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Ongoing violence in Darfur having ‘devastating’ impact on civilians, Security Council told

10 June - The security situation in Darfur is a very serious one, marked by a “deeply concerning” increase in violent attacks by armed assailants against United Nations peacekeepers and humanitarian personnel, the Assistant Secretary-General for UN peacekeeping operations told the Security Council today.

“Most worrisome is the devastating impact that [it] has had on innocent civilians and the obstacles it has created for their protection and for humanitarian assistance,” Edmond Mulet stated this morning, reporting to the Council “very limited progress” in the peace process.

Indeed, he stressed, the second phase of the Government’s military offensive, ‘Operation Decisive Summer,’ has resulted in high numbers of newly displaced people. At least 78,000 people have been displaced by conflict in Darfur this year, according to humanitarian organizations. In addition, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) received reports of some 130,000 additional internal displaced persons (IDPs), which it was not yet able to verify.

“Most of these unverified IDPs are said to be in the Jebel Marra area, where the heaviest fighting has been taking place and which is mostly inaccessible for humanitarian partners. There is also significant concern about reports of indiscriminate attacks against civilians, as well as other violations of human rights and international humanitarian law,” explained the UN official.

Moreover, intercommunal fighting led to periodic outbreaks of violence, he emphasized, also citing conflicts over resources as an aggravating factor, as well as broader political tensions and the actions of numerous paramilitary groups and militias, the proliferation of small arms and criminality, and the handling of insecurity by local authorities.

Despite the difficult operating environment, including movement restrictions and other obstructions imposed by the belligerent parties, Mr. Mulet assured Council members that the African Union-UN Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) remains resolute in its commitment to deliver on its strategic priorities.
“The adequate responses by units when attacked and the proactive approach shown when protecting IDPs are indicators of continuous improvement as a result of the change of attitude, robustness and training” requested by the implementation of the strategic review, he stated.

For the Assistant Secretary-General, the most significant achievements of UNAMID over the reporting period were the establishment of “protective areas” and instances in which peacekeepers repelled or prevented attacks against civilians, conducted robust patrols to affected villages and escorted humanitarian missions during intercommunal clashes.

“Protection committees were also formed with IDPs to coordinate relevant protection activities in collaboration with humanitarian personnel,” Mr. Mulet highlighted.

As for the formulation of an exit strategy for UNAMID, even though an outcome has not been produced yet, the African Union-United Nations team has explored the idea of a “two-pronged approach” with the Sudanese Government, he continued.

“First, UNAMID’s proposal is based on the achievement of the Mission’s benchmarks and premised on a political solution to the conflict based on direct talks between the parties, starting with a cessation of hostilities.”

The exit strategy, emphasized Mr. Mulet, is also based on the gradual and phased withdrawal of UNAMID’s force from West Darfur, where there have not been any major fighting in two years, complemented by a progressive handover of its tasks to the Government and the UN Country Team. Three other team sites in North and South Darfur, in areas that do not necessitate the Mission’s presence, would also be closed.

However, acknowledging that the prospect of a definitive end to the crisis seems to be “wishful thinking” in the current environment, the Assistant Secretary-General said the UN Secretariat, in agreement with the Council for Peace and Security of the African Union, has requested from the Security Council the extension of UNAMID’s mandate for an additional year, until June 2016.

According to the Deputy Joint Special Representative for UNAMID, the peace process is stalled, and the greatest challenge it meets is the “Sudanese Government’s reluctance” to engage in negotiations with armed movements.

In an interview with UN Radio, Abiodun Oluremi Bashua said the Government thinks it can “win the war militarily”, while the African Union and the UN believe only a political process can bring an end to more than a decade of conflict, a position he advocates relentlessly to the Sudanese authorities, the AU and the League of Arab States.

‘Libya doesn’t have time,’ says UN envoy, urging parties to make political draft ‘a final one’

10 June - Amid “very encouraging signs” in the United Nations-facilitated Libyan political dialogue, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative on the North African nation today said that “time has come to make an agreement” and if possible, before or at the beginning of Ramadan, which begins on 17 June.

“We now have a draft. This draft provides solution for most of the challenges we have been facing and will be facing in the coming months,” Bernardino León said at a press conference in Berlin today.

“The principles of inclusion, balance and consensus are there, at every step, at every institution and the principle that no side, no actor will be able to impose its views on the other,” he told reporters.

Delegations of the Libyan political talks are currently in Germany’s capital for UN-led discussions hosted with senior officials from a number of States, including the United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom. The five permanent members of the Security Council are sending a “very strong message” of unity and support to Libya, Mr. León
“We can continue working for months and for years and maybe to reach a perfect agreement. But Libya doesn’t have the time. Because the people of Libya cannot continue the situation of humanitarian disaster […] there are displaced people in their own country,” he added.

Today’s dialogue was different because Libyans were able to work together “discussing, interacting” which had “not been possible before”. In a communiqué issued following those discussions, participants renewed their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Libya, while recalling relevant Security Council resolutions.

Mr. León underscored the security threat posed by Da’esh, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The group has seized a city in central Libya and has strategized “maybe to divide Libya” by controlling its central city Sirte, which is close to the country’s main oil facilities. He also stressed the importance of addressing the financial and economic situation.

“The main economic source of the country is oil. Libya is not producing oil, the Central Bank cannot sustain the currency anymore,” he warned.

From the many messages received on social media, Libyans have expressed that they are “eager to live in democracy and freedom— from all camps, sides and cities.”

