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Warning against ‘toxic public debates,’ UN official urges global compact on refugee and asylum matters

8 October - The top protection expert in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) today warned of a growing risk to people fleeing conflict and persecution and called for “an all-out effort to ensure that protection, and in particular the institution of asylum, remains life-saving, non-political, and fundamentally humanitarian.”

Speaking in Geneva at the UNHCR annual Executive Commitment meeting, Volker Türk, UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, drew attention to the 60 million forcibly displaced people living in a troubled global landscape of increased conflict, coupled with an ever-more dire humanitarian funding situation.

He also noted that some countries are building fences or walls to keep refugees out, or using deterrence to shift people onto the territories of their neighbours, as well as denying school for children and legal work for adults.

“Push-backs, building walls, increasing detention, and further restricting access, combined with few legal avenues to safety, will never be the answer,” said Mr. Türk.

“The impact is simply the diversion of refugee movements along other routes and the aggravation of already precarious situations in regions embroiled in conflict,” he continued. “Worse still, these measures compel more people who have nothing left to lose to risk dangerous journeys onward in the hope of finding eventual safety and stability.”

Mr. Türk also warned against an apparent lack of responsibility for the safety of refugees.

“It is also becoming increasingly evident that the single most important challenge to the safety and protection of refugees...
arises from populist politics and toxic public debates, as well as the climate of fear they engender,” he said.

“This is often fuelled and abetted by irresponsible media reporting, lack of political and moral leadership, and xenophobia and racism,” he continued. “In some countries around the world, there has been a proliferation of xenophobic narratives, hate speech, fear-mongering, and inflammatory statements – both at the political and civil society levels.”

Mr. Türk also noted the need to build closer ties between displaced people and the communities that host them, which, if left unsupported, could easily become overwhelmed.

“Community-based protection includes investment in national and community capacity to reinforce social cohesion between the displaced – be they refugees or IDPs [internally displaced persons] – and their host communities. This helps to preserve pluralism and diversity as well as promote peaceful co-existence,” he said.

In his concluding remarks, he said that an all-out effort was needed “to ensure that protection, and in particular the institution of asylum remains life-saving, non-political, and fundamentally humanitarian.”

“We must call upon our shared humanity, histories and sacred traditions of providing refuge to persons fleeing conflict and persecution, and remember that it was exactly for times like these that the international refugee protection regime was created,” said Mr. Türk.

He also added that the 1951 Refugee Convention recognized that the problems of forced displacement cannot be achieved by countries working in isolation.

“This speaks to the most critical protection gap we are facing today – the need for a global compact on predictable and equitable burden and responsibility-sharing,” he said. “In a world in turmoil, we need a sense of equanimity, purpose, and trust to make such a compact a reality.”

**New UN report shows global youth unemployment rate still above financial crisis levels**

8 October - Global youth unemployment rates have stabilized somewhat but remain well above pre-financial crisis levels, according to a new report released by the International Labour Organization (ILO) today.

The rate has stabilized at 13 per cent following a period of rapid increase between 2007 and 2010, but it is still well above the pre-crisis level of 11.7 per cent, according to the ILO report Global Unemployment Trends for Youth 2015: Scaling up investments in decent jobs for youth. It also highlights a drop in the number of unemployed youth to 73.3 million in 2014, some 3.3 million less than the crisis peak of 76.6 million in 2009.

“It is encouraging to see an improvement in the youth employment trends compared to the GET [Global Employment Trends] for Youth 2013,” says Sara Elder, the report’s lead author.

“But we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that recovery is not universal and that almost 43 per cent of the global youth labour force is still either unemployed or working yet living in poverty. It’s still not easy to be young and starting out in today’s labour market,” she added.

Because of a shrinking youth labour force, the youth unemployment rate remains high despite a decline in the number of unemployed youth, states the report, which notes that, according to projections, the rate is expected to increase slightly this year.

One reason for the decrease in the global share of youth in the total labour force, notes the report, is that more young people are participating in education. This is not the case in low-income countries, where millions of young people leave school
early to take jobs. According to the report, 31 per cent of youth in low-income countries have no educational qualifications at all, compared to 6 per cent in lower middle-income countries.

