Child mortality rates plunge by more than half since 1990 but efforts must be redoubled – UN report

9 September - Child mortality rates have plummeted to less than half of what they were in 1990, but it is not enough to meet the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of a two-thirds reduction over the past 15 years, according to a new report released today by a number of United Nations agencies.

“We have to acknowledge tremendous global progress, especially since 2000 when many countries have tripled the rate of reduction of under-five mortality,” said the Deputy Executive Director of the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Geeta Rao Gupta.

“But the far too large number of children still dying from preventable causes before their fifth birthday – and indeed within their first month of life – should impel us to redouble our efforts to do what we know needs to be done. We cannot continue to fail them.”

According to Levels and Trends in Child Mortality Report 2015, released by UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank Group, and the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), under-five deaths have dropped from 12.7 million per year in 1990 to 5.9 million in 2015.

This is the first year the figure has gone below the 6 million mark. However, new estimates in the report indicate that although global progress has been substantial, 16,000 children under five still die every day.

The report notes that the biggest challenge remains in the period at or around birth. A massive 45 per cent of under-five deaths occur in the neonatal period – the first 28 days of life. Prematurity, pneumonia, complications during labour and delivery, diarrhoea, sepsis, and malaria are leading causes of deaths of children under five years old. Nearly half of all under-five deaths are reportedly associated with undernutrition.
Yet, the UN study highlights how most child deaths are easily preventable by proven and readily available interventions. It says the rate of reduction of child mortality can speed up considerably by concentrating on regions with the highest levels—sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia—and ensuring a targeted focus on newborns.

“We know how to prevent unnecessary newborn mortality. Quality care around the time of childbirth including simple affordable steps like ensuring early skin-to-skin contact, exclusive breastfeeding and extra care for small and sick babies can save thousands of lives every year,” noted Dr. Flavia Bustreo, Assistant Director General at WHO.

She added that the Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health to be launched at the UN General Assembly this month, will be a “major catalyst for giving all newborns the best chance at a healthy start in life.”

The report also shows that a child’s chance of survival is still vastly different based on where he or she is born. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest under-five mortality rate in the world with 1 child in 12 dying before his or her fifth birthday—more than 12 times higher than the 1 in 147 average in high-income countries.

In the past 15 years, the region has overall accelerated its annual rate of reduction of under-five mortality to about two and a half times what it was from 1990 to 2000. Despite low incomes, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania have reportedly all met the MDG target.

“This new report confirms a key finding of the 2015 Revision of the World Population Prospects on the remarkable decline in child mortality globally during the 15-year MDG era,” said UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Wu Hongbo.

“Rapid improvements since 2000 have saved the lives of millions of children. However, this progress will need to continue and even accelerate further, especially in high-mortality countries of sub-Saharan Africa, if we are to reach the proposed child survival target of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Tim Evans, Senior Director of Health, Nutrition and Population at the World Bank Group, stressed the need to do more before 2030 to ensure that all women and children have access to the care they need.

The World Bank Group is also underlining that the recently launched Global Financing Facility in Support of Every Woman Every Child will help countries deliver essential health services and accelerate reductions in child mortality thanks to focus on smarter, scaled and sustainable financing.

**Women must be empowered to actively help counter terrorism and extremism, says UN official**

**9 September** - Increased attention needs to be given to women so they can be empowered to actively help counter terrorism and violent extremism around the world, a senior United Nations counter-terrorism official told a news conference in New York today.

“Terrorist groups such as Daesh, Boko Haram and Al Shabaab are becoming increasingly creative in their strategies by also including women, [who] take a more active role in their criminal enterprise,” said Jean-Paul Laborde, the Executive Director of the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED). “I would even say ‘forcing’ women to take this active role, but this is my word.”

Mr. Laborde was briefing reporters ahead of a meeting of the UN Security Council’s Counter-Terrorism Committee on the role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism.

“Until recently, terrorism has been viewed predominantly as a male problem,” Mr. Laborde stated. “In reality, terrorist organizations are gradually using women to recruit other women […] including women to act as suicide bombers.”

