As chaos deepens in Yemen, UN expert warns of ‘worst case scenario’ displacement

8 April - The United Nations expert on the human rights of internally displaced persons today urged the international community “to prepare for massive displacement and humanitarian crisis as conflict torn Yemen further descends into chaos and civilians flee the fighting.”

“The international community must prepare for a worst case scenario. While efforts to reach a diplomatic solution are essential, the picture on the ground is extremely bleak and humanitarian responses must be stepped up as a matter of urgency,” UN Special Rapporteur Chaloka Beyani warned in a news release from Geneva.

“Unless rapidly resolved, the crisis could lead to mass displacement in the wake of heavy and ongoing fighting and airstrikes,” he added.

Over the last two weeks of increased fighting, more than 540 people have been killed, of which 311 are civilians, including 77 children, according to UN humanitarian agencies. At least 513 civilians have been injured, and more than 100,000 have been displaced.

On 30 March, an airstrike carried out against the Al-Mazraq camp, home to over 4,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) in Hajjah Governorate, northern Yemen, led to the deaths of 25, with 37 others injured, including 12 children. The UN expert condemned the attack and described it as “a grave violation against some of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable civilians.”
In addition to the IDP camp, reports have indicated that numerous hospitals, schools and other civilian buildings have been damaged by airstrikes and power and water supply cuts. Thousands of people are in an extremely vulnerable situation having been forced to flee their homes in areas where fighting has become intense and spread to residential neighbourhoods.

“Those responsible for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, including the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, must be held accountable,” the Special Rapporteur stressed.

The Special Rapporteur joined humanitarian actors, including the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen, Johannes van Der Klaauw, in calling on all parties to allow unhindered access to civilians by humanitarian actors. He underscored that IDPs must be protected against direct or indiscriminate attacks or acts of violence and attacks against their camps or settlements.

“While the scale of internal displacement remains unclear at this stage, it is certain to grow significantly over the coming days and weeks, as clashes continue to take place,” Mr Beyani said. A total of 14 Governorates out of 22 have been affected by airstrikes or armed conflict.

Special Rapporteurs are part of the Human Rights Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations in all parts of the world. They do not receive a salary for their work and are independent from any government.

Meanwhile, UNICEF Yemen Representative Julien Harneis has warned that yesterday’s airstrike on Al Rasheedi school in Yemen’s Ibb governorate, which left at least two children dead and two injured, “is a stark reminder of the appalling risks facing children as the conflict in Yemen intensifies.”

“Such incidents underline the urgent need for all parties to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and for every effort to be made to protect children from violence. That includes affording special protection to schools and hospitals, which should always be places where children can feel safe and not face the risks of death or injury.”

Also today, the Secretary-General’s spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, updated the press at Headquarters on how UN agencies were coping with the increasingly dire humanitarian situation in Yemen.

He said that the World Health Organization (WHO) has reported that ambulances in Aden are unable to reach injured people in some of the affected districts earlier this week. Meanwhile, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) called yesterday’s airstrike on the Al Rasheedi school in Yemen’s Ibb governorate, which left at least two children dead and two others injured, a stark reminder of the appalling risks faced by children as the conflict intensifies.

The head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Office for Yemen, Trond Jensen, has expressed the humanitarian community’s concern that the situation could turn catastrophic. He appealed to all parties to the conflict to respect their obligations under international law, to respect civilians and civilian infrastructure, and to allow unfettered access for humanitarian supplies and workers, so that urgently needed supplies can be brought in.

National aid partners in Yemen are expected to conduct needs assessments in the coming days, including in Hajjah, Al Hudaydah, Aden, Al Dhale’e, Lahj and Abyan. Discussions also continue with authorities to allow partners to undertake a humanitarian needs assessment in Sa’ada.
UN calls for $111 million to address urgent humanitarian priorities in DPR Korea

8 April - The United Nations today called for some $111 million to fund its humanitarian operations in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DRPK) in 2015, covering activities in food and agriculture, health and nutrition, water and sanitation.

"DPR Korea is both a silent and underfunded humanitarian situation," said UN Resident Coordinator Ghulam Isaczai in a press release. “Protracted and serious needs for millions of people are persistent and require sustained funding.”

The call comes as the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has released its latest assessment that addresses the country’s critical humanitarian needs which remain drastically underfunded.

According to the UN, among a population of 24.6 million people, approximately 70 per cent (18 million people) are considered food insecure, and are not able to access an adequate and diverse nutritious diet to live healthily.

Malnutrition rates continue to be a public health concern, with the chronic malnutrition (stunting) rate among children under five at 27.9 per cent; 4 per cent of them are acutely malnourished (wasting), according to the 2012 National Nutrition Survey.