The report also notes the need to invest in skills and create decent work.

“We know that today’s youth do not face an easy labour market transition and with the continued global economic slowdown,” said Azita Berar Awad, Director of the ILO’s Employment Policy Department, adding “this is likely to continue, but we also know that greater investment in targeted action to boost youth employment pays off. It is time to scale up action in support of youth employment.”

“The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and its emphasis on youth employment in Goal 8, provides a new opportunity to mobilize broad global partnerships to support action on a more significant scale,” Ms. Berar Awad continued. “Increased investment is needed to alleviate the scars of the crisis on the present generation as well as to ensure more inclusive labour markets and societies.”

No new cases of Ebola reported for first time since March 2014 – UN health agency

8 October - There were no new cases of Ebola reported in West Africa in the week ending last Sunday, making it the first week since March 2014 with zero cases recorded in the three countries most affected by the outbreak, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), which cautioned that there remains a near-term risk of new cases.

“While the news is very encouraging, there are still a number of high risk contacts,” UN Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric cautioned during the regular press briefing at UN Headquarters today. “Previous experience indicates that at the tail end of an Ebola outbreak, we may see weeks with zero transmission interspersed with some flare-ups.”

WHO, in its latest update ending on Sunday, 4 October, stated that no new cases were reported in Guinea and Sierra Leone. Liberia was declared free of Ebola virus transmission in the human population on 3 September 2015.

To date, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa has resulted in more than 11,000 deaths.

“This is the first time that a complete epidemiological week has elapsed with zero confirmed cases since March 2014,” the latest WHO report update said.

“All contacts have now completed follow-up in Sierra Leone,” it said. “However, over 500 contacts remain under follow-up in Guinea, and several high-risk contacts associated with active and recently active chains of transmission in Guinea and Sierra Leone have been lost to follow-up.”

WHO cautioned: “There remains a near-term risk of further cases.

The health agency also said that “robust” surveillance measures are needed to ensure the rapid detection of any reintroduction or re-emergence of Ebola in currently unaffected areas.
‘Extremely concerned’ by escalating West Bank violence, UN rights chief urges restraint

8 October - Voicing extreme concern over escalating tensions and rapidly-spreading violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the United Nations human rights chief today called for urgent action by both Israelis and Palestinians to halt the violence, while stressing the need to ensure security forces comply with international standards and respect for human rights.

“The security situation has deteriorated dramatically over the past week in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem,” Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in a news release.

The violence is spreading rapidly across the entire West Bank in over 50 locations, with increasing attacks of stone throwing by both Israeli settlers and Palestinians as well as using fire arms by settlers.

More bloodshed, he warned, will only lead to more hatred on both sides, and offer no solution in the long run.

According to High Commissioner Zeid, growing frustration and despair of the prolonged occupation have led to escalating tensions, which caused high number of casualties resulting from the use of live ammunition by Israeli security forces.

“The use of .22 calibre rifles against protestors is of particular concern,” said Mr. Zeid, which has caused many Palestinian deaths in the past. “The use of any firearms by law enforcement should be the exception, and only where less extreme means are insufficient to put a stop to an imminent threat of death or serious injury,” he stressed.

Further, collective punishments, such as punitive home demolitions, are being stepped up in East Jerusalem as part of the response of Israeli authorities to the situation.

Calling those operations both illegal and counterproductive, the UN rights chief underscored that “any response to the current situation must be strictly in accordance with norms and standards contained in international law.”

While fully supporting the Secretary-General’s call for urgent action by both sides to stop any further escalation, the High Commissioner reiterated the imperative need to ensure that security forces comply with international standards on use of force.

Since 28 September, at least 134 Palestinians have reportedly been injured by live ammunition with over 150 Palestinians arrested during clashes with Israeli security forces, and hundreds more have been injured by tear-gas inhalation and rubber bullets, according to the High Commissioner’s Office (OHCHR).