He further explained that many do not even know they are recruited to serve this purpose.
Recently, thousands of women in Iraq, Kenya and Nigeria were abducted by terrorist groups. Three women from these countries were invited to the press conference to share first-hand stories and to speak about their work fighting this trend.

Among them was Hanaa Edwar, a women’s activist from Iraq who underlined how the absence of security and stability in her country since 2003 has created weak state institutions and chaos, as well as influenced the growth of local militias.

“Daesh, the so-called Islamic State, occupied about one-third of our country in June 2015. This was a very hard moment in our Iraqi history, especially as the suffering of people increased every day,” said Ms. Edwar, adding that between 2003 and 2014, around 14,000 women in Iraq were killed.

She explained that the scale of gender-based crimes has been horrible, with sexual violence being used as a tool in the terrorists’ policy; as a result, many women have committed suicide due to the absence of safety, human rights and institutions to seek care.

Last July, Daesh reportedly announced a list of 2,070 people who were killed. Among them were 300 women, many of them lawyers, journalists, activists, or employees in the Government.

Nonetheless, Ms. Edwar underlined that she is hopeful thanks to the work of many non-governmental organizations in the county, several of which she founded.

“I feel hope when I look at the growth of the movement, the women’s movement, civil society movements against this terrorism and extremism,” she said. “We do a lot inside the community. We try to work with the children and young people to make them aware [of] how to counter terrorism.”

She also mentioned that a regional forum of women activists in the Middle East recently addressed how to counter “this heinous policy of terrorism,” but insisted that the support of the international community is needed.

**UN agencies boost effort to avoid ‘catastrophic loss’ of young children’s lives in South Sudan**

9 September - Two United Nations agencies are intensifying their efforts to reverse “dire” malnutrition in South Sudan, where every two minutes another child becomes severely malnourished and brutal conflict has displaced millions of people, destroyed basic services and increased disease.

“Last year we helped avert a famine. Now we must increase our efforts to avoid a catastrophic loss of young children’s lives,” said Jonathan Veitch, the Representative of the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in South Sudan.

UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP) jointly announced the launch of an enhanced joint nutrition response plan covering all states in South Sudan, which will see both agencies and their partners assist over two million people – children, pregnant women and new mothers – for the treatment and prevention of acute malnutrition in the country until May 2016.

The two agencies began the joint nutrition approach last year, helping to avert famine and save lives by reaching one million people using joint rapid response teams in the conflict-affected states and ramping up the response in non-conflict states, according to the announcement.

“In the first year, we worked under extremely difficult conditions to bring much needed nutrition assistance to as many people and as many places in the country as we possibly could,” said Joyce Luma, the WFP Country Director in South Sudan. “Looking forward, we want to improve on the quality of nutrition services to continue to prevent and treat acute malnutrition.”
The nutrition response plan will work to address the root causes of malnutrition, such as poverty, inadequate water and sanitation, and infant and young child feeding practices.

“While a peace agreement signed in August provides hope for the new country, basic health and nutrition services remain out of reach for much of the population,” said the announcement. Since April, intense fighting has forced hundreds of thousands to flee into the bush or swamps for protection, where they are cut off from humanitarian assistance.

“Basic services that were re-established over the past year have been destroyed, including hospitals, clean water, nutrition treatment sites – both out-patient and in-patient facilities,” the announcement added.

Since fighting broke out in December 2013, more than two million people have been uprooted from their homes in South Sudan, more than half of them children.

UNICEF said with another child becoming severely malnourished every two minutes in South Sudan, humanitarian agencies continue facing challenges to reach and provide sustained nutrition services to this affected population.

The nutrition programme in South Sudan is funded by, among others, the European Commission, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

**UN envoy urges constructive steps for Palestinian unity amid postponement of key gathering**

9 September - The United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process urged all Palestinian leaders and factions to use the opportunity provided by the postponement of the meeting of the Palestine National Council to take constructive steps towards achieving unity.

“This shows leadership and wisdom in giving adequate time for consultation with all factions in preparation of a regular session, which should strengthen unity and chart the way forward,” Nickolay Mladenov said in a statement, referring to the decision announced by the Council’s Chairman, Salim Zanoun.

The meeting of the Council had been set to take place next week in the West Bank city of Ramallah, according to media reports. A new date has reportedly not been set for what would be the first gathering of the 700-plus member Council in nearly 20 years.

