths in Yemen due to the hostilities.

At least 74 children are known to have been killed and 44 children maimed so far since the fighting began but the figures, UNICEF said, are “conservative” and the UN agency believed that the total number of children killed is much higher.

“Children are paying an intolerable price for this conflict,” lamented UNICEF Yemen Representative Julien Harneis in a press statement. “They are being killed, maimed and forced to flee their homes, their health threatened and their education interrupted.”

“These children should be immediately afforded special respect and protection by all parties to the conflict, in line with international humanitarian law,” he added.
UNICEF reported that its teams were on the ground working to provide families with safe water and essential health services while also prepositioning therapeutic food and oral rehydration salts for young children.

Nevertheless, the agency continued, the conflict is exacerbating the already precarious situation for children in one of the region's poorest countries,” with much of Yemen already prone to food insecurity and with severe acute malnutrition widespread among young children.

Against that backdrop, increasing numbers of people from Sana'a and Sa'ada are reportedly being displaced to Amran Governorate, just north of the country's capital. OCHA said local partners estimated that up 28,000 people had moved into Amran since the beginning of the crisis and warned that the fighting risked interrupting humanitarian access, such as medical supplies, to those civilians most in need.

In addition, the ongoing shelling in Aden has disrupted the city's waterworks with the need to ensure a reliable water supply becoming an “urgent priority” for humanitarian partners.

On International Day, UN underlines role of sport in promoting development, peace

6 April - On the second annual International Day of Sport for Development and Peace today, top United Nations officials stressed the important role that sport can play in achieving sustainable progress and change.

“Sport has the power to help develop the potential of individuals, communities and nations,” said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. “On this International Day, let us pledge to strengthen the role that sport plays in communities around the world. We need to have everyone on the team.”

Mr. Ban described the role sport plays in encouraging personal growth, eliminating gender barriers and building bridges across lines that might otherwise divide. He added that sport helps to create cultures where fundamental values such as equality, the acceptance of rules, mutual respect and fairness are appreciated.

“It helps the more vulnerable groups in society, especially young people and persons with disabilities, to enjoy their human rights, including safe opportunities to engage in physical education programmes and sporting activities,” he said. “This contributes to their inclusion in society and increases their motivation to attend school.”

He underlined the role that the sporting industry can play in promoting environmental awareness and sustainable practices and commended athletes across the world for supporting United Nations efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. He also looked ahead to the new development agenda, saying he would continue looking to sportsmen and women to be advocates for building a better world for all.

“Sport has established itself as an effective tool for development and peacebuilding,” said Wilfried Lemke, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace. “As we are moving to a new set of sustainable development goals for the post-2015 development agenda, we have to make sure that sport keeps playing its beneficial role in it.”

Mr. Lemke, who works for the Secretary-General as an advocate, facilitator and representative of sport's social impact in a development context said the Day's tagline – 'United action towards sustainable development for all through sport’ – targets sustainable for all, which is “the main goal,” and partnerships, which he said were “the foundation” of the Office's work.

“It has been through systematic cooperation that we have been able to make sport and physical activity accessible and inclusive to millions of people of all ages and abilities worldwide,” he said. “Let us work together to make the most use of the great potential that sport has for advancing positive social change all over the world.”

Girls line up during a basketball drill in Mogadishu, Somalia. UN Photo/Tobin Jones
He encouraged stakeholders of all varieties to continue joining efforts to firmly place sport in policies and programmes relating to education, health, development and peace consolidation and called for celebration of the International Day by hosting activities around the world that commemorate the accomplishments of sport in improving the lives of many people all over the world.

The International Day was established to raise awareness of the ideal position sport has to contribute towards the United Nations' objectives for development and peace and adoption of that Day signifies the increasing recognition by the United Nations of the positive influence that sport can have on the advancement of human rights, and social and economic development.

As part of this year's efforts to publicise the Day and to celebrate sport's role in driving social change included a video contest calling on all organisations and projects active in the sport for development field to share their stories on film of how they are using sport to make an impact in their communities. The 10 best videos were chosen and will feature on various UNOSDP media platforms and at selected events throughout the year.

Senior UN official calls for disarmament push amid uptick in global tensions

6 April - The United Nations disarmament chief today urged Member States to work actively and seek common ground on disarmament issues related to nuclear weapons and conventional arms amid a period of increasing global tensions and violence.

Addressing the opening of the 2015 substantive session of the Organization’s Disarmament Commission (UNDC) in New York, UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Angela Kane warned gathered delegates that efforts to reduce the global circulation of weaponry had stalled and that the prospects of nuclear disarmament were particularly “dim.”

“I have never seen a wider divide between nuclear haves and nuclear have-nots,” declared Ms. Kane.

She added that the “schism” continued to act as a “significant” obstacle to non-proliferation and underscored the need “to bridge the fissure” between Member States while noting that the world’s brewing conflicts had fed the increasing proliferation of conventional weapons.

