UN ramps up relief efforts as huge Mid-East snowstorm threatens Syrian refugees

9 January - The United Nations refugee agency has been working around the clock this week to help the millions of Syrian refugees and internally displaced people scattered across the Middle East endure a severe winter storm that has swept through much of the region.

Heavy snowfall, rains, high winds and freezing temperatures are forecast to continue over the next several days and are expected to further disrupt the lives of the most vulnerable Syrians. Flooding has already become a problem in some low lying areas and is expected to get worse once the snow melts, said the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The longer the low temperatures continue, the more difficult life becomes for everyone, UNHCR’s Adrian Edwards warned today as he briefed journalists in Geneva.

UNHCR teams and partners have been working over the past few days to replace damaged tents, provide repair kits, deliver emergency supplies and offer alternative shelters to those who have been forced to abandon their homes. The response was timely this year as winter operations in the region began ahead of time and included cash vouchers to help the most vulnerable refugees.

However, despite the best efforts of governments, local authorities, and UNHCR, the situation across the region remains precarious for most refugees, particularly given the poor conditions in which many people already live and the scattered nature of the population.

Especially concerning is the situation in Lebanon, where refugees are spread out in some 1,700 different locations. Reports
say that more than 100 shelters and tents have been damaged and that flooding and standing water is a serious concern in places hit by heavy rains and high winds. In coastal areas in the south, high waves had flooded some settlements, Mr. Edwards explained.

In hard to reach areas, including inside Syria and some parts of Iraq, temperatures have dipped. In Za’atari – Jordan’s largest refugee camp with nearly 85,000 Syrians – dozens of families as of today remain camped in emergency shelters after their tents collapsed under the weight of snow.

More funds are needed to meet these critical challenges and to help some of the most vulnerable people, Mr. Edwards added, emphasizing that needs continue to outpace money coming in.

At Za’atari, UNHCR has established several shelters in advance of the storms for those with nowhere else to go. The shelters are equipped with heaters, mattresses and blankets, and food and water are also provided.

But heavy rain and melting snow have caused flooding, damaging belongings and turning streets into quagmires of water and freezing mud. Electricity in several parts of the camp has been cut.

Once conditions improve, UNHCR teams will be sent out to assess the damage to individual shelters and carry out repairs or provide replacement equipment.

Also at today’s Geneva briefing, Tarik Jasarevic, from the World Health Organization (WHO), expressed concern over the spread of infectious diseases in Aleppo, Syria.

He said WHO had managed to bring medication including for chronic diseases and antibiotics for infections – enough for 240,000 people – to Aleppo but is now waiting to distribute to hard-to-reach areas. WHO is also providing vaccines against measles, rubella, mumps and polio to hard-to-reach areas, including Aleppo governorate.

**UN chief offers condolences to French Government in wake of ‘Charlie Hebdo’ attack**

9 January - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today visited the Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations to offer, on behalf of the Organization, his condolences to the families of the victims of the terrorist attack on the offices of French satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, in which 12 people were killed.

Mr. Ban signed the book of condolences that was opened in the wake of the attack and reiterated comments he made yesterday during a press stakeout at UN Headquarters.

“This is not a war against religion or between religions,” he said. “This is a purely unacceptable terrorist attack – criminality.”

He stressed that such criminality had to be brought to justice “in the name of humanity” and underlined that the UN promotes tolerance and inclusive dialogue.

“I am urging all the people around the world that it is important to enhance the level of tolerance and respect for the beliefs, religions and traditions of others,” he said. “When your religion, your belief is important, then we should know that the other people’s belief is also as important.”

He said that grievances and differences of views should be addressed in a peaceful manner, and stressed that dialogue can resolve any difference of opinion.

Offering his strong support to the people of France, especially those working in media, he emphasized their right to do their jobs in safety.
“It is important that freedom of speech, freedom of media [and ] opinion should be protected,” he said.

**New Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria drive more than 7,000 into Chad – UN**

9 January - The number of Nigerian refugees seeking safety in Chad has almost quadrupled over the past 10 days after attacks by Boko Haram insurgents in northeastern Nigeria uprooted thousands, the United Nations refugee agency has reported.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that attacks in Borno state have uprooted about 7,300 Nigerians, forcing them into western Chad, where most are staying with local communities in villages around 450 kilometres north-west of the capital, N’Djamena.

A spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said the 3 January attack on the town of Baga alone caused 3,400 people to flee to Chad.

