Violence in northern Nigeria sparks major new exodus into Niger border region, UN warns

10 February - The spread of violent attacks across the border from northern Nigeria into Niger is causing widespread displacement and hampering efforts to provide humanitarian assistance in the area, a spokesperson for the United Nations food agency said today.

The second half of 2014 saw a major increase in the number of new arrivals in the Diffa region. While only 15,000 people had crossed the border in October, the total estimated number now stands at 125,000 people, spread out over more than 140 sites and villages, said Elisabeth Byrs of the World Food Programme (WFP).

The arrival of displaced people has seen the population of Diffa almost double, putting enormous pressure on people’s livelihoods and food stocks, in a region that had been struggling with drought for several years in a row.

Ms. Byrs said the WFP had started distributing food in one of the refugee camps that the Government of Niger had agreed to open to accommodate Nigerians arriving in the region, and was providing supplementary feeding for all children under the age of five.

That was particularly important, she said, given that one in three displaced children is affected by Global Acute Malnutrition, compared to one out of five within host populations, both well above the emergency threshold of 15 percent. She added that WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF were developing a joint nutrition strategy for the camps.
WFP and its partners had also conducted a food security and vulnerability assessment in Niger in November 2014, which showed that a total of 52.7 per cent of displaced households and their host families were severely – 14 per cent – or moderately – 38.7 per cent – food insecure, and in need of food assistance.

Ms. Byrs said WFP plans to distribute food for everyone in camps, with an additional mixture of conditional and unconditional support, based on vulnerability, for out-of-camp host and displaced populations in sites where new arrivals were most highly concentrated.

She added that WFP sought to reach 238,000 people in Cameroon, Chad and Niger with food assistance, including in the form of transfers and vouchers, over the next year. In that time, the agency’s regional emergency operation in the area needs $50.1 million and it currently has a funding shortfall of $41.4 million.

**New UN rights report depicts ‘turmoil, lawlessness’ in Libya**


The report, which will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council in March, depicts a country suffering from increasing turmoil and lawlessness, inflamed by a multitude of competing, heavily armed groups and a broadening political crisis. Against such a backdrop, it calls for bolstering State institutions, urges accountability for rights violations and support for the ongoing political dialogue.

“Rampant violence and fighting, including in the country’s two biggest cities, Tripoli and Benghazi, as well as many other cities and towns across the country, is badly affecting civilians in general and a number of specific groups in particular,” said spokesperson Rupert Colville.

Indiscriminate artillery and air attacks are commonplace, the report says, while infrastructure, such hospitals, schools and airports, has been attacked and damaged or used for military purposes.

He said the report found tremendous suffering among children, with many unable to attend school and others killed or maimed at home or during attacks on schools and hospitals, as well as numerous reports of violence against women, including threats, attacks and killings of female human rights defenders, politicians and other women in public positions.

Targeted violence, unlawful killings and assassinations, were found to be common, with footage emerging in November that appeared to show several beheadings in Benghazi and Derna.

Cases of harassment, intimidation, torture, abductions, and summary executions of human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists and other media professionals, as well as members of the judiciary, politicians and law enforcement officers were common and minority groups, including Egyptian Coptic Christians, have also been increasingly targeted.

“The report also highlights the extremely vulnerable situation of migrants in Libya, especially those in areas affected by the fighting, and of internally displaced people,” said Mr. Colville. “Migrants face arbitrary detention and very poor conditions of detention, marked by overcrowding, poor sanitation and exploitation.”

Fighting and intentional destruction of residential and commercial property has caused ballooning displacement with the number of internally displaced persons soaring from 60,000 at the beginning of 2014 to around 400,000 by mid-November.

UN human rights staff report thousands of people in detention, held mostly by armed groups in situations where torture and ill-treatment is rife, with no means of challenging their situation because prosecutors and judges are unable or unwilling to confront the armed groups.
The intimidation and attacks suffered by members of the judiciary, which include court bombings, physical assaults, abduction of individuals or family members and unlawful killings, help explain the hesitancy and the breakdown of the justice system, which does not function in some parts of the country.

State institutions must be strengthened, the report urges, calling for accountability for human rights violations and support the ongoing political dialogue. Reforms have been severely undermined by the security situation, with little progress on establishing a new fact-finding and reconciliation commission or measures of redress for victims.