Nonetheless, she continued, in the midst of “these dark clouds,” she had also seen some “genuine bright spots,” including the complete removal of all chemical weapons from Syria. Moreover, the bringing into force of the landmark Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) could also be considered a “major achievement” for the international community, she said, as it ensured that all actors in the arms trade complied with international standards.

The Commission, whose membership is universal, is a deliberative body mandated to make recommendations in the field of disarmament and to follow up the decisions and recommendations of the General Assembly’s first special session devoted to disarmament, in 1978. Between 1979 and 1999, the Commission was able to reach consensus at least 16 times to adopt guidelines or recommendations on disarmament subjects.

Despite the overall chiaroscuro of disarmament progress, Ms. Kane warned that the commission itself needed to ramp up its efforts in working for non-proliferation, stating that it had become “disheartening to see the commission develop into an annual box-checking exercise.”

To that point, she said, she “encouraged and cajoled” the commission to take up its “integral part” in the UN machinery and work “actively” to seek compromises to achieve common ground.

Ms. Kane observed that in an ever-complicated international security environment, the disarmament commission had an increasingly important function to deliberate and contribute to the enhancement of global security.
What is needed is the political will of Member States “to take us out of the current morass,” she concluded.

**UN agency demands end to Yarmouk fighting, calls for protection of civilians**

5 April - With fighting near Yarmouk intensifying, the United Nations agency concerned with the well-being of Palestinian refugees today made a strong appeal to all armed actors to cease hostilities that place civilians in acute danger and to withdraw immediately from civilian populated areas.

“Never has the hour been more desperate in the Palestine refugee camp of Yarmouk, in Damascus,” read a press release circulated by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). “We demand that all parties exercise maximum restraint and abide by their obligations under international law to protect civilians.”

UNRWA called on concerned States to urgently exercise their authority and influence in order to end the fighting in Yarmouk for the sake of civilian lives and to alleviate human suffering. Meanwhile, humanitarian access had to be increased and secure conditions established under which the agency would be able to deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance and civilians could be evacuated.

The agency said that the international community, including UN bodies, should be seized of the “critical situation” without delay and should ensure that all civilians are protected in accordance with the UN charter and international law.

Failure to do so could lead to the gravest and most appalling of consequences for the more than 18,000 civilians who have been trapped in Yarmouk for over two years. Since 1 April, it has been the scene of intense fighting and it is virtually impossible for civilians to leave, as any attempt to move in the open brings high risk.

“The lives of civilians in Yarmouk have never been more profoundly threatened,” said UNRWA's press release. “Men, women and children – Syrians and Palestinians alike – are cowering in their battered homes in profound fear, desperate for security, food and water, deeply concerned by the grave perils that may yet come, as hostilities continue.”

Among the besieged residents of Yarmouk are 3,500 children, who have been reliant on UNRWA’s irregular distributions of food and other assistance for over a year.

“The level of our aid has been well below the minimum required,” said UNRWA's statement, which stressed the agency's readiness to resume assistance to the civilian population as soon as hostilities cease. “Potable water is now unavailable inside Yarmouk and the meager health facilities that existed have been overrun by conflict. The situation is extremely dire and threatens to deteriorate even further.”

**Secretary-General disappointed at cancellation of meeting to establish Sudan National Dialogue**

4 April - The United Nations Secretary-General today expressed his disappointment at the failure to hold the Sudanese pre-dialogue meeting in Addis Ababa because of the decision by the ruling National Congress Party and its allies not to attend the meeting.

In a statement released by his Spokesperson today, Ban Ki-moon stressed that a fully inclusive, free and transparent dialogue is critical to addressing the root causes of the recurrent crises in Sudan and achieving sustainable peace, adding that the pre-dialogue meeting would have been an important step in this regard.

He urged all stakeholders to continue to engage constructively towards the early convening
of a credible and inclusive National Dialogue and expressed his appreciation to the African Union High-level Implementation Panel for its tireless efforts on Sudan and South Sudan, while reaffirming the continued full support and partnership of the United Nations.

**Ban welcomes de-escalation of Bangladesh violence, calls for transparent, inclusive and credible elections**

4 April - In response to questions raised concerning developments in Bangladesh, the Spokesman for the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, said that Mr. Ban welcomed the de-escalation of violence in Bangladesh in the past weeks.

The Spokesperson added that the Secretary-General is encouraged by the opposition's decision to participate in the city council elections for Dhaka and Chittagong, scheduled for 28 April, and he appeals to the authorities in all relevant institutions to ensure that the elections will be transparent, inclusive, and credible.

The statement adds that the Secretary-General hopes that political parties will soon find a way to overcome their differences for the sake of the country's long-term development and stability and that the United Nations remains fully committed to supporting Bangladesh in that regard.

**UN expresses ‘outrage’ at ‘heinous’ Al Shabaab attack on Kenyan university**

4 April - The United Nations has condemned the terrorist attack carried out by Al Shabaab in Garissa, Kenya, in the strongest terms, with the Security Council members stressing their “outrage” at what the President of the General Assembly called a “heinous” attack.