“The Government of Chad has requested international assistance,” said the spokesperson. “The Chadian Government has sent a mission and a medical team to the areas and is providing food assistance and other basic supplies. Humanitarian agencies including OCHA, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are currently in the area assessing needs.”

UNHCR is assessing the protection situation and coordinating aid delivery. “We’re already providing plastic sheets, jerry cans, mats, blankets and kitchen tools. Other humanitarian organizations are distributing aid too,” UNHCR spokesman Adrian Edwards noted in Geneva.

Mr. Edwards said UNHCR teams are seeking more information on the new arrivals and their needs and noted that the attack on Baga left hundreds dead and forced most of the town’s surviving inhabitants to flee.

Meanwhile in Niger, UNHCR has started to relocate refugees from the border area, so far moving 336 people to a camp deeper inside Niger, with more planned for next week. The refugees fled after a November attack on the Nigerian town of Damassak.

UNHCR, working alongside the National Eligibility Commission of Niger, is registering refugees as they arrive at the new camp, giving them identity documents and providing basic relief items, including drinking water and latrines.

In December, the first results of a continuing Government census, organized with UNHCR’s technical support, revealed that at least 90,000 people, including Niger nationals previously living in Nigeria, have found refuge in Niger’s Diffa region since May 2013. Many have chosen to remain close to the border, hoping to return to their home villages when the situation calms down.

Some 200,000 people have fled Nigeria to neighbouring countries, including Chad, Cameroon and Niger, according to figures from OCHA.
Cuba: UN rights office hopes release of political prisoners paves way for freedoms to flourish

9 January - The United Nations human rights office today welcomed Cuba’s release of political prisoners, hoping this new development will help open the way for an environment where freedom of expression and association flourishes.

According to media reports yesterday and overnight, at least nine political prisoners have been released by the Cuban authorities, reportedly as part of the recent US-Cuba agreement.

“We understand that at least some of them may have been released conditionally, which means that they have to report to the authorities regularly,” Rupert Colville, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said at a Geneva briefing.

“We do not know what other conditions may have been imposed for their release. As far as we are aware, the Cuban authorities have not made any statements with regard to these releases, so the details are not yet clear,” he added.

OHCHR has been particularly concerned about Cuba’s recent short-term detention of political opponents, human rights activists and members of civil society. Over the past four years, the Office received numerous reports of such detentions, without warrants, especially in advance of certain meetings and events, apparently in order to prevent specific people from participating.

“These detentions can last a few hours, a few days and sometimes longer, and then people are usually released without charges,” Mr. Colville said, adding that a number of UN special procedures have engaged with the Cuban authorities on this issue.

“We urge the authorities to stop this practice, which clearly impinges on individuals’ human rights and appears to be little more than a form of intimidation or harassment,” Mr. Colville said.

The latest such detention occurred on 30 December 2014 when, according to media reports, dozens of people were arrested before they could participate in a performance at the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana by Tania Bruguera, a well-known Cuban artist. The protest had not been authorized by the authorities. Ms. Bruguera and others were subsequently released, but she was detained on two further occasions over the following days and finally released last Friday.

Sources in Cuba have put the number of these detentions to well over 8,000 in 2014 alone, although we have not been able to verify the number independently, he added.

Mali: UN Mission condemns attack that wounded seven peacekeepers

9 January - The United Nations Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has condemned the attack on its peacekeepers near the Kidal airstrip this morning, when one of its vehicles struck an explosive device.

“Seven Senegalese peacekeepers were wounded and have been evacuated,” UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told the daily press briefing at UN Headquarters in New York this afternoon.

According to MINUSMA, the area of the explosion has been secured and a team of experts
from the Mission has started an investigation.

The UN is calling on all those involved in the peace process to respect the commitment they made last September in Algiers to prevent attacks against peacekeepers. Those responsible for these acts must be brought to justice, the Mission added.

This attack is the latest in a spate of violence targeting UN peacekeepers. On Sunday, eight “blue helmets” were wounded in the Gao region of northern Mali when their vehicle was struck by an explosive device.

Briefing the Security Council last week, the Under-Secretary-General for UN Peacekeeping Operations, Hervé Ladsous, appealed to all parties to resolve outstanding issues in the fresh round of talks scheduled for February.

While talks held so far had resulted in a draft peace agreement that all parties were currently examining, he pointed to an “extremely volatile” security situation in the North of the country, with “serious fighting” taking place in recent days, including an attack on Malian troops in the Ségou region, where 10 were killed, and disturbances in Gao where three were killed.