“The National Council on Civil Liberties and Human Rights, Libya’s national human rights institution which has been forcefully shut down in Tripoli, must be allowed to resume its work,” said Mr. Colville, who noted that the Constitution Drafting Assembly was in urgent need of support to continue functioning.

As the Libyan parties prepare to restart UN-supported political talks – two rounds of discussions have been held in the past month at the UN Office in Geneva – Bernardo Leon, head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) told UN Radio that he believed that while the majority of the people in the country were pushing their political representatives and the militias alike to negotiate, “a minority, but a noisy minority and people who hold weapons and have power, in some cases are against [the talks].”

“Our challenge is to make sure this majority has enough support from the international community to prevail over the minority,” he said the coming round of negotiations, which will be held in Libya rather than Geneva. The time and location for the talks had not been released for security reasons.

Asked what would be the difference between the talks now that they were opening in a new location, Mr. Leon stressed that the dialogue is the same, while it has different tracks. “One is this political track; there are other groups with municipalities with the armed groups, tribal leaders and political parties. So you have different groups discussing different things but the idea is that at the end they will all converge in one final group.”

He went on to say that as of now, all the mainstream groups, the most influential groups in both the political and military realms in both groups fighting in Libya are supporting the UN-mediated political process, which he said had been agreed by the parties and should include at the first stage “the unity government and the stabilization programme including, ceasefire, weapons control, militias leaving cities and the strategic facilities and monitoring.

“If we can achieve these two very urgent goals we will be solving maybe 75 per cent or 80 per cent of the current problems in Libya. Still we will have a lot of challenges and it will be an important step, but it won't be enough,” he explained, underscoring that the constitution process would need to be re-launched and that negotiation would be needed “to find solutions for the institutional chaos in the country.”

“So, we will still have a long way [to go], even if we're successful in the first stage, but if we can get in the coming weeks this ceasefire and especially the unity government, I think we will have achieved a lot,” said Mr. Leon.

**On Safer Internet Day, UN joins global call to boost online safety for children**

10 February - The United Nations today joined the global call for child online safety, with human rights experts flagging the need to tackle online child sexual abuse and the head of the UN agency for information and communication technology urging greater worldwide collaboration to ensure what has become a priority for many countries.

“Child online safety is now much higher on the political agenda of many countries, and has become a top priority for a wide variety of stakeholders, including businesses and financial institutions,” said Houlin Zhao, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in a message on Safe Internet Day.

“I warmly encourage all of you to join us today in promoting the increasingly vital need to keep everyone, and especially
our young people, safe online,” Mr. Zhao said.

According to ITU, in 2013, 30 per cent of the world’s youth were “digital natives” – defined as 15-24 years old with five or more years of experience online. And by 2018, this is expected to double in the developing world, growing from 22.8 per cent to 53 per cent of young Internet users.

“Creating a better Internet together” is this year’s theme,” the ITU Secretary-General said. “The word ‘together’ is the key. It’s a word we hear very often. But in reality, in the online world global collaboration is not so easily implemented.”

He went on to say: “Safer Internet Day is a great example of how the international community can start to collaborate in a harmonized way to create a better environment for all.”

Meanwhile, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Marta Santos Pais; the Special Rapporteur on sale and sexual exploitation of children, Maud de Boer-Buquicchio; and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, David Kaye, called on States and the IT industry to tackle head on online child sexual abuse and exploitation, while protecting the right to freedom of expression of both children and adults.

In a joint statement, the experts said that “openness and accessibility are fundamental aspects of the Internet – but therein also lie some of the greatest risks.”

“New technologies are easing the production and proliferation of child abuse material, with new exploitative activities appearing such as the live streaming of child sexual abuse on demand,” according to their statement. “The quantification and identification of cases are made difficult by the possibility of concealing illegal activities on the Internet. The harm caused to child victims is amplified when images of abuse and exploitation go viral.”

The statement went on to note that: considerable progress has been made in recent years in addressing risks and harms while maximizing opportunities offered by new technologies to prevent online abuse and empower children, but “it is high time to scale up these efforts by connecting through a truly global alliance to develop an empowering, safe and inclusive digital agenda for children.”

