Unrest in Burundi sends thousands fleeing, threatening years of refugee gains – UN agency

8 May - The eruption of pre-election violence in Burundi last month has seen over 50,000 people flee to neighbouring countries and threatens to undo some of the most promising developments in recent refugee history in Africa, the United Nations body tasked with protecting displaced people said in Geneva today.

“Many of these have crossed into Rwanda (25,004), but over the last week we have also seen a sharp increase in people seeking asylum in Tanzania (17,696) after entry restrictions there were lifted,” said, Adrian Edwards, spokesperson for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), briefing journalists in Geneva.

“In addition, almost 8,000 people have crossed into South Kivu province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In all these cases women and children, including a large number of unaccompanied children, are in the majority,” he said.

Mr. Edwards praised solutions found, following the end of Burundi’s civil war in 2005, to address the plight of many thousands of formerly displaced people after over a decade of conflict. These have included one of the world’s largest and most successful voluntary return programmes for Burundian refugees – with UNHCR helping the country to re-integrate almost half a million people into society.

Neighbouring Tanzania was among countries that hosted large numbers of Burundian refugees who fled violence in 1972. In recent years, Tanzania offered citizenship to around 200,000 of them and their descendants, which is the largest number of refugees UNHCR has ever seen locally integrated by a host country. Thousands of others have been successfully resettled overseas, including more than 8,000 in the United States.
However, as protests have continued after the country’s ruling National Council for the Defence of Democracy – Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party nominated on 26 April Pierre Nkurunziza as its presidential candidate, Mr. Edwards pointed to reports of daily violence in the capital and the spreading of unrest to the capital.

He added that new arrivals in Rwanda spoke of harassment and intimidation by Imbonerakure youth militants. Many new arrivals came from northern Burundi but those leaving urban areas, including a number of high school and university students, has increased.

“With the Government of Rwanda, we are now moving the refugees to a new refugee camp, Mahama, which can host up to 60,000 refugees,” said Mr. Edwards. “Many people have experienced difficulties while trying to leave Burundi. Several women have reported threats of rape from armed men, and having to bribe their way through roadblocks. Some have walked for hours through the bush with their children.”

Mr. Edwards also described local efforts, supplemented by UNHCR support, in Democratic Republic of the Congo, where 7,661 Burundians have registered as refugees, and said 13,000 people were awaiting processing in Tanzania, with 10,000 on Kagunga island on Lake Tanganyika.

“We have started to relocate them with the help of an old ferry that can carry a maximum of 600 people,” said Mr. Edwards. “All asylum seekers are being transported from villages and islands to Nyarugusu refugee camp, where they will receive a plot of land on which they can build a shelter and grow some vegetables.”

Concerns over the political crisis in Burundi turning into a humanitarian one were echoed by a spokesperson from the World Food Programme (WFP), who said she was also concerned about the tens of thousands of people leaving the country.

WFP is providing food and nutrition assistance to more than 25,000 Burundian refugees in Rwanda, said Elisabeth Byrs, with the agency and other humanitarian partners preparing to assist 50,000 to 100,000 refugees in Rwanda.

Resources are stretched by the influx, she said, adding that WFP is on the ground in a new transit camp and three transit centres providing food assistance to Burundian refugees, starting with High Energy Biscuits.

She said a quarter of the children arriving in the transit camp at Mahama are malnourished and WFP is providing hot meals and ready-to-use supplementary food to help them recover. Additionally, the WFP would start blanket supplementary feeding for all young children as soon as possible to avert any further deterioration of refugees’ nutritional status.