Under-nutrition is a fundamental cause of maternal and child death and disease. Health service delivery is inadequate, and many areas of the country are not equipped with sufficient facilities, equipment or medicines. Safe drinking water and inadequate sanitation services are a fundamental problem, contributing to high and chronic instances of diarrhoea, respiratory infections and waterborne diseases. Food production is hampered by a lack of agricultural resources, such as seeds and fertilizers, and is highly vulnerable to shocks, particularly natural disasters like floods.

Funding these humanitarian priorities will enable the five UN agencies – the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World health organization (WHO), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) – already working on the ground to continue programmes that provide many vulnerable people with the basics.

"It is vital that donors respond quickly and generously to allow aid agencies to address the humanitarian situation,” emphasized Mr. Isaczai. “Humanitarian needs must be kept separate from political issues to be able to ensure minimum living conditions for the most vulnerable, especially women, children and the elderly.”

The commitment and support of the international community is vital. The UN needs to continue to build on positive developments, otherwise the progress made in the past decade to improve food security, health and nutrition will not be sustained. The UN will continue to work towards addressing the structural causes of vulnerabilities and chronic malnutrition through development interventions agreed with the DPRK Government, the press release concludes.
UN renews call for end to fighting inside Yarmouk camp, urges opening of humanitarian corridor

8 April - The situation in the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk remains extremely tense amid continued street fighting and unconfirmed reports of aerial bombardments of civilian areas, the United Nations said today.

At the daily press briefing held at UN Headquarters in New York, Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric told journalists that the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was unable to conduct humanitarian operations in the camp, which is located just outside the Syrian capital of Damascus.

Since 1 April, Yarmouk has been the scene of intense fighting between a number of armed groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), rendering it virtually impossible for civilians to leave.

Among Yarmouk’s 18,000 besieged residents are also 3,500 children, who have been reliant on UNRWA’s intermittent distributions of food and other assistance for over a year. In some areas, interruptions of humanitarian operations have left thousands of people without aid for months.

Addressing reporters, Mr. Dujarric noted that UNRWA had called for a pause in the hostilities in order to allow humanitarian access to civilians in need of assistance and the safe evacuation of those who wish to leave Yarmouk.

In addition, he said the UN agency called for all armed groups to respect and comply with their obligations to ensure the protection of civilians and exercise their influence on the parties on the ground to bring this about.

UN agency kicks off registry of vetted medical emergency teams, drawing lessons from past crises

8 April - With global crises on the rise, the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) today announced that its new registration system will enable it to build a global roster of foreign medical response teams ready to deploy in response to tsunamis, typhoons, floods and outbreaks, such as Ebola and cholera.

The Global Foreign Medical Teams Registry – which goes live today – sets minimum standards for international health workers and allows teams to clearly outline their services and skills. This facilitates a more effective and predictable response, and better coordination between aid providers and recipients. If preregistered with the WHO global registry, medical teams will be expedited and allowed in to the country to help those in need.

“Thanks to the system we have developed, the international response to the cyclone in Vanuatu has been very fast and efficient,” said Dr. Ian Norton, who leads the work on foreign medical teams at WHO.
The standards developed by WHO build on lessons learned during previous emergency responses including the West African Ebola outbreak, for which WHO coordinated the deployment of nearly 60 foreign medical teams provided by 40 organizations. It was the first time that foreign medical teams were deployed during an outbreak. Most recently, the WHO assisted in the vetting of medical teams responding to Cyclone Pam in the remote Pacific Island of Vanuatu.

“We supported the Ministry of Health to ensure that every foreign medical team that arrived in Vanuatu was registered in the system and had the right training and equipment. This meant that teams have been able to provide care quickly and effectively to the people most in need,” Dr. Norton added.

The first medical team arrived from Australia to support the local health workers just 2 days after the cyclone hit. Since then, 20 teams – more than 50 doctors, 40 nurses, 24 paramedics and 12 midwives – have provided assistance. New teams continue to arrive to fill positions as other teams return to their home countries. Under the new registry, medical teams are required to self-sufficient for the first two weeks – including food, shelter, water and medication for their team and for themselves.

Last year’s Ebola outbreak in West Africa also called for unique medical knowledge and equipment, and has carried risks for health workers. Progress that has been made against Ebola is in part due to the response by the national and international teams working together in 72 Ebola treatment centres across Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia.

In previous responses including the Haiti earthquake and the South Asia tsunami, some foreign teams arrived without informing the national health authorities or coordinating with other international responders. Although well-intentioned, sometimes these people lacked appropriate skills and local knowledge, were unfamiliar with the international response systems and standards, or brought inappropriate equipment that did not match the health needs of the people.

“The issue really came to a head in Haiti in 2010 with the response to the Haitian earthquake and the arrival of multiple medical teams, estimated up to 300, without self-sufficiency, without a coordination mechanism and the chaos that ensued,” Dr. Norton said at a press conference in Geneva this morning.