“I urge all Palestinian leaders and factions to seize this opportunity to take constructive steps towards achieving genuine Palestinian unity on the basis of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) principles, and to strengthen the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,” said Mr. Mladenov.

“This would be an important step forward towards ending the occupation and realizing a just and lasting solution on the basis of two States – Palestine and Israel – living side-by-side in peace, security and mutual recognition.”

Senior UN officials have repeatedly stressed the need for all Palestinian groups to resolve their differences and find common ground, on the basis of non-violence and reconciliation, to achieve national unity which is critical for a two-State solution.
Secretary-General discusses refugee, migrant crisis with UK Prime Minister

9 September - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today discussed the refugee and migrant crisis with Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom, as he continued to confer with European leaders on what has become the biggest influx of people into the continent in decades.

“This has been part of a series of calls he has made to European leaders in recent days, in which the Secretary-General has stressed the individual and collective responsibility of European States to respond responsibly and humanely to the arrival of refugees and migrants in Europe,” UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told reporters.

Mr. Ban has spoken recently with the leaders of Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, appealing to them to be “the voice of those in need of protection” and to quickly find a joint approach to address their basic needs.

“The Secretary-General,” Mr. Haq added, “has assured European leaders of the United Nations readiness, through its agencies, in particular UNHCR [the UN refugee agency], to continue supporting their efforts to develop a response that is effective, feasible and in line with universal human rights and humanitarian standards, including the right to claim asylum.”

In a separate development, the UN chief welcomed the initiative by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to make $2 million available to National Olympic Committees for programmes focused on refugees. The IOC already works with a number of UN agencies, notably UNHCR.

Mr. Ban has repeatedly underscored the great work done by civil society organizations in bringing help and support to refugees worldwide, including through the support provided to the activities of the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for Youth Refugees and Sport, Jacques Rogge.

Peace ‘a distant dream’ without development, UN high-level forum told

9 September - United Nations officials today shared a common message that building a culture of peace means not just ending conflict but building inclusive societies that are able to develop and thrive in the absence of discrimination.

“Today’s discussion is an opportunity to focus on what we need to do on our pathway to a new and prosperous future for all,” said Ambassador Einar Gunnarsson of Iceland, speaking on behalf of the President of the General Assembly, at the High-level Forum on a Culture of Peace.

“Experience has shown us that peace is not simply the absence of conflict,” he stated.

“Peace requires equitable societies, inclusive education and tangible actions on the ground.

“More importantly, peace is a distant dream without development. This is part of the core challenge in promoting a culture of peace and ensuring peaceful societies.”

Mr. Gunnarsson also spoke of the need to create a national community to promote dialogue, enhance respect for religious and cultural diversity, and eliminate all forms of discrimination and intolerance, while developing policies to promote peace, security, the rule of law and democratic decision-making.
Today’s event was designed to highlight the importance of implementation of the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace that the Assembly adopted in September 1999 and the need to further strengthen global movements to promote a culture of peace.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon shared his thoughts on how to bring about a culture of peace, highlighting humanitarian crises around the world and violations of international human rights laws.

“Today’s meeting is about the very hard truths in our world,” he said, “where people are suffering and dying from violence and atrocity crimes.”

“Syria is the world’s worst humanitarian crisis today,” he said. “I have condemned the parties – especially the Government – for reported grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.”

As well as speaking about war-torn regions, Mr. Ban noted: “Even in mostly peaceful, democratic societies, minorities are attacked for their race, sexual orientation or some other difference – when they should be embraced for our common humanity.”

He also paid tribute to those countries, communities and people who had shown compassion, rather than xenophobia and discrimination.

“We cannot build a culture of peace without an active campaign against division and injustice,” said Mr. Ban. “To be more than just soothing words, the culture of peace demands courageous practice.”

Arun Gandhi, a grandson of the late Mahatma Gandhi, delivered the keynote address at the meeting, and shared some of the knowledge he said he had gathered from one of the great leaders of the Indian independence movement.

“What I learned from grandfather is that each one of us contributes to violence all the time. Many times in ways we don’t even know and recognize,” he said. “Unless we individually transform ourselves and accept a non-violent way of life, we cannot create peace in the world today.”