Turning to the challenges that the WFP was facing, Ms. Byrs said that the WFP in Rwanda did not have enough resources to respond to the food needs of the increasing number of refugees from Burundi. The agency had been able to mobilize some emergency funding, allowing them to immediately respond to the initial needs, but that was not enough to sustain assistance, especially if the number of refugees kept rising. WFP urgently needed a minimum of $5 million to meet food needs of 50,000 to 100,000 refugees who could arrive in the coming six months.
FEATURE: search-and-rescue worker looks back on ‘intense,’ rewarding deployment in quake-hit Nepal

8 May - As international search-and-rescue teams start wrapping up their activities in Nepal following the Government’s decision to call off ground operations there, Dewey Perks, a rescue worker soon heading back to the United States, describes his time in the small South Asian nation trying to save lives as both “very intense” and highly rewarding.

Speaking to the UN News Centre about his deployment in the capital, Kathmandu, after Nepal was struck by a devastating 7.8-magnitude earthquake on 25 April, he recalled the rescue of a Nepalese teenager.

On that particular day, after four tense hours, Mr. Perks’ team and the Nepalese police were able to rescue a 15-year-old boy, who had been stuck inside a hole.

“We had two units in the field coming to a cross-point in the sector they’d been assigned to, and they observed that heavy equipment was being used [by Nepalese police] to take a building apart,” Mr. Perks said by phone.

This process, he explained, is typically used to clear a site and recover the bodies of the deceased.

“Suddenly, their dogs were alerted by human scent,” he said. Mr. Perks’ team then worked in cooperation with the local police force, helping them go deeper into the building.

“It was a very intense situation,” he said. “They had to make sure not to cause the entire building to collapse.”

Ultimately, the rescue operation was a success, and the boy was able to get immediate medical assistance.

“It was really a good example of cooperation, in line with international spirit, where the local authorities were in charge and we were able to provide them with tools to go into the building,” he said.

Mr. Perks is a seasoned member of the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance at the US Agency for International Development (USAID) whose personal involvement in urban search-and-rescue operations dates back to the early 1990s. One of his primary responsibilities at USAID is to coordinate the US search-and-rescue teams deployed in the aftermath of disasters.

Though Mr. Perks works for the US Government, he considers himself part of a broader international effort coordinated by the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG), a network of over 90 disaster-prone and disaster-responding countries and organizations under the umbrella of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) that is dedicated to urban search-and-rescue since 1991.

Because of the high likelihood of an earthquake in Nepal, INSARAG has had a longstanding interest in the country prior to the recent catastrophe.

“In case of a major earthquake, we knew that it would be a great challenge to get there and that it would also be a great challenge to operate once we arrived,” said Mr. Perks.

When asked about the circumstances surrounding his deployment in Kathmandu, Mr. Perks pointed out the difficulties in access faced by his team and others.

“We stayed most of the day [25 April], like everyone else, looking for airplanes to get there. We knew there was a very tiny airport [in Kathmandu] and that it was closed early on,” he said.
Ultimately, he explained, his agency used a US military aircraft, which required far less space for take off and landing than civilian ones, to fly to the Nepalese capital on Tuesday morning, three days after the earthquake.

“While the plane was being unloaded, we went through the normal border crossing procedures and sent a small party to the [INSARAG] Reception-Departure Centre to find out where the other teams were, get a situation update, as well as to receive an assignment for where we should start operations,” he continued.

Eventually, he and his team moved to an area of Kathmandu recommended by the US Embassy, where they established their base of operations, using information from the Reception-Departure Centre and the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team, which was already on the ground, to assess the area.

“Although this was a major earthquake, the damage was not as bad as we had anticipated, which is very good news for Nepal,” he noted. “Still, many structures had collapsed and we knew that there was the possibility of helping our [Nepalese] colleagues [rescue survivors].”

On a daily basis, Mr. Perks and the other INSARAG teams relied on the UN system both to organize their work and coordinate themselves with the Nepali authorities.

“We operate under the UN OCHA umbrella, using a UN facility called the On-Site Operations Coordination Centre [OSOCC],” he said, adding that foreign search-and-rescue teams had coordination meetings there twice a day, “one to receive tasks and the other to report your progresses made on these tasks.”