“If we take the approach from the Haitian side, if you’re a Haitian family, you’re not really sure whether the team coming in is a qualified surgeon or doctor whether they have the right equipment, whether they actually clean their instruments between the surgical cases they are about to perform which was the case in Haiti.”

For this reason, the WHO set up the blue book of classifications and minimum standards that seeks to identify foreign medical teams – more than one or two medical workers, be doctors, nurses, paramedics, physiotherapist, that go from their country into another in an emergency. This includes charities, non-governmental organizations and government teams as well.

“Classifications allow the team to declare and the country to realize what they are offering,” he said, adding that the standards were published in May 2013 and within two months were used in the Philippines response to Typhoon Haiyan.

“What we saw even in the Philippines is teams arriving without the right equipment, without the right medications, without the right skills so this is really the purpose of the registry. It allows governments to know what’s coming in and whether somebody has gone and prequalified and pre-accredited the team.”

“It has been proven in the field with 151 teams responded to the Haiyan Typhoon and within about three days the Ministry was informed about the classification system. They then issued a
declaration to all arriving teams that they must register with the department of health,” he added.

Improving the global response to emergencies has benefits for all countries, Dr. Norton said, emphasizing that it will help build skills and capacities of national teams to respond to their own emergencies and eventually be better able to help other countries.

WHO is also developing best practice guidelines and standards for teams to respond to specific needs including care of children, pregnant women, patients with disabilities and older people.

In related news, the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) and AudioNow Digital, a leading provider of in-language mobile apps for radio broadcasters, today announced that audio content featuring United Nations coverage on the Ebola epidemic will now be accessible through UN Radio’s Global Ebola Response mobile application.

The latest news bulletins and updates on Ebola’s impact and the efforts to address it, as well as archived audio stories, from the UN’s multimedia teams are available in the six official languages inside the app: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. Additional coverage is available in Kiswahili and Portuguese.

“We are excited to expand further our partnership with AudioNow through the launch of this very timely mobile app. Despite the progress made, the Ebola crisis is far from over, and this app will inform stakeholders and the general public about ongoing international efforts on the ground to contain and eliminate this epidemic,” said Hua Jiang, Acting Director, UN News and Media Division.

At thematic debate, UN chief urges efficient private sector funding for post-2015 development

8 April - The international community needs a financial framework capable of confronting the multifaceted crises of the day in a predictable and effective manner if it is to delineate a successful post-2015 sustainable development agenda, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon confirmed.

Delivering the opening remarks to the UN General Assembly’s Informal Interactive Hearing for the Third International Conference on Financing for Development today, the Secretary-General told the gathering of delegates and private sector professionals that channelling both public and private sector cash flows into sustainable development initiatives would be “crucial for securing an ambitious post-2015 agenda.”

“All sources of funding must be tapped – public and private, national and international,” Mr. Ban declared. “Domestic resource mobilization will be crucial.”

However, he noted, numerous obstacles in facilitating financing remained. In many countries, attempts to raise public resources through taxation continued to be hampered by loopholes, tax avoidance and tax evasion while private international capital flows also suffered from volatility.

In addition, the global financial crisis had further exposed the risks and underlying vulnerabilities in the international financial system, increasing inequalities, environmental challenges and rendering states susceptible to shocks such as the recent Ebola epidemic.

“The world needs an international financial framework that is predictable and effective in meeting
these challenges and achieving sustainable and inclusive development,” continued Mr. Ban. “We invite the private sector to be our partners in supporting and financing this agenda, including through partnerships and collaboration.”

This year marks wrap up of the landmark UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which world leaders agreed on 15 years ago. There has been significant progress in meeting the targets. For example, global poverty has been halved well ahead of the 2015 deadline; in developing countries, 90 per cent of children now enjoy primary education; the number of people lacking access to improved drinking water has halved, and the fight against malaria and tuberculosis has shown results, according to the UN.

But challenges persist, and with the deadline of the MDGs set for the end of this year, the UN will craft a new set of targets known as the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Globally, 73 million young people are looking for work and many more are trapped in exploitative jobs. In recent years, more than two and a half million more children in affluent countries fell into poverty, bringing the total above 76 million.

In a statement delivered on behalf of Sam Kutesa, the President of the UN General Assembly, Nicholas Emiliou, Acting President of the UN General Assembly, similarly called on Member States and all stakeholder to ensure that accessed resources are utilized “effectively and efficiently.”

“While businesses should take into account profit and shareholder value, they have opportunities to realize long-term success contributing towards achievement of sustainable development, including through partnerships and collaboration with the public sector,” stated Mr. Emiliou.

He added that today’s hearing provided a “unique opportunity for an in-depth exchange of views” on important themes directly impacting the planet’s new development agenda.