“We need an empowering, inclusive and safe Internet for all children, wherever they are,” it said. “Let us all connect safely to make it happen!”

Safer Internet Day is marked on 10 February globally to help promote the safe, responsible and positive use of digital technology for children and young people. The day offers the opportunity to highlight positive uses of technology and explore the role that all stakeholders can play in helping to create a better internet and safer online community.

**UN agency, Swiss scientists team up to crunch genome data to increase animal health**

10 February - The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) announced today that it is teaming up with a Swiss institute using computer technology to study biological data in combatting dangerous viral infections such as bird flu that strike animals but can also be transmitted to humans.

Future joint initiatives include a genetic module for Rift Valley fever – a viral disease that is potentially devastating to livestock and can also be transmitted to humans – and African swine fever, FAO said in a press release.

"The new technology helps us understand biological threats in order to help countries better prevent, respond and ultimately protect the health of humans, animals and the environment," said FAO's Chief Veterinary Officer, Juan Lubroth.

FAO said it chose SIB Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics as a designated reference centre to expand its access to state-of the-
art technology.

The Swiss institute, FAO said, is equipped with high performance computers, software, databases and a knowledgebase used for screening and monitoring animal diseases. These, like avian influenza, also known as bird flu, strike animals but can also be transmitted to humans.

Working closely with FAO, SIB experts have developed tools to improve early detection and fast alert systems to prevent and respond to transboundary disease emergencies in poultry or livestock, FAO said.

SIB specializes in bioinformatics, a relatively new science which employs computer technology to study biological data.

Scientists use bioinformatics to gather, process and analyze information on the genomes of pathogens – the genetic material peculiar to specific micro-organisms, such as viruses, bacteria and fungi – that cause diseases in their hosts, according to FAO.

“Such information enables scientists to develop new drugs and targeted treatments as well as improve the effectiveness of existing medicines,” it said.

FAO also said the new technologies play an important role in understanding the nature and dynamics of biological threats, and the food agency in collaboration with SIB, has developed online e-learning courses on bioinformatics in viral pathogens that can help laboratory technicians, physicians, veterinarians and researchers around the world improve their work while increasing access to this emerging field of competence.

FAO Reference Centres are regarded as centres of excellence in providing scientific and technical expertise on issues related to the agency’s mandate.

Among FAO’s three main goals are: the eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition; the elimination of poverty and the driving forward of economic and social progress for all; and, the sustainable management and utilization of natural resources, including land, water, air, climate and genetic resources for the benefit of present and future generations.

‘Vigilant, determined, united’: UN urges cohesive front against terrorism

10 February - The international community must remain united in countering the threat of global terrorism despite the attempts by extremist groups to “spread fear by competing in brutality,” United Nations Deputy-Secretary-General Jan Eliasson declared today.

In closing remarks to an open briefing organized by the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), the Deputy-Secretary-General warned that terrorist organizations would seek to “divide” and “polarize.” Member States, but the United Nations “must not fall into their trap” and instead must remain steadfastly devoted to human rights, the principles of due process and the rule of law.

“The terrorist attacks recently perpetrated in Nigeria and in Paris, along with the barbaric acts committed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), prove that we must remain vigilant, determined, and united,” Mr. Eliasson continued.

“It is now crucially important to let every terrorist and terrorist group hear the same message from Member States, the United Nations, and partners everywhere: the world stands united in denouncing and rejecting your atrocities.”

Mr. Eliasson’s plea follows a spate of recent atrocities committed by extremist groups in various theatres of conflict around the world. In the Middle East, ISIL’s recent immolation of a Jordanian pilot, its beheadings of numerous hostages and the atrocities committed against civilians have stirred global outrage.
Meanwhile, Boko Haram’s continued campaign of brutality in Nigeria, including the kidnapping of hundreds of schoolgirls and repeated targeted bombings against civilians, has resulted in widespread condemnation and the promise of swift action by a designated African Union force. This, in turn, has prompted the UN to urge that the fight against terrorism be conducted in accordance with international law.

The Deputy-Secretary-General observed that the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy had made it clear that Member States could not counter terrorism in isolation or confront extremist groups solely through military action.