Under this system, Kathmandu was quickly divided into sectors, each of which was assigned to an international team, while the Government of Nepal assigned priorities to these areas based on, among other factors, the number of inhabitants, the types of buildings, and the probability of survival.

“We used the [UNDAC] team as a liaison with the local government. Instead of having 76 teams directly trying to coordinate with the local government, the UNDAC team worked closely with local authorities to make sure their priorities were then transmitted to the urban search-and-rescue teams,” explained Mr. Perks, stressing the importance of the UN coordination on the ground.

“Our job is to take the number of those who are missing and try to reduce it to zero, so there is constant communication and coordination through the UN system, along with the affected country, to make sure we get the best information on how many people are still being impacted,” he added.

According to Mr. Perks, the situation in now stable in Nepal from a search-and-rescue standpoint, which is why the Government, with the support of all foreign agencies involved, has called off such operations. He and his team expect to be back in the US in the coming days.

Mr. Perks reflected on the critical importance of the training he received from INSARAG, which helped him gain an understanding of Nepal and its culture and had “prepared him for this moment.”

“Sooner or later all of us are going to be recipients of aid and we know that – one day I’m going to be a donor country and another day I’m going to be a recipient country – so we find it very critical to make sure that our focus is not just on rescue teams but also to get a better understanding of disaster-prone countries,” he stated.
New UN refugee agency report documents alarming surge in Bay of Bengal crossings

8 May - The number of irregular migrants crossing the Bay of Bengal has almost doubled over the past year amid a dangerous uptick in human smuggling and trafficking across the region, according to a new report from the United Nations refugee agency.

Released today, the *Irregular Maritime Movements in South-East Asia* report, documents an alarming rise in the number of Rohingya and Bangladeshis being smuggled across the Bay of Bengal and towards Thailand's border with Malaysia in the three-month period spanning January to March 2015.

Estimates now place the number of those crossing one of the world's most dangerous sea routes at 25,000.

At a recent press briefing in Geneva, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Adrian Edwards observed that the swelling number of migrants coincided with an increase in the profitability of smuggling in the region.

“Smuggling networks by sea from the Bay of Bengal area to Thailand and onwards to Malaysia have become increasingly lucrative for smugglers,” Mr. Edwards explained, “and increasingly dangerous for their human cargoes.”

In addition to the surge in crossings, the report also describes scenes of harrowing human experience as thousands of migrants are increasingly lured into life-threatening compromises by the smugglers themselves, signalling a stark shift in how smugglers recruit passengers.

During the reporting period, in fact, UNHCR staff spoke with several hundred survivors of such journeys and documented numerous cases in which passengers are initially lured by low boarding costs or free passage on condition that they repay the debt with future earnings in their country of destination. On occasion, false promises of work and even small cash incentives are offered in order to sweeten the deal.

The prospects of a hopeful crossing, however, end there, as what begins as a journey of human smuggling is quickly transformed into human trafficking.

Those who change their minds about crossing the Bay of Bengal, for example, and ask to be let off the smugglers’ boats are frequently forced to remain. The UN agency has noted cases of children being abducted off the streets or while fishing and forced onto boats while, for the most part, people remain unaware that money will be extorted from them later in the journey.

In some cases, smugglers have even resorted to holding passengers for ransom at sea. Once payment is made, people are taken by fishing or speed boats directly to Malaysia. According to a non-governmental organization’s (NGO) estimates cited by UNHCR, currently several thousand people could be held – and dozens could have already died – in these ‘offshore camps.’

Against that backdrop, irregular migrants are also paying for the Bay of Bengal crossings with their lives.

Based on survivor accounts, UNHCR estimates that 300 people died at sea in the first quarter of 2015 as a result of starvation, dehydration or abuse by boat crews. One survivor, the agency's report says, compared his 62 day experience at sea to a graveyard and said he lost hope of reaching shore alive.
The UN report comes just days after the grisly discovery of dozens of bodies in smugglers’ camps in Thailand which prompted UNHCR's appeal for a regional effort to end human trafficking and protect those who escape difficult conditions from the hands of smugglers.