He said that, in the words of his grandfather, “we must become the change we wish to see in the world,” adding that “unless we change ourselves and our attitudes, we are not going to be able to change the world at all.”

**Watch the historic moment when UN adopts ‘charter for people and planet’ – UN official**

**9 September** - The top United Nations official who oversaw the negotiations that whittled down more than 500 proposals into 17 goals to end extreme poverty, fight inequality and injustice and tackle climate change says it will be a “historic moment” when world leaders formally commit to the Sustainable Development Goals later this month.

“If you have the time, just follow closely the United Nations webcast on the forthcoming summit in September,” Wu Hongbo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said in an interview with the UN News Centre. “We hope you will be an eyewitness to this historic moment.”

Mr. Wu was referring to the Sustainable Development Summit, to be held from 25 to 27 September at UN Headquarters in New York, at which world leaders will formally adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which he described as “a charter for the people and planet in the 21st century.”

He said that, unlike the previous set of UN targets, the Millennium Development Goals, Member States have had “ownership” of the agenda from the start of the process three years ago.
“Now they have the ownership and I am confident that these 17 goals and 169 associated targets will be implemented worldwide,” he said.

Recalling the negotiations he navigated starting with a 30-member working group that evolved to include all 193 Member States, Mr. Wu said “at the beginning, they came up with more than 500 goals.”

Despite the many differences, he said the “driving force” behind the work over the past three years is the common belief that “our present way of consumption, our present way of production is not sustainable.”

The 17 proposed goals and 169 targets are aimed at stimulating action over the next 15 years in areas of critical importance towards building a more equitable and sustainable world for all.

Mr. Wu outlined some key challenges over the next 15 years ranging from the need to change work methods and mindsets to operate with partners and outside “silos;” the need to do more to follow up to ensure what has been promised is being implemented; and the need to help build capacities with countries that need it.

He predicted that the so-called 2030 agenda will have a “profound impact on specific operations of the United Nations and its system.”

The agenda and its adoption later this month is among several watershed events in 2015, including the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Addis Ababa in July and the upcoming UN climate change conference that will be held in Paris in December.

### UN health agency warns Ebola outbreak in West Africa has ‘a very nasty sting in its tail’

**9 September** - The United Nations health agency’s special envoy on Ebola response today said the outbreak in West Africa has a “very nasty sting in its tail,” but projected that the goal of zero transmission in the human population remains “very possible within 2015.”

Dr. Bruce Aylward, Special Representative on Ebola Response for the World Health Organization (WHO), made those remarks at a press conference in Geneva, following his return from the “hot spots” of the epidemic in Guinea and Sierra Leone.

He said that despite the “ferocious rainy season” in West Africa, the number of Ebola cases has remained in the single digits for six consecutive weeks in Guinea and Sierra Leone. In addition, there are only three active chains of transmission in those countries, a development he described as a “major milestone in all three countries [Liberia being the third] in the march towards zero” cases.

“Our goal is zero transmission in the human population and that remains very possible within 2015,” he said.

The senior WHO official said that the focus of the current Ebola response was what he called Phase 3 aimed at ensuring that the residual risks are managed and guarding against the re-emergence of the disease, which has claimed more than 11,000 lives, mostly in West Africa.

Dr. Aylward described the remaining challenges as residual risk surveillance, sustaining rapid response teams, and survivor engagement and care, which includes the risks of transmission through semen by male survivors of Ebola.

Testing for the status of semen is underway, he said, but other precautions are also being looked into such as the vaccination of sexual partners or family members to reduce the risk if someone tests positive.

“This virus has a very nasty sting in its tail,” he said.
Separately, WHO released guidance on the care of pregnant women with Ebola. The agency said that there is no evidence to show that women who survive Ebola and subsequently become pregnant pose a risk for Ebola virus transmission. However, pregnant women with active Ebola, pregnant women who survive the disease with an ongoing pregnancy and pregnant women who are contacts of confirmed Ebola cases pose a potential risk.

WHO’s latest weekly update on Ebola showed there were 2 confirmed cases of the disease reported in the week to 6 September: 1 in Guinea and 1 in Sierra Leone.