Instead, he added, Member States required assistance in strengthening their criminal justice systems in order to respond to “the complex nature of terrorist crimes in an accountable and transparent manner.”

To that point, he noted the recent UN-backed training exercises for Nigerian law enforcement and security officials to assist them with upholding human rights and the rule of law while fighting Boko Haram.

“A truly effective response must leverage the resources of the international community and look at all aspects of the problem, including the underlying factors leading to the recruitment of new terrorists,” Mr. Eliasson told the gathered delegates.

“We will not accept to have societies living in fear and division. We will more than ever stand up for our common humanity. These are fundamental principles. Nothing you can do to destruct and destroy can take these values away from us.”

**Central African Republic: UN mission, French forces retake public spaces in Bria town**

**10 February** - The United Nations stabilization mission in the crisis-gripped Central African Republic (CAR) announced today that it has retaken public buildings in Bria, illegally occupied by ex-Séléka rebels.

UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told reporters in New York that the operation, conducted with the support of French forces, took place after the repeated refusal of the armed groups to peacefully evacuate the premises, and aimed at ending the existence of a parallel administration.

Mr. Haq added that Babacar Gaye, head of the UN mission, known as MINUSCA, reiterated the determination of international forces to protect the population and support the restoration of the State’s authority, for the organization of free, fair, transparent and open elections in the country.

Press reports suggest that UN peacekeepers and French forces used helicopters retake rebel-held positions in Bria, a town northeast of the capital, Bangui.

More than two years of civil war and sectarian violence have displaced thousands of people in the CAR. According to UN estimates, nearly 440,000 people remain displaced inside the country while some 190,000 have sought asylum across the borders. At the same time, more than 36,000 people remain trapped within the landlocked country in enclaves across the country, hoping to find asylum in neighbouring States.

In December, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous warned of a potentially explosive situation in the CAR amid continuing violent clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka alliance and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian.
UN rights office ‘disappointed’ to see Malaysian opposition leader prison sentence upheld

10 February - The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said today that it is disappointed that Malaysia’s Federal Court ruled to uphold the imprisonment of opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim.

The Federal Court agreed with a decision made by the Appeals Court in March 2014, which sentenced Mr. Ibrahim to five years in prison on charges of sodomy, a crime that should not exist under international human rights law, said the High Commissioner’s spokesperson, Rupert Colville, briefing press in Geneva.

Mr. Colville said Mr. Ibrahim had faced a number of charges and lengthy judicial processes after removal from the Government in 1998.

“There were allegations that that case had been politically motivated and the trial marred by violations of due process rights in relation to the opportunities provided to the defence, raising concerns about the fairness of the judicial process,” said Mr. Colville. “In addition, Mr. Ibrahim had been investigated and his lawyers prosecuted under the 1948 Sedition Act for speaking about the case.”

Mr. Colville added that OHCHR was highly concerned by the increasing use of the Sedition Act in “an apparently arbitrary and selective fashion,” against political opposition, human rights activists, journalists, lawyers and university professors in Malaysia since 2014.

Ban condemns killing of UN peacebuilding partner in Guinea

10 February - The Secretary-General has today condemned, in the strongest terms, the killing of Thierno Aliou Diaoune, National Coordinator for the UN Peacebuilding Fund, in Conakry, Guinea, on 6 February 2015.

“Mr. Diaoune was a trusted United Nations partner and a tireless advocate for the construction of peace, democracy and human rights in Guinea,” said a statement issued today by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson.

The statement said the Secretary-General welcomed the Guinean Government’s announcement of a full investigation into Mr. Diaoune’s death and offered his sincere condolences to Mr. Diaoune’s family.
After ‘grim’ 2014, UN urges renewed push for Middle East peace

10 February - The resolution of the long-standing Israel-Palestine conflict is “clearly a serious matter” for international peace and security, particularly during a time when the entire Middle East is threatened with terrorism and violent extremism, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson warned today.

Addressing the opening of the 2015 session of the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People on behalf of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Mr. Eliasson called on the UN system, the international community and all concerned stakeholders to work to revive negotiations for a two-State solution and end the impasse between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples which, he noted, had dangerously deteriorated.