**In Ukraine, Ban pledges UN support amid ‘debilitating’ conflict in country’s eastern regions**

8 May - Continuing his travels in Europe to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon joined the people of Ukraine today to honour the millions of soldiers and citizens who fought to defend human dignity against the aggression of Nazism, and also pledged support from the United Nations as Ukraine deals with a protracted conflict in the east.

“As we recall the huge price of victory over fascism, we renew our solemn promise that the sacrifice of the fallen will not be in vain,” Mr. Ban said at a Kiev press encounter for 70th Anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe.

“I am saddened that I come to Ukraine amidst a debilitating conflict in the east, where nearly 7,000 [lives] have been lost, along with so much destruction of your society,” the Secretary-General added, pledging that the UN will continue to stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

The UN chief was joined by Ukraine’s President Petro Poroshenko. Yesterday Mr. Ban was in Poland where he also attended events commemorating the end of the Second World War in Europe. Mr. Ban heads to Russia tomorrow for a weekend of events as well.

“I am here to reaffirm my support for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, in a manner upholding Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence,” Mr. Ban said.

It is out of the tragedy of World War II that the United Nations emerged as a common resolve of the international community to come together and, as the Charter pledges, to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” the Secretary-General reminded.

“I know that there had been some setbacks and failures, but the United Nations is the most legitimate organization in the international community to preserve peace, freedom, human dignity, and human rights,” he said.

Mr. Ban also recalled that Ukraine is a founding member of the UN and in its 24 years of independence, the eastern European nation has provided peacekeepers to many places in the world.

Also today, Mr. Ban met with Ukraine’s Prime Minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, to discuss the way forward for resolving the conflict based on the Minsk agreements and Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

The Secretary-General and the Prime Minister also discussed the critical reforms currently undertaken by the Government.

Mr. Ban underscored that the UN remains deeply committed to supporting the people and Ukraine in their quest toward a more transparent, inclusive and results-oriented political and democratic culture.

“I am standing with you,” he said.
UN to begin polio and measles vaccinations as Ebola transmissions plummet in Liberia

8 May - United Nations agencies and their partners today announced a massive campaign to vaccinate more than 600,000 children against polio and measles in Liberia as a crucial step towards recovery and the restoration of health services in the West African country, where Ebola transmissions have dwindled in recent weeks.

“This on 9 May, 42 days will have elapsed since the burial of the last confirmed case and the outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease will be declared over in [Liberia],” according to the World Health Organization in its latest update on the outbreak.

The vaccination campaign in Liberia “aims to vaccinate more than 683,000 children against polio and 603,000 against measles,” according to a joint press release by Liberia’s Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) issued in Monrovia, Liberia.

“The polio vaccines will be given to children aged up to 59 months, and the measles vaccine to children between the ages of six and 59 months,” said the release. “Children aged 12-59 months will also receive deworming medicine.”

The massive vaccination campaign had been scheduled for last year, but was suspended due to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which has affected more than 26,500 people, including over 11,000 deaths in the most-affected countries Guinea and Sierra Leone, as well as Liberia.

But because there is still a risk of reintroduction from Guinea and Sierra Leone – where transmission continues – infection prevention measures will be heightened during the campaign, including temperature checks and the use of single-use syringes and new gloves for each child vaccinated, according to the agencies involved in the campaign.

Measles is a highly contagious viral disease and one of the leading causes of death among young children globally. Polio, also a highly infectious viral disease, can lead to paralysis and sometimes death, with children under the age of five the most vulnerable. Both diseases are easily preventable as vaccines are effective and inexpensive.

“A major social mobilization effort has been deployed to convince communities of the need to have their children vaccinated and to explain the measures being taken to minimize any risk of infection,” the press release said.