Recent weeks have witnessed increasing tensions both in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, prompting UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the Security Council and the High Commissioner for Human Rights to urge Israelis and Palestinians to defuse tensions and prevent any escalation of the current situation on the ground.
UN rights chief urges Mexico to end ‘misery’ of enforced disappearances and torture

8 October - Despite significant progress towards building a solid human rights framework, the Mexican Government must nevertheless “bind itself to a new sense of urgency in solving the enormous human rights challenges it faces,” Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said today as he wrapped up an official visit to the country.

“Despite [legislative developments and constitutional reforms]… my visit has been very sobering with regard to the daily realities for many millions of people here in Mexico itself,” said the High Commissioner at a press conference.

“Many of the people I have spoken to have painted a very bleak – and consistent – picture of a society that is wracked by high levels of insecurity, disappearances and killings,” he explained, as well as noting the ongoing harassment of human rights defenders and journalists, violence against women, and terrible abuses of migrants and refugees transiting the country on their way to the United States.

During his visit, Mr. Zeid met with President Peña Nieto and senior Government officials, and he noted that over the past four years, there have been highly significant legislative developments, including the constitutional reforms of 2011 and this year’s amendments which paved the way for new general laws addressing two of Mexico’s most pressing human rights issues, namely enforced disappearances and torture.

Yet, according to official statistics, 98 per cent of all crimes in Mexico remain unsolved, with the majority never even being properly investigated. Among these crimes, the High Commissioner spotlighted Mexico’s high levels of homicide and enforced disappearances.

“For a country that is not engaged in a conflict, the estimated figures are simply staggering: 151,233 people killed between December 2006 and August 2015, including thousands of transiting migrants,” he said.

“At least 26,000 people missing, many believed to be as a result of enforced disappearances, since 2007,” he said, adding later that “the amount of misery attached to that statistic is impossible to comprehend.”

Indeed, he said, the failure of the police, of the justice system to clarify the whereabouts of the victims and what happened to them, and above all, of successive governments and the political system as a whole to stop these crimes is not just regrettable, “it is deeply tragic.”

The High Commissioner noted that, while some of the violence “can be laid at the door of the country’s powerful and ruthless organized crime groups,” many enforced disappearances, acts of torture and extra-judicial killings are alleged to have been carried out by Federal, State and municipal authorities, including the police and some segments of the army, either acting in their own interests or in collusion with organized criminal groups.

He went on to highlight recent, specific incidents, including the enforced disappearance of 43 students from a training college in Iguala in Guerrero state and the killing of six others.

“Reports strongly suggest that local police engaged in repeated ferocious attacks and ambushes against the unarmed students,” he said, noting that the report by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (IGIE), appointed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and invited by the Mexican Government, “revealed that the Federal security forces were fully aware of what was happening.”

He added: “If the true fate of the students is finally revealed as a result of a thorough and determined investigation and the full range of perpetrators are identified, prosecuted and convicted, with reparations granted to the victims, this terrible case
could have a salutary effect on many similar situations across the country.”

The case, he said, highlighted the impunity and disregard for victims that affect the entire country.

He said that the Mexican Government should urgently strengthen the Attorney-General’s Offices across the country to ensure that human rights violations are properly investigated. It should also adopt a time frame for the withdrawal of the military from public security functions, and implement recommendations from the IGIE and consider similar follow-up mechanisms for other serious cases.

“The Government that taps fully into its citizens’ desire and ability to create a State that works, is the Government that will be remembered and praised by future generations. Such a Government would be able attract a massive influx of foreign direct investment, which would in turn stimulate greater and much wider prosperity for its population,” Mr. Zeid emphasized.

**Ban requests internal probe over corruption claims against former Assembly President**

8 October - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has requested that the Organization’s Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) launch an audit of the interaction between the UN and the Global Sustainability Foundation and the Sun Kian Ip Group, and the use of any funds received from these entities, according to a UN spokesperson.

The request follows news earlier this week of serious allegations by United States’ federal prosecutors against John Ashe, a former President of the UN General Assembly.