“The situation on the ground remains difficult [with] each side trying to escalate,” he said, pointing out that MINUSMA forces had been deployed in response to the violence, facing a situation that was “very dire and costly” for MINUSMA’s troops.

“No Mission has been as costly in terms of blood,” he said, noting that a total of 33 MINUSMA soldiers had been killed and 109 injured and pointing out that the Mission’s peacekeepers face assaults on a virtually daily basis, in the form of rocket attacks on bases and targeted attacks with improvised explosive devices.

He called on all parties to respect the ceasefire and to show good faith, both on the ground and at the negotiating table in Algiers. That required some parties to accept the need to move from their opening positions, something not everybody had done.

Senior UN envoy meets with Libyan stakeholders, warns ‘time running out’ to resolve crisis

9 January - The top United Nations official in Libya, in discussions with the strife-torn North African nation’s leaders and stakeholders, has warned that time may be running out to put an end to the political and security crisis, stressing that it is extremely important to "freeze fire" so that political dialogue can begin.

In Tobruk and in Tripoli, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya, Bernardino León, met with main stakeholders expected to take part in the proposed dialogue.

In both stops, Mr. León, who also heads the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), stressed the need to convene the second round of political dialogue very soon to stop the country's slide towards deeper conflict and economic collapse.

The Special Representative’s call comes as fighting between armed factions continues to rattle the beleaguered nation. Libya’s civil war began in 2011 and resulted in the ouster of late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

He warned that time was running out, and the more efforts to tackle the country's political and security crisis are delayed, the more difficult it will be to reach a solution that will end the fighting, restore political and State institutional unity and revive the economy.

Mr. León proposed a “freeze” in hostilities for a short period of time to create a conducive environment for holding the dialogue.
“The United Nations will continue to facilitate the efforts for the resumption of the political process to achieve the Libyans’ quest for peace and stability,” he said.

“Libyans need to unite and work towards resolving their differences if they want to save their country, its people, resources, infrastructure and State institutions from further pain and destruction, and to be effective in combating terrorism,” he added.

In Al-Marj, Mr. Leon met with General Khalifa Haftar as part of efforts to de-escalate the military situation. He said General Haftar “reacted positively” to the UN proposal and will discuss it with his team. And in Tripoli, he also met with commanders of armed brigades from the City of Misrata, who said they will consider the UN proposal to freeze hostilities.

“The majority of the Libyan people want peace. They should not be held hostage by a small minority that sees that it can win this conflict militarily.”

**UN rights chief urges more global attention to ‘wanton’ violence in Yemen**

9 January - The top United Nations human rights official appealed today for more international attention to be focused on Yemen and the plight of Yemenis as deepening insecurity and “utterly intolerable” violence in the country continue to wreak a terrible toll on civilians.

“Perhaps because of the violence engulfing so many other countries – relatively little attention is being paid to the situation in Yemen,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein. “The past few weeks have seen dozens of people killed in a succession of bomb attacks in Yemen. Such wanton acts of indiscriminate violence are utterly deplorable.”

Despite the formation of a new Government on 7 November aimed at ending a period of political turbulence and bringing about a full transition towards democracy, Yemen continues to be plagued by violence.

Several bomb attacks in the last three weeks have killed a total of 86 people, with the most recent, a car bomb detonated outside a police college in the capital, Sana’a, the most deadly, killing 37 people.

“What does anyone gain by slaughtering civilians – especially children – in this way?” Zeid said. “I urge all parties in Yemen to renounce the use of violence to avoid further loss of innocent lives and take concrete steps towards the immediate and effective implementation of the peace and partnership agreement.”

Mr. Zeid also urged Yemeni security forces to ensure they used proportionate force when responding to incidents, amid reports of security personnel causing civilian deaths including one incident in December where live ammunition was fired to break up demonstrations.

“Notwithstanding the difficult situation they face, it is essential that Government security personnel halt the use of excessive force, resulting in civilian deaths,” Mr. Zeid said. “Violations of international human rights law by all sides must be promptly, independently and effectively investigated to bring perpetrators to justice and ensure that victims’ right to justice and remedy is upheld.”
Haiti: 5 years after earthquake, UN warns progress threatened by poverty, inequality

9 January - Five years after a massive earthquake killed 200,000 people in Haiti, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) is appealing for funds to continue momentum towards building more resilient communities that will withstand future disasters.