UN experts welcome report on disappeared, executed and tortured students in Mexico

9 September - A group of United Nations human rights experts today welcomed a new report on the enforced disappearances, executions and torture of students from Ayotzinapa in the Mexican state of Guerrero in September 2014, and stressed the need for the national Government to implement its recommendations.

“Prompt and diligent implementation of the recommendations will promote the proper investigation and punishment of those responsible, the clarification of the facts, as well as the search for the victims and redress for them,” the experts said in a news release about the report, which was produced by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

The experts said the recommendations contained in the report were also relevant in relation to all enforced disappearances, torture and executions in Mexico, and reiterated their offer of cooperation and technical assistance to the country.

According to the UN human rights office (OHCHR), the 43 students were last seen on 26 September 2014 as they arrived in Iguala (Guerrero) to stage a protest. When they got off their bus, the students were blocked by police who, by some accounts, were operating in collusion with a local criminal gang. The police then fired on the students, killing six people, including a 15-year-old child and three students, and injuring another 17 people, while the 43 students were then taken into custody.

In the news release, the experts acknowledged the support of the Mexican Government in the creation of the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (IGIE) of the Inter-American Commission, as well as its readiness to extend the Group’s mandate to complete its work.

They highlighted the conviction of the IGIE that, contrary to the official version of events, “the 43 students were not cremated in the waste dump of Cocula.” Both the experts and the IGIE called for a reassessment of the investigation, including the particulars of the search for the students, as well as allegations of torture and mistreatment. It was also agreed that there was a need to “investigate all officials who have obstructed the investigation.”

The human rights experts include the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and the Special Rapporteurs on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment as well as on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions.

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.
Relations on Korean peninsula ‘taking a new turn,’ says UN rights expert

9 September - At the end of a five-day visit to the Republic of Korea, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) said today that the relationship between the two countries is “taking a new turn.”

“Based on the agreement reached on 25 August, representatives of both countries met and discussed the way forward to resume the reunion of separated families,” Marzuki Darusman said in a news release. “This is a promising development that could further encourage the intra-Korean dialogue and people-to-people contacts.”

Mr. Darusman also noted the increasing references and the public discussions on a possible unification in the near future that are taking place in the Republic of Korea.

“This discussion on unification makes the work on accountability even more urgent,” he continued. “While unification is paramount, accountability measures for crimes against humanity need to be laid down firmly and robustly by the international community. At the same time, we should not lose sight of the fact that both unification and accountability share a common goal – the improvement of the human rights situation on the Korean peninsula.”

The visit to Seoul was the first by a UN Special Rapporteur since the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) established an office in the capital of the Republic of Korea to work on the human rights situation in DPRK.

Mr. Darusman met with senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Unification as well as with representatives of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea and the Korea Institute for National Unification, non-governmental organizations, defectors and the diplomatic community.

“As we know, numerous efforts are ongoing, both here in Seoul and around the world, to follow up on the findings and recommendations of the report prepared by the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK,” Mr. Darusman explained.

“The report documented wide-ranging and gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity that continue to be committed as we speak. It is now time to consider the concrete measures that should be taken to ensure accountability for those crimes and to set up a broader process of transitional justice.”

The newly established OHCHR office in Seoul was mandated by the Human Rights Council as a follow up to the Commission of Inquiry. It works to strengthen the monitoring and documentation of the human rights situation in the DPRK, and engages in capacity building, technical assistance and advocacy activities with a wide range of partners.

“During this visit, my attention was repeatedly drawn to the issue of the DPRK nationals who are sent abroad to work and reportedly subjected to forced labour by their Government,” Mr. Darusman stated. “I was also briefed on the situation of women in the country and alleged abductions of Korean and other nationals, including detentions of four recent cases of Korean citizens, by the DPRK.”

He added that while some of these issues will be included in his report to the General Assembly in October, they require further investigations to identify the people responsible for these crimes.

Meanwhile, the expert announced he will be returning to the Republic of Korea in late November for further discussions. He also intends to travel to Japan on a similar assessment mission early next year, and will elaborate on his findings in his report to the Human Rights Council in March 2016.
Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.