Later Friday, WHO issued interim advice on the sexual transmission of Ebola, that said “sexual transmission of the Ebola virus, from males to females is a strong possibility, but has not yet been proven. Less probable, but theoretically possible, is female to male transmission.”
Somalia remains one of the largest, most complex emergencies, says country’s UN relief coordinator

8 May - In New York to update Member States and partners on the humanitarian and development situation in Somalia, the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia said the “multi-faceted” challenge presented by Somalia is different to that posed in other countries.

“We are dealing with a country putting things together again,” said Philippe Lazzarini. “We have a post-conflict situation but we also have a conflict existing. We have military operations but we also have different stages of recovery and development.”

That meant that aid delivery remained incredibly dangerous, and Mr. Lazzarini had described to UN Member States the challenges of delivering humanitarian assistance, as highlighted by the attack three weeks earlier in northern Somalia on UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) workers, where four lost their lives and five were wounded.

“I think it’s an understatement to say that Somalia remains one of the largest and most complex emergencies in the world,” he said, pointing to figures, such as the fact that three million people need humanitarian assistance or livelihood support, among whom 740,000 are unable to meet food needs, as well as 200,000 children who are severely malnourished.

He stressed the vulnerability of the one million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country, whose vulnerability made them “pariahs among pariahs” as they continued to live in appalling conditions.

Mr. Lazzarini underlined Somalia’s susceptibility to natural disasters and food insecurity and said it was still too early to say whether the harvest would be sufficient or not.

The country also faced challenges due to a money transfer operator ceasing operations there and he pointed out that 40 per cent of Somalia’s population is dependent on remittances. He said they accounted for between $1.3 and $1.5 billion of annual gross domestic product (GDP) and amounted to twice the value of the international humanitarian effort.

Mr. Lazzarini also pointed to several achievements including the arresting of a polio outbreak. After a large number of cases was found, there followed “sustained mobilization of the aid community” and the vaccination of 4 million people to put an end to the outbreak. While the country was not polio free, there had been no new cases since August 2014.

Also in health sector, he noted a drop in prevalence of malaria, which had been reduced from 20 per cent to less than two per cent. Vaccination campaigns had also allowed Somalia’s livestock to recover to an extent that exports had re-started, generating profits of $350 million for Somali farmers.

He called on the international community to address the root causes of the problems in Somalia, pointing out that the international activity in Somalia had been humanitarian focused for 25 years.

“Humanitarian assistance is a band aid that allows us only to keep people alive,” said Mr. Lazzarini, calling for a durable solution for IDPs.
Yemen’s children at immediate risk of severe malnutrition as fighting continues – UNICEF

8 May - More children in Yemen are at risk of dying from hunger and lack of health services than from bombs and bullets, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) warned today amid ongoing fighting across the Gulf country.

Briefing the press in Geneva, UNICEF spokesperson Christophe Boulierac warned that 120,000 children in Yemen remain at immediate risk of severe malnutrition over the coming three months if health and hygiene services failed to resume normal functioning.

Mr. Boulierac explained that restrictions on commercial imports of fuel and food are largely to blame for the rapidly deteriorating situation facing the country’s children.

He added that another 2.5 million children under five years of age were at immediate risk of diarrhoea while 1.2 children were likely to suffer from preventable diseases such as pneumonia and measles as vaccination campaigns had ground to a halt.

More than 1,400 people have been killed and 300,000 have fled their homes in nearly three months of fighting in the war-torn Gulf nation. Emergency relief and medical teams from abroad are struggling to fly in to scale-up the humanitarian operation to address the needs of increasingly vulnerable Yemenis.

Insecurity and lack of fuel have also limited access to and delivery of services. Partners report difficulty providing medical services as result of the current security situation and continued airstrikes targeting Haradh, Sa'ada and Sana'a. Food relief partners have reported they have had to suspend assistance in several districts due to lack of fuel.

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), confirmed that regular commercial imports of fuel had become the main issue and called for them to increase. The primary obstacle, he explained, was an inspection regime instituted by a recent Security Council resolution and which had resulted in a crippling effect on humanitarian operations.