The Secretary-General, who had previously condemned the attack in a statement released on Wednesday, sent a personal letter yesterday to the President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta, to once again expressed his sincere condolences following the “horrendous” attack.

“There is little more appalling than targeting young people for murder and mayhem.” Mr. Ban wrote in the letter. “Those responsible for this heinous attack must be brought to justice.”

He also reiterated the solidarity of the United Nations with the people and Government of Kenya in preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism.

Those sentiments were echoed by the members of the Security Council, who issued a statement paying tribute to Kenya's role in the fight against terrorism, in particular the role played by the country in the fight against Al Shabaab as part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

Reaffirming that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security, and that any acts of terrorism are criminal and unjustifiable regardless of their motivation, wherever and whenever and by whomsoever committed, Council members reiterated their determination to combat all forms of terrorism, in accordance with their responsibilities under the Charter of the United Nations.

They underlined the need to bring the perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of these reprehensible acts of terrorism to justice and urged all States, in accordance with their obligations under international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, to cooperate actively with the Kenyan authorities in this regard.

The members of the Security Council reminded States that they must ensure that measures taken to combat terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, international humanitarian law
and refugee law.

The President of the General Assembly, Sam Kutesa (Uganda), also reiterated that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations is criminal and unjustifiable, regardless of its motivation, wherever, whenever and by whomsoever commits it, and he joined the Secretary-General and the Security Council in extending condolences to the families of the victims and the people and government of the Republic of Kenya, while wishing a speedy recovery to those injured.

The heinous attack left dozens dead, scores injured and many held hostage and others unaccounted for, the vast majority of whom were students, the statement said, adding a call on the international community to redouble its efforts to combat the scourge of terrorism.

**UN disaster risk chief highlights existential threat facing small island States**

**4 April** - The head of the United Nations office dealing with disaster risk mitigation has today underlined her concerns about the future development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the face of extreme weather events.

“Climate change combined with poverty and exposed infrastructure and housing, will lead to a significant increase in economic losses due to increased wind damage and sea level rise,” said Margareta Wahlström, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Disaster Risk Reduction and head of the UN's Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR).

“It is remarkable that in the two weeks since the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, both the Republic of Vanuatu and the Federated States of Micronesia have been forced to declare a state of emergency,” she said. “Two separate Category 5 cyclones which have caused several deaths, population displacement and widespread destruction.”

Ms. Wahlström pointed out that many millions of people across the Philippines were also facing the threat of Typhoon Maysak this weekend.

“The Pacific is a constant reminder to the rest of the world of what is at stake this year,” she said, referring to the international agreements on climate and a new global development agenda, which are under discussion this year and which aim to complement the framework on disaster risk reduction agreed last month in Sendai.

“For many small island states, expected future losses are not just disproportionately high, they pose an existential threat.” Ms. Wahlström stressed. “Unless disaster risk is reduced these countries will struggle to meet the development needs of their people.”

**Ban commends successes of mine action, calls for more support to eradicate explosives threat**

**4 April** - As the world marks the 10th anniversary of the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action today, the United Nations Secretary-General pointed to a decade of much progress in efforts towards eradicating the threat of antipersonnel landmines.

A total of 162 States were now Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention and the UN was playing a vital role in freeing the world from the threat of mines and explosive remnants of war and meeting the needs of victims and survivors and ensuring their human rights.
“Last year alone, the United Nations destroyed more than 400,000 landmines and explosive remnants of war and more than 2,000 tons of obsolete ammunition,” said Ban Ki-moon in a message to mark the International Day, which noted that the UN had also verified more than 1,500 kilometres of roadways, provided mine risk education to millions of people and trained thousands of military and police officers to handle and safely dispose of explosive hazards.

“I commend all who contributed to this success,” he said. “However, women, girls, boys and men continue to fall victim to landmines laid decades ago in places such as Afghanistan and Cambodia, and I am alarmed that these indiscriminate weapons are still being used in conflicts today.”

Civilians were also exposed to an increasingly wide range of explosive hazards, going beyond mines to cluster munitions, unsafe and unsecured weapons and ammunition, and improvised explosive devices.

“I am extremely concerned by the extensive use of improvised explosive devices by armed groups in Iraq, which poses a major threat to civilians,” he said. “In Syria, the widespread use of ‘barrel bombs’ and other explosive weapons in populated areas has caused great devastation and human suffering, leaving a legacy of explosive remnants of war that will remain a threat until their removal.”

This year’s theme for the Day, ‘More than Mines,’ reflects that changing reality. When explosive hazards block the way, food is not delivered, refugees and internally displaced people cannot safely return home, children cannot attend school and peacekeeping, peacebuilding and development efforts are hindered.

“On this International Day, I urge Member States to stay committed to the cause of mine action through financial contributions and political support, which is particularly crucial this year as the General Assembly debates assistance in mine action,” said the Secretary-General. “The proposed resolution will provide an opportunity to recognize that mine action is indeed ‘More than Mines’ and to recommit ourselves to working with affected states to reduce the menace of mines and explosive hazards.”