While originally designated as the International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, 2014 had been “grim” for the region, as talks between the two sides broke down and violence escalated, he continued.

Last summer, for instance, hostilities between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip resulted in the deaths of almost 2,200 Palestinians and 72 Israelis, along with the wide-scale destruction of the war-ravaged enclave.

According to a recent UN assessment, as it stands now, over 100,000 homes remain damaged or destroyed, affecting more than 600,000 people. Many people still lack access to the municipal water network. Blackouts of up to 18 hours per day are common.

He added that Gaza remained “a desolate place under blockade and with much human suffering” and called on donors to fulfil pledges made at last October’s Cairo conference for the reconstruction of Gaza.

In addition, the year also saw rising levels of violence in the West Bank with incitement fanning religious tensions in the region and beyond.

“I regret that the parties have since taken unilateral steps that have deepened mutual distrust and distanced them from a prospect of negotiated settlement,” Mr. Eliasson declared.

“I urge both parties to refrain from any action that could further exacerbate the situation and to demonstrate the necessary leadership for reaching and implementing the difficult decisions that lie ahead.”

The Deputy Secretary-General reiterated that Israelis, Palestinians and the international community together held the responsibility for what had become “a collective failure to advance a political solution” to the crisis and said “all good forces must now be mobilised” for a new, successful push for peace.

“As we celebrate the 70th anniversary of our Organization, I call on this Committee to exert all efforts to enable the Palestinian people to exercise their inalienable rights,” Mr. Eliasson concluded.

“I reiterate the commitment of the United Nations to help achieve a just and durable peace between Israel and Palestine, resolving the conflict by ending nearly half a century of occupation and establishing a sovereign and independent State of Palestine – living side-by-side with Israel in peace and security.”
Closing thematic debate, UN Assembly President urges better funding for post-2015 development

10 February - The creation of a coherent and synergistic strategy that marries the post-2015 development agenda, new methods of financing and efforts to reach a new climate change agreement is key if the international community intends to make strides on securing a sustainable future for all, President of the United Nations General Assembly, Sam Kutesa, declared today.

Delivering the closing remarks to a High-Level Thematic Debate on Means of Implementation for a Transformative Post-2015 Development Agenda, Mr. Kutesa reiterated participants’ calls for “a fair, rules-based international trading regime” which, he said, would help fuel investments for development into the near-future.

Mr. Kutesa had underscored the need for better financing in order to fully satisfy the breadth and scope of the new UN development agenda at the High-Level Debate’s opening on 9 February and, addressing delegates earlier today, he reiterated that “a huge financing gap for infrastructure” remained despite sufficient global liquidity.

Nonetheless, he added, proposals had been made on how to channel the necessary funding in the most valuable manner and, in particular, from “all sources” – public and private, domestic and international.

Moreover, the General Assembly President reminded participants about “the important development role of parliaments” in determining budgets and monitoring policy implementation.

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

But challenges persist, and with the deadline of the MDGs set for the end of this year, the UN will craft a new set of targets known as sustainable development goals (SDGs). The new agenda will aim to address a raft lingering and emerging challenges, such as the fact that globally, 73 million young people are looking for work and many more are trapped in exploitative jobs.

Mozambique: UN chief welcomes dialogue between President and opposition leader

10 February - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has welcomed the meetings between Mozambique President Filipe Nyusi and the head of the opposition RENAMO party, Afonso Dhlakama, adding his approval of the progress made in talks between the two leaders and congratulating them both for their “commitment to dialogue,” the UN Spokesperson's office has announced.

In a statement released late yesterday evening, the UN Spokesperson explained that Mr. Ban had voiced hope that the meetings would “pave the way for the peaceful resolution of outstanding issues” in respect of the constitutional framework and the work of the National Assembly.

The meetings between Mr. Nyusi and Mr. Dhlakama – held in the capital of Maputo from 7 to 9 February – are, reportedly,
the first face-to-face encounters between the two since RENAMO initiated a boycott of the Mozambique Parliament, preventing its 89 deputies to attend the opening session of the National Assembly.

“The Secretary-General reiterates the commitment of the United Nations to support Mozambique as it endeavours to promote development, strong democratic institutions as well as sustainable peace and stability,” the statement added.