Today, some three million Haitians remain unsure where their next meal will come from. To provide them the essential food they require, about $28 million will be needed in 2015.

“Persistent chronic poverty and inequality, environmental degradation and continuing political uncertainty threaten achievements Haitians have made over the past five years,” WFP’s representative in Haiti, Wendy Bigham, warned.

In the hours after the quake struck on 12 January 2010, WFP began distributing emergency food to those survivors left in the rubble. Within four months, the agency had provided food for more than 4 million vulnerable Haitians, which helped avert a food crisis.

Because of its geography, Haiti is highly prone to natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, landslides and droughts. Poverty means that even moderate shocks can push people into hunger.

Since 2010, WFP has helped create job opportunities for over 200,000 Haitians in cash- or food-for-work projects aimed at stabilizing food security. In Marigot, a community nestled between the Caribbean Sea and the mountains that was hit hard by the earthquake, local farmers have been employed to build hillside stone terraces.

In Haitian Creole, Kore Lavi means “supporting life” and that is what WFP is doing under a project that helps improve the nutrition of Haiti’s poorest women and young children, the agency stressed.

For example, WFP, with its partners, has been providing flour mixed with vitamins and minerals as well as bulgur wheat, cooking oil and beans. By strengthening nutrition now, vulnerable Haitians will be stronger and healthier the next time a disaster strikes.

With the new funds, WFP plans to reach up to 1.2 million highly vulnerable Haitians. It will also support the Government to provide hot meals to almost half a million schoolchildren.

Some of the produce for the agency’s projects is bought locally as a way of supporting the country’s farmers. Together with the Ministry of Agriculture, smallholder farmers’ associations are trained and mentored to meet WFP’s local procurement standards.
UN probe says South Sudan attacks 'nadir' of conflict marked by abuses, rights violations

9 January - The Human Rights Division of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) issued a report today saying there are reasonable grounds to believe that at least 353 civilians were murdered and another 250 wounded in attacks in the capitals of Unity state and Jonglei state between 15 April and 17 April last year.

Having collected and analysed physical evidence and interviewed 142 sources, the report has found that the attacks in the towns of Bentiu and Bor involved the deliberate targeting of victims on the basis of their ethnicity, nationality or perceived support for one of the parties to the conflict, a press statement from the Mission said.

“In both Bentiu and Bor, attacks took place against protected objects – a hospital, a mosque, and a United Nations base – which may amount to war crimes,” said the report. “Although the conflict has been marked throughout by gross abuses and violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law, these two events seemed to represent the nadir of the conflict.”

The attack in Bentiu, capital of Unity State, took place after opposition forces retook control of the town from Government troops. The report says that at least 287 civilians – mainly Sudanese traders and their families who were targeted on the basis of their Darfuri origins – were killed at a mosque before a further 19 civilians were killed at the Bentiu Civil Hospital.

Two days later, an UNMISS civilian protection site outside the Jonglei state capital of Bor was attacked by a mob of armed men demanding the expulsion of all youths of Nuer ethnicity. After forcibly entering the protection site, the mob went on a rampage of killing, looting and abductions of internally displaced persons (IDPs), killing at least 47 people whose names appear in report.

“UNMISS strongly condemns the continued killing and displacement of civilians on the basis of their ethnic identity nearly nine months after the events of April 2014,” said Ellen Margrethe Løj, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for South Sudan. “This risks an even greater polarization of the country along ethnic lines with potentially serious repercussions for the state of human rights and the prospects for reconciliation.”

Nearly nine months after the attacks took place, no perpetrator has been held accountable by either the Government of the Republic of South Sudan or the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army In Opposition and the report says that few accountability measures have been taken in response to the incidents.

The Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights referred to the UNMISS report during a briefing in Geneva today, adding his voice to those concerned by the response to the attacks.

“Accountability is a big issue. There has been no accountability for the mass atrocities, human rights violations and abuses that have caused the death of tens of thousands of people in South Sudan,” said Robert Colville. “Nearly nine months after the attacks in Bentiu and Bor took place, no perpetrator has been held accountable by either the Government of South Sudan or the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army In Opposition for the two large-scale killings described in the report.”
Two leading Ebola vaccines show ‘acceptable safety’ – UN health agency

9 January - The World Health Organization (WHO) announced that two promising Ebola vaccines appear safe and could soon be tested in West Africa, as the agency wrapped up an expert meeting in Geneva earlier today.