“Mobilizing financing for critical infrastructure such as energy, transport, water and sanitation, as well as for [small and medium enterprises], is instrumental for structural transformation, economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability,” Mr. Emiliou said.

Meanwhile, as he urged private sector leaders to join the UN and Member States at the upcoming Third International Conference on Financing for Development to be held in Addis Ababa later this year, Mr. Ban explained that the international system needed to create better incentives and a regulatory framework that would enable investors and companies to better align their strategies with economic, social and governance issues and report on their progress.

“We need to continue to expand partnerships with the business sector, civil society and other stakeholders, and to lever your resources and unique skills,” concluded the Secretary-General, who added that world sat at the brink of “a very important historic moment.”

“We need your advocacy, expertise, and ingenuity to make Addis Ababa a success and to chart a new era of sustainable development.”
UN expert urges political action to promote Roma human rights, combat discrimination

8 April - A United Nations rights expert has today called for strong and tangible political commitment to fight the bias and discrimination that continues to infringe upon the rights of Roma people.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Rita Izsák, speaking on International Roma Day, urged the world to focus on putting the human rights of Roma, including minority rights, at the centre of all State inclusion policies and measures.

“Discrimination and racism against Roma come in many different forms, ranging from silent indifference to hate speech and violence against individuals or entire communities,” she said.

“Furthermore, growing populism and extremism in many countries with significant Roma populations have deepened societal divisions, causing more stigmatization of Roma communities. Unfortunately this has led to a desensitization of the public, and to the resurgence of unacceptable myths about Roma criminality, unworthiness and inferiority.”

She said it was time for societies to stop tolerating public discourse that perpetuates “stereotypical, racist, hateful or discriminatory” views about Roma, to take effective action against such discourses and to “reject anti-Gypsyism” in every form.

The Special Rapporteur, who will present a report on the human rights situation of Roma and anti-Gypsyism worldwide to the UN Human Rights Council in June 2015, called on political and public leaders to combat bias and discrimination against Roma by reinforcing the basic foundations of good governance and democracy and promoting minority rights protection in line with international standards, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.

“I also highlight the role of the media, which must take responsibility to guarantee the objective portrayal of Roma, refrain from sensationalist media coverage, and give space to Roma self-representation,” said Ms. Izsák, whose report will reflect her key concerns on Roma inclusion, both inside and outside of Europe, and provide important policy recommendations.

She called for heightened political will, especially at national and local levels, and for openness to learning from past policy and planning mistakes, so that dedicated institutional attention can be given to Roma issues and Roma leadership with the aim of breaking the vicious cycle of stigma, discrimination and marginalization.

“I therefore call on Governments to place Roma rights at the heart of all strategies and policies related to human and minority rights, social inclusion and development, with explicit targets for Roma communities,” she said urging protection and promotion of Roma identity, language and culture, the guarantee of dignity and equality, and effective political and economic participation.

“I also remain deeply alarmed about the lack of Roma representation in local, national and international decision-making bodies, especially in institutions explicitly established to protect and promote their rights,” she said. “Given the unprecedented level of Roma intellectuals, professionals and activists, the slogan ‘nothing about us without us’ must be put into practice in the field of Roma
‘Education is your right’ says UN agency official at opening of school for displaced Iraqis

8 April - The United Nations education agency today celebrated the opening of a new school at Dawodiya Camp in Dohouk, Iraq, as part of its efforts to provide quality secondary education to children and adolescents in internally displaced persons communities.

The opening of the new school represents another major milestone in the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) work to improve access to quality education in Iraq following the opening of the Baharka Secondary School in March this year.

“Regardless of the circumstances you are in, remember that education is your right, demand for it and take advantage of it,” said Ali Zulfiqar, the UNESCO Project Manager, who spoke on behalf of the UNESCO Office for Iraq Director, Axel Plathe.

The Dawodiya Secondary School, for which UNESCO received financial support from the Government of Saudi Arabia, has six classrooms and will host up to 500 students and 20 teachers in two shifts. Children will attend catch-up classes over the next three months, before sitting for exams at the end of June.

With 4,017 people and 661 families currently residing in Dawodiya camp, the opening of the new school will allow a large number of students to continue their education and restore a sense of normality and stability to their lives and helps fulfil the aims of UNESCO’s project to continue ensuring that quality education reaches the children of displaced people.

Government and education officials from the regional capital, Erbil, attended the opening ceremony, as did students, parents and teachers along with members of the international humanitarian community and civil society organizations.

“We are thankful for UNESCO’s support in constructing the Dawodiya Secondary School for IDPs [internally displaced persons],” said Abed Yousef, Director General of Education in Dohouk during his speech at the opening ceremony, “and for helping the Ministry of Education of the Kurdistan Regional Government in conducting teacher training workshops and providing catch up classes as well as the necessary stationery for students to continue their education.”