“The Secretary-General is concerned about the serious nature of the allegations, which go to the heart of the work of the United Nations and its Member States,” said a statement issued by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson.

“The Secretary-General reaffirms that there will be no tolerance for any corruption at the United Nations or in the name of the United Nations,” the statement continued. “He is committed to ensuring that funds received from such private entities were handled properly according to relevant UN rules and regulations.”

**Nepal: experts begin post-disaster work at quake-damaged UNESCO heritage sites**

8 October - International and national experts from the Nepalese Department of Archaeology and an archaeological team from Durham University have begun post-disaster excavation surveys and rescue excavations at earthquake damaged UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal.

“Creation of risk maps and identification and characterization of subsurface archaeology will facilitate the future protection, preservation and presentation of the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site, specifically, the severely damaged sites of Hanuman Dhoka, Patan and Bhaktapur” said Christian Manhart, Representative of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to Nepal in a press release issued today.

The 7.8 magnitude earthquake which hit Nepal in April this year, caused over 8,000 fatalities, devastated large areas of county and neighbouring regions, including destruction of Nepal’s unique monuments within the UNESCO Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site of Universal Outstanding Value.

The monuments of the Kathmandu Valley were a major source of income and economic growth through national and
international tourism for the local residents and a key source of foreign currency in Nepal.

The severely damaged ornate temples of wood, brick and tile were not only of intangible value, but they also were places of worship for the residents who ‘reach out and commune with their guiding goddesses and gods’ through these temples.

Prior to rebuilding the experts will undertake rescue and survey excavations in the damaged medieval city squares of Patan, Hanuman Dhoka and Bhaktapur.

They will create Archaeological Risk Maps heritage within the three Darbar squares using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), which will provide a detailed layout of archaeological features such as walls and buildings below the surface.

This will be critical in guiding the laying of new service infrastructure, protecting key elements of Kathmandu’s underground heritage for future generations.

“This project offers archaeological expertise in the post-disaster recovery effort for Nepal, not only affording the opportunity of identifying earlier cultural phases of human activity in the Kathmandu Valley, of which there is a current paucity of evidence, but also mitigating the risk, and affording protection to subsurface heritage, prior to the post-disaster reconstruction of these World Heritage Sites,” said Professor Coningham, the UNESCO Chair in Archaeological Ethics and Practice in Cultural Heritage at Durham University in the United Kingdom.

Haiti taking ‘resolute’ steps towards renewal of democracy and stability – UN envoy

8 October - With the holding of its first round of elections 9 August this year, to renew the executive legislative and local leadership of the country, Haiti is taking “resolute” steps in renewing its democratic institutions, the top United Nations official for the country told the Security Council today.

Presenting the Secretary-General’s latest report on the work of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), which she heads, Sandra Honoré said the country is also moving resolutely towards the re-establishment of institutional balance.

After a prolonged period, the Electoral Council published the results on 27 September, according to which there were 10 contenders who won an outright victory for Senate and lower chamber seats. However, 25 electoral districts will require re-elections due to electoral violence.

“Notwithstanding the efforts of the Electoral Council, the Government and the Haitian National Police (HNP), severe acts of violence and some technical irregularities invalidated the 9 August vote in 13 per cent of the country’s voting centres,” she added.

She commended the actions taken by the Electoral Council to address the shortcomings, responding to recommendations from political parties and implement corrective measures.

“To recapitulate therefore, the 25 October polls will include the first round Presidential; second round legislative; as well as the municipal vote, together with the re-runs for the first round legislative vote in the constituencies affected on 9 August,” Ms. Honoré added.

Further, she pointed out that for the first time in Haitian electoral history, the Electoral Council took punitive action against instigators of electoral violence. Members belonging to 10 political parties were barred from further participation in the elections and 17 political parties were issued warnings for instigating criminal acts and voter intimidation.

She also noted the commitment expressed by the Haitian National Police (HNP) to undertake measures to improve police performance in the upcoming round, to ensure a stable electoral climate.
On a related note, she added that work continues towards the implementation of the HNP 2012-2016 Development Plan, which is now in its final year. The UN is working towards reshaping its assistance, to acknowledge progress and concentrate its action where criminality affects most the main security indicators, such as homicides and gang confrontations.