In addition to the limited access to fuel, food imports had also been impacted, cautioned Mr. Laerke as he noted that 90 percent of the country depended on their food from imports.

Against that backdrop, the UN’s World Health Organization (WHO) – which also addressed the briefing – cited reports of 484 suspected cases of dengue fever with two reported deaths.

A spokesperson for the WHO said the UN agency was on the ground and trying to send rapid diagnostic kits for both dengue and malaria but could not confirm the dengue cases without lab testing. The spokesperson added that between 19 March and 4 May the number of casualties across the country had shot up to 1,439 deaths and 5,951 injuries, including 71 children deaths.
Unemployment rate for Palestine refugees reaches 44 per cent in Gaza Strip, UN agency says

8 May - More than 27,000 applicants applied for some 200 teaching jobs for the coming academic year in the Gaza Strip, where unemployment has now reached nearly 44 per cent, making it one of the world’s most unstable economies, the United Nations agency assisting Palestinian refugees across the Middle East said today.

“The resilience of Palestine refugees is legendary, but not inexhaustible,” said Chris Gunness, spokesman for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which provides direct relief and works programmes for some 5 million Palestine refugees in the region.

Mr. Gunness quoted UNRWA Commissioner-General Krähenbühl as saying via social media: “Palestine refugees need more than just aid; they need a just solution.”

This past week, “the gravity of unemployment in Gaza, coupled with the number of well qualified job seekers, was once again brought to the fore,” according to Mr. Gunness.

He said a recruitment exercise was initiated in line with increasing student numbers to ensure quality education for refugee children in Gaza, and UNRWA received more than 27,000 applicants for an advertised recruitment of approximately 200 teachers for the coming school 2015-2016 year.

Out of the applicant pool, more than 22,000 applicants met the criteria and have been invited to take the written test, he said.

“The high number of qualified applicants,” Mr. Gunness said, “for a small number of job opportunities, reflects the ongoing unemployment crisis prevailing in Gaza.”

“A large portion of the society is highly educated but is limited to finding employment opportunities in the Strip, due to the blockade, which severely restricts the movement of people and goods,” he said.

“The blockade has crushed the Strip’s once dynamic and trade-oriented economy and its capacity to create jobs, and pushed the majority of the population into aid-dependency.”

According to the UNRWA spokesman, in 2014, the average unemployment rate for registered Palestine refugees was 44.1 per cent and for the general population it stood at 43.9 per cent.

“This is the highest rate ever recorded in Gaza and one of the highest worldwide,” he said.

Mr. Gunness also noted that approximately 65 per cent of the refugee population depends on food aid.

The Gaza economy was already in recession before the last conflict in the summer of 2014, but according to International Monetary Fund statistics, in the third quarter of 2014 the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) shrank dramatically by 24.4 per cent, according to UNRWA.

“According to the International Monetary Fund, the overall Gaza GDP shrank by 15 per cent in 2014, making it one of the most unstable economies in the world,” Mr. Gunness said. “There is no indication that this will improve in the near future.”
**Nepal: UN agency stresses urgent funding needs to get food to earthquake victims**

**8 May** - Two weeks after a devastating earthquake hit Nepal, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has warned that “severe logistical challenges” are getting in the way of aid reaching hundreds of thousands of survivors in some of the country’s hardest-hit areas.

“We in no way want a lack of resources to force us to limit the assistance we’re providing,” Richard Ragan, who is coordinating WFP’s relief operation, said from Kathmandu.

“The people of Nepal are resilient, but we can’t expect families to be living in the rubble of their homes, with little food, no roof over their head and the monsoons coming,” he said.

After the initial focus in the relief effort on search and rescue, food has become an increasingly urgent need, WFP said. Thus far, the Programme has distributed food for 300,000 people and is bringing in more helicopters and engaging multiple fleets of small trucks to get supplies to hard-hit rural areas. It is also opening a land route from India to take pressure off Kathmandu airport.