The UN health agency has been meeting with researchers, regulators, vaccine developers and policy makers since Thursday, discussing vaccine access and financing, and reviewing the current status of clinical trials and plans for Phase II and Phase III efficacy trials.

Dr. Marie-Paule Kieny, WHO Assistant Director-General of Health Systems and Innovation, said in a press conference this afternoon in Geneva that so far, the two Ebola vaccines that have already undergone the first phase of testing have an “acceptable safety profile.”

The third phase of testing – which consists of giving the vaccine to healthy volunteers in affected areas – is about to begin. According to a UN spokesperson, research teams have been set up and preparations have been put in place, including special refrigerators for Ebola vaccine tests, in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, the three countries hardest hit by the current unprecedented outbreak.

Recent figures from WHO note some 20,206 confirmed, probable or suspected cases of Ebola and 7,905 reported deaths.

Opening the high-level meeting yesterday, WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan said the participants had given themselves tight deadlines and were moving ahead quickly. “In fact, what you are doing is unprecedented: compressing into a matter of months work that normally takes two to four years, yet with no compromise of international standards of safety and efficacy,” she said.

Also today, the head of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, and the UN Special Envoy on Ebola, Dr. David Nabarro, are in Sierra Leone, before heading to Guinea on Sunday.

Ban commends success of Sri Lanka presidential election, peaceful transfer of power

9 January - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today congratulated the people of Sri Lanka on the successful conclusion of the country’s presidential election, and welcomed the constitutional transfer of power.

“The Secretary-General applauds the Sri Lankan Elections Commission for its professionalism in ensuring a peaceful and credible election,” according to a statement released by Mr. Ban’s spokesman at UN Headquarters in New York today.

The UN chief also commended the efforts of the candidates, including outgoing President Mahinda Rajapaksa, law enforcement agencies and civil society for upholding and respecting democratic governance.

“The Secretary-General looks forward to working with President Maithripala Sirisena and the people of Sri Lanka,” the statement said.

The UN will continue to support development, reconciliation, political dialogue and accountability in Sri Lanka.
The South Asia nation has experienced a spate of ethnic and sectarian attacks since its 26-year civil conflict, which pitted the Government against Tamil insurgents, ended in 2009.

Most recently, a tide of violence and recrimination against Sri Lanka’s Muslim and Christian communities by Buddhist groups with extremist views has threatened to divide the country once again.

**Ban calls on Global Compact to help end poverty, transform lives, protect planet**

9 January - Addressing the United Nations Global Compact board meeting this afternoon, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said everyone held a stake in ending poverty, transforming people’s lives and protecting the planet.

“We live in paradoxical times,” said Mr. Ban. “We see enormous wealth, technological progress and unprecedented opportunity on the one hand, coupled with great inequality and fragmentation, extremist violence, and environmental degradation on the other.”

Despite progress in many areas, including reducing poverty and improving healthcare, he said individual and group interests still take precedence over universal priorities too often.

“Ultimately, our interdependent world will prosper or perish as one,” he said calling for conviction and courage to change course and take responsibility for the planet and the people.

That change of course would involve a commitment to sustainable development, a restructuring of the global financial system in line with people’s needs, and an urgent response to the challenge of human-induced climate change.

He looked forward to a momentous year ahead and said the Global Compact had proven that progress can be made when all key players are engaged on issues of common importance.

“The Global Compact’s blueprint for change has been tested, and it works,” he said. “Business is proving that the power of collaboration is enormous. We are seeing markets beginning to transform from within, based on actions taken by business to respect and support human rights, provide decent work, account for environmental impacts and end bribery and corruption.”

He said the world would need the help of the Global Compact’s board to meet several milestones that the international community had ahead.

“The spirit of the Global Compact will be at the heart of the new global agenda for sustainable development, which will be agreed here in New York in September,” he said noting that his recently released synthesis report – The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet – emphasized the role to be played by the private sector in achieving the proposed sustainable development goals.

Private sector financing would be essential to the new agenda, and business would be essential in efforts to achieve a universal, meaningful agreement on climate change in Paris in December.

“We must be bold. We must act together. We must make 2015 a year of global action,” he said.

The UN Global Compact is a strategic policy initiative for businesses that are committed to aligning their operations and strategies with 10 universally accepted principles in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption. By doing so, business, as a primary driver of globalization, can help ensure that markets, commerce, technology and finance advance in ways that benefit economies and societies everywhere.