Proposed amendments to military court laws in Thailand draw UN rights office concern

10 February - The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is concerned that a number of proposed amendments to Thailand’s law relating to military courts, which are due for consideration this week, are not in line with international standards, according to a the High Commissioner’s spokesperson.

The country’s National Legislative Assembly, which was appointed by the military government in 2014, is expected to adopt a series of amendments to the 1955 Act on the Organization of Military Courts on Thursday.

“We are particularly concerned that the proposed amendment to section 46 would authorize military commanders to issue detention orders for both military personnel and civilians under the Criminal Procedure Code for up to 84 days with no judicial oversight,” said Rupert Colville. “Since the May 2014 coup, military courts have had jurisdiction over civilians for specific offenses.”

The proposed amendment on judicial oversight of military detention could be applied in such cases, Mr. Colville said, pointing out that detention without judicial review breaches the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Thailand is a state party.

Under Article 9 of the Covenant, a person detained on suspicion of a criminal offence is to be brought promptly before a judge, with the Human Rights Council, which oversees the ICCPR, interpreting “promptly” to mean within a few days.

“OHCHR notes assurances by the current Government of its commitment to uphold its international human rights obligations,” said the Spokesperson. “We urge the National Legislative Assembly to revise the proposed amendments in line with international human rights standards, including the right to judicial review of detention, right to counsel and right to appeal.”

The Office called on the Government to restrict use of military courts to military offences committed by military personnel and recalled the ICCPR obligation to ensure that everyone has the right to a “fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law” (article 14), noting also that the Human Rights Council underlined that the military character of a trial should in no way affect such rights.
UN calls for boosted search, rescue efforts as migrants die of hypothermia in Mediterranean

10 February - The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) has urged European nations to ramp up search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea following the region’s first major maritime tragedy this year in which dozens of people perished, apparently from hypothermia.

Twenty-nine migrants were reported dead off the coast of Libya yesterday during an attempt to cross the Mediterranean over to Europe. UNHCR said it is both deeply saddened by the news and concerned by the manner of the deaths – “all but seven of which appear to have occurred on board the rescue vessel, with people dying of hypothermia.” Some 100 migrants were rescued when the Italian Coast Guard succeeded in reaching the distressed vessel despite the turbulent waters.

“While we applaud all involved in the rescue effort – which took place in high seas and poor weather conditions and resulted in 106 lives being saved – this is an example of why it was felt important in October 2013, following tragedies that occurred then, to underline the need for a much more effective and improved rescue capacity in the Mediterranean to cope with the scale of the problem,” said UNHCR spokesperson Adrian Edwards in a press release.

Migrant crossings in the Mediterranean have spiked in the first few weeks of 2015 with UNHCR reporting the numbers as being “significantly higher” compared to the same period last year. In January alone, the agency added, 3,528 arrivals were reported in Italy compared to 2,171 in January last year. Meanwhile, 2015 has already seen 50 deaths, including the lives lost yesterday, compared to the 12 recorded by this point last year.

As conflict continues to flare in Syria, Libya and across the Middle East, refugees are increasingly resorting to irregular migration, paying vast sums of money and frequently succumbing to the whims of human traffickers in order to flee zones of crisis for Europe’s shores. The bulk of these migrants arrive in Italy. By the end of August 2014, for instance, more than 108,000 migrants had already landed on the Italian peninsula.

“As additionally worrying is that, with yesterday’s incident, there are indications that more people were attempting to reach Italy last night,” Mr. Edwards continued.

The UNHCR spokesperson recalled that more than 218,000 people had crossed the Mediterranean in 2014 with an estimated 3,500 having lost their lives in the attempt. He added that the number “would have been higher if not for Italy’s Mare Nostrum” – the Italian Government’s rescue campaign which was replaced last year by a European Union operation named Triton.

While the “Mare Nostrum” rescue operation brought an array of Italian naval and coast guard vessels into the fold, permitting the rescue of distressed migrants stranded far from Europe’s shores, Triton remains more focussed on assisting those within range of the continent’s coastlines.

Mr. Edwards warned the European Union that Triton was “no replacement for proper search and rescue capacity” and called for European Governments to provide Italy with “proper support to deal with people making irregular crossings.”