But WFP’s emergency operations are only four per cent funded, with much of the food distributions and common services provided to date enabled by internal resources which are reaching their limit.

Funded entirely by voluntary contributions from governments, companies and private individuals, WFP has appealed for $116.5 million to provide food for 1.4 million people over the next three months.

Many of those affected in the most remote rural areas are subsistence farmers who lost the crops that were harvested just before the quake hit, WFP said. Families urgently need food to carry them over until the next harvest while they rebuild their lost livelihoods. It is vital that the response from the international community matches the immense needs of the people of Nepal.

On 25 April, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake shook Nepal, killing thousands while limiting access to food and leaving some 3.5 million in need of food assistance. An estimated 8 million people across the country’s Western and Central Regions are affected by the disaster, including its largest cities, Kathmandu and Pokhara.

**Ban appoints deputy special representatives for UN missions in both Mali and Haiti**

**8 May** - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today announced the respective appointments of his Deputy Special Representative for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and also of his Deputy Special Representative for the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).

Mbaranga Gasarabwe of Rwanda, to serve in MINUSMA, will also serve as UN Resident Coordinator, Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Representative of the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Ms. Gasarabwe succeeds David Gressly of the United States who served as Deputy Special Representative from July 2013 to April 2015. Mr. Ban thanked Mr. Gressly for his dedicated service at a critical moment in Mali’s history and during the establishment of MINUSMA’s presence.

Ms. Gasarabwe brings more than 20 years of experience with the UN in development and humanitarian assistance. From 2001 to 2011, she served as Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Benin, Djibouti, Guinea and Mali. She was appointed Assistant Secretary-General in the Department of Safety and Security in 2011.
Today Mr. Ban also announced the appointment of Mourad Wahba of Egypt as the Deputy Special Representative for MINUSTAH, where he will also serve as UN Resident Coordinator, Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Representative of the UNDP.

Mr. Wahba will succeed Peter de Clercq of the Netherlands, who Mr. Ban also thanked today for his dedicated service and contribution to the work of the UN in Haiti.

Mr. Wahba brings to the position extensive experience in development, policy making, and operations management. He currently serves as Deputy Assistant Administrator and Deputy Regional Director for the Regional Bureau for Arab States of UNDP in New York.

Prior to this role, Mr. Wahba was the Director of the Security Office in the Bureau of Management of UNDP in New York from 2009 to 2013, and UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Morocco from 2006 to 2009.

**UN expert urges Mauritius to prioritize legal protections against abuse of older persons**

8 May - While efforts have been made in Mauritius to ensure that older persons fully enjoy their rights, the United Nations rights expert on the issue stressed today that “law is not enough” and encouraged the authorities to make detection of elder abuse and law enforcement a priority.

“The authorities’ firm commitment to putting older people first needs to translate into deeds,” said Rosa Kornfeld-Matte, the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, at the end of her first official visit to the country.

“Theyir situation cannot be seen in isolation as it is reflective of existing patterns of discrimination, marginalization and social exclusion that needed to be addressed,” she said.

Ms. Kornfeld-Matte noted that Mauritius has a remarkable legal, institutional and policy framework on older persons and has taken a number of commendable measures in recent years to safeguard older persons.

For example, “the 2001 national policy on the elderly was an important step to comprehensively address the welfare dimension of the ageing phenomenon,” she said, adding that she trusts “that the Government will deploy all necessary efforts to implement the new national policy on ageing (2014-2024).”

Moreover, Ms. Kornfeld-Matte was pleased to learn that as a developing country, the Government is spending about half of its budget on social services including free health and education, which also benefit older persons.

“Financial autonomy is key to ageing with dignity,” said the UN right expert, who also hailed the country’s non-contributory universal pension for all people 60 years and older, operating since 1976.