“I encourage member States to provide experts in administrative, technical and operational support in the form of Government Provided Personnel as well as specialized teams in key fields of policing, with a view to creating longer-term post-MINUSTAH partnerships among the Haitian National Police, donors and other international partners,” she added.

She went on to tell the Council that in order to sustainably transfer such activities and other responsibilities of MINUSTAH, and mindful of the transition process of the Haitian authorities, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has recommended the extension of the Mission for another, and possibly, final year.

“An Integrated Strategic Assessment Mission will be deployed after the completion of the electoral cycle and the installation of a new President and authorities to formulate recommendations for the future presence of the United Nations in Haiti,” Ms. Honoré explained.

However, she stressed that for now, despite the near-success of the 9 August polls, the engagement of the UN system, including MINUSTAH and its uniformed components, continues to be required in support of operations, logistics and security in Haiti.

She also specified that despite the substantial budgetary allocations assigned by the Haitian Government, including as largest donor to the UN Development Programme (UNDP)-managed Basket Fund, the financial contributions of Haiti’s international partners continue to be critical for the completion of the electoral cycle.

**Food prices are staying lower for longer periods – UN agency**

8 October - Food prices are staying lower for longer periods, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported today, saying lower food prices "seem to be a boon to food security and are indeed just that for households who spend a large share of their income on food purchases."

The FAO Food Outlook released today also said that trade in cassava is poised to grow by 19 per cent and to hit a record high, due mostly to demand from China for a cheaper raw material for its animal feed, energy and industrial sectors, while trade volumes in seafood are also rising.

On the prices of agricultural commodities, FAO said that “after several dramatic upward price spikes from 2007 through early 2011, most cereal and vegetable oil prices are on a trajectory that is both steady and declining.”

“Among the reasons are high inventory levels, sharply lower oil prices and the renewed strength of the US dollar, none of which appear likely to be reversed in the short term, although unexpected shocks, such as weather-driven impacts on harvests, can never be excluded,” the report noted.

The report’s authors Adam Prakash and Friederike Greb, both commodity specialists at FAO, wrote that "the takeaway message here is that statistically, the most recent shifts in behaviour foresee downward price momentum with lower volatility.”

The FAO Food Price Index, a trade-weighted index tracking international market prices for five major food commodity groups also release today, fell to a six-year low in August.

“New figures, also released today, show it inched up by about two-thirds of a percentage point from its August low to 165.3 points, which is still 18.9 percent less than a year earlier,” according to the index.

But FAO also noted that “the price path of the past few years and the prospective path ahead, are not the same for all food
Staple grains are at the core of the declining price trend, as a result of several years of robust harvests around the world as well as stockpiling that has taken reserves to record highs, according to the agency.

Analyzing the latest figures, the report said “lower food prices seem to be a boon to food security and are indeed just that for households who spend a large share of their income on food purchases.”

On trade, FAO said that global production is robust and inventory still high, but the volume of cereals being traded internationally is declining, driven by wheat – mostly due to lower imports in Asia, especially Iran and North Africa – and by coarse grains, where demand from Asia is lower, even though Africa and Europe are both expected to increase their imports.

**Ban appoints new head of UN mission in DR Congo**

**8 October** - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has appointed Maman S. Sidikou of Niger as his new Special Representative for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Head of the UN Mission in the country, known as MONUSCO.

“Mr. Sidikou brings vast experience to his new position, with more than 25 years in his country’s domestic and foreign services, the United Nations, as well as a senior African Union official,” UN Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric said at today’s regular press briefing at UN Headquarters.

Mr. Sidikou succeeds Martin Kobler of Germany.

“The Secretary-General is of course very grateful for Mr. Kobler’s important contribution and dedicated service for the past two years in supporting the implementation of the UN Mission’s mandate,” the Spokesperson added.

Mr. Sidikou is currently serving as the African Union (AU) Special Representative for Somalia and Head of the AU Mission in Somalia.