“The pension system also has an important gender dimension,” stressed Ms. Kornfeld-Matte, explaining that “since it is younger women in households who are expected to care for the elderly and reach retirement age without having been active in the formal work force, forcing them otherwise into poverty in later years.”

She said that safeguards need to be put in place against older persons’ financial exploitation as this makes them an important income source.

However, “the continued prevalence of elder abuse indicates that normative action is not enough,” Ms. Kornfeld-Matte warned, stressing that “further measures are required to detect, report and prevent all forms of abuse of older persons in institutional care and in family settings.”
“I urge the Government to put in place, as a matter of priority, a monitoring mechanism and inspection framework,” the independent expert emphasized.

She also suggested that inspections should be conducted on a regular basis, including announced and unannounced visits to ensure the protection of older persons from sexual and physical abuse and neglect.

“There is also an urgent need for affordable, accessible and barrier-free housing for older persons in order to reduce their levels of dependency and provide alternative housing options,” Ms. Kornfeld-Matte added.

The UN rights expert lauded the Government’s acknowledgment of the important role older persons have played in nation-building, rather than portraying them as physically, mentally and socio-economically vulnerable.

Emphases of the intergenerational dialogue, she said, are good examples in challenges faced by multi-lingual, multicultural and multi-ethnic societies.

“Theyir knowledge, experience and wisdom should be taken into account when designing disaster risk reduction strategies,” said Ms. Kornfeld-Matte, as climate change is exacerbating the inherent environmental vulnerabilities of a small island developing state like Mauritius and has a disproportionate effect on older persons.

Mauritius is the first African country to have developed a national policy on ageing. It has a population of about 1.2 million and around 13 per cent are age 60 and over. The figure is projected to rise to 30 per cent by 2050.

Traditional care-providing structures, such as the extended family, are undergoing radical changes in Mauritius as the number of dependent elderly increases. This severely affects care-providing mechanisms, the housing situation as well as the health care system.

The Elderly Persons Act 2005 is a crucial step to provide adequate protection to older persons against ill-treatment, be it physical, verbal, emotional harassment or financial prejudice, as well as breaking the taboo of elder abuse in the country.

**UN rights experts call on Iran to end death penalty**

8 May - Two United Nations human rights experts have condemned the sharp increase in executions across Iran in recent weeks, urging the Government in Tehran to heed the Organization’s appeal for an immediate halt on the use of the death penalty.

“When the Iranian government refuses to even acknowledge the full extent of executions which have occurred, it shows a callous disregard for both human dignity and international human rights law,” Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, stressed in a press release issued earlier today.

According to a UN human rights report released last year, the new Islamic Penal Code that entered into force in 2013 now omits references to apostasy, witchcraft and heresy, but continues to allow for juvenile executions and retains the death penalty for activities that do not constitute most serious crimes in line with the safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty such as adultery, repeated alcohol use, and drug possession and trafficking.

Iran has witnessed a surge in executions over the past two years.

At least 852 individuals were executed between July 2013 and June 2014 – the last reporting period for which data is available – representing an “alarming” increase in the number of executions in relation to the already-high rates of previous years, according to UN estimates.

In addition, more than 340 persons, including at least six political prisoners and seven women, were reportedly executed since January 2015.
“We are alarmed by the recent surge in the number of executions, which has occurred despite serious questions about fair trial standards,” added Christof Heyns, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions. “Many of the prisoners executed during this period were charged with drug-related offences, which do not involve intentional killing and hence do not meet the threshold of the 'most serious crimes'.”

Both experts drew particular attention to continued reports of public executions, noting that 15 such executions were known to have already occurred in 2015. Public executions, they said, had “a dehumanising effect on both the victim and those who witness the execution” and ultimately reinforced the “already cruel, inhuman and degrading nature of the death penalty.”

Mr. Shaheed and Mr. Heyns urged the Iranian Government to establish an immediate moratorium on the death penalty throughout Iran with a view to abolishing the practice altogether.