“And now it is in the hands of the Libyan actors, the Libyan people to make clear this draft becomes a final one,” Mr. Leon said.

What is important is that the door is still open and that moderates remain strong, and are becoming a majority in both camps, he said, adding that achieving an agreement will not be easy.

“The problem we have in Libya there are many negative forces operating against the agreement,” Mr. León said.

**In Geneva, UN envoy meets Syria stakeholders amid ongoing consultations**

10 June - The United Nations Special Envoy for Syria is continuing a series of critical meetings with Syrian and international stakeholders as part of the ongoing Geneva Consultations and in an effort to find a political solution to the country’s five-year long conflict.

According to a spokesperson for the Organization, Staffan de Mistura – who has been engaged since 5 May with representatives of the Syrian Government, the Syrian opposition Coalition and 39 Syrian political and civil society groups – will continue the consultation process into the month of July with the “sincere hope and belief that guns will fall silent one day.”

“The sooner they fall silent, the more lives will be saved,” Mr. de Mistura’s spokesperson added in a statement issued earlier today. “It is the responsibility of all Syrian, regional and international actors to try to bring that day forward and to make every effort to protect civilians under any circumstances and at all times.”

During Syria’s tragic five-year arc of conflict, 220,000 people have been killed, more than one million have been injured, 7.6 million have been displaced and four million people have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, according to UN estimates. In the past weeks alone, well over 100,000 people were displaced in a new wave of fighting in Idlib while some 14 million people are now displaced due to the interlinked crises in Syria and Iraq.

In addition, the repeated use of highly lethal weaponry, such as barrel bombs, has increasingly drawn condemnation from the Special Envoy and the UN itself.
In the statement, the spokesperson said Mr. de Mistura stressed the existence of a “general consensus” that there cannot be a military solution to the Syrian tragedy and that the continued use of force “will only create further suffering, destruction and grievances.”

“An inclusive and Syrian-led and owned political solution is urgently needed,” the statement added. “Only such a solution can address the aspirations of the Syrian people and end the conflict in a sustainable manner.”

The UN describes the Geneva Consultations as “a rolling process of separate and informal meetings” aimed at operationalizing the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 and Mr. de Mistura has announced that he remains set on briefing Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on his findings from the process.

“Special Envoy de Mistura hopes to be in a position to present to the Secretary-General views on ways to help the Syrian parties reach a political solution, as per the Geneva Communiqué, to end the unacceptable bloodletting in their country, which has led to countless deaths and injuries, and destruction of cities, towns and villages,” the statement concluded.

**Migrant arrivals in Europe top 100,000 in 2015 – UN refugee agency**

10 June - Refugee and migrant arrivals to Europe across the Mediterranean so far in 2015 have moved above 100,000, with record numbers now arriving every day in the Greek islands, the United Nations refugee agency has confirmed.

Official figures show that as of 8 June a total of 103,000 refugees and migrants had arrived in Europe: 54,000 in Italy, 48,000 in Greece, 91 on Malta and 920 in Spain, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The latest tally includes around 6,000 migrants and refugees who were disembarked in southern Italy last weekend in a major rescue operation coordinated by the Italian Coast Guard and joined by navy ships deployed by Frontex and from Italy, Germany, Britain, Ireland, and Spain.

Record numbers of the refugees are arriving in flimsy rubber dinghies and wooden boats on the Greek island of Lesvos, putting an enormous strain on its services and resources. Half of some 600 refugees, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, who arrive daily in Greece, now come ashore on Lesvos. Arrivals there have grown from 737 in January to 5,000 in April and over 7,200 in May.

Hundreds of refugees leave the island for the Greek mainland every day after being identified, screened and registered. At present, however, there are around 2,200 to 2,500 waiting there for registration by the authorities. A screening centre in the village of Moria, a former detention centre for migrants waiting to be deported, is currently housing over 1,000 refugees.

"This is more than twice its official capacity of 410 people. In addition, an education park in Kara Tepe is being used as temporary accommodation for around 1000 refugees,” UNHCR spokesperson Adrian Edwards told a press briefing in Geneva.

UNHCR has a permanent presence in the island's main town, Mytilini, and is working with people at the Moria centre. UNHCR has been present on Lesvos and other Greek islands since 2011, supporting the authorities' efforts to improve reception conditions and procedures, providing legal advice to newcomers about the asylum procedure in Greece, as well as their right and responsibilities, and identifying and referring people with specific needs such as unaccompanied children, people with disabilities, the elderly and victims of torture or trauma.

In recent weeks, UNHCR has been distributing sleeping bags and hygiene kits to refugees in greatest need in Lesvos and other Greek islands.

To deal effectively with the challenges posed by the large number of arrivals in Lesvos and other Greek islands, UNHCR is
calling for urgent reinforcement of personnel and resources of all the state services and civil society organisations dealing with the reception of refugees.

**Religious leaders at forefront of fight against intolerance, says UN chief**

**10 June** - Religious leaders have a pivotal role to play in times of turmoil, during which they can provide a values-based glue to hold communities together and provide common ground for peace-making and problem solving, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today at a conference in Kazakhstan.

“You can do so by fostering dialogue; by using spiritual authority to encourage individuals to act humanely; and by promoting shared values – as enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – and as reflected in the teachings of all world religions,” Mr. Ban said in his remarks to the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, held in Astana.

In his opening remarks to a dialogue to promote peace and prosperity in turbulent times – which echoed the UN General Assembly thematic debate on “Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation” held in April – the Secretary-General reminded religious leaders, both traditional and non-traditional, of their obligation to speak out when “so-called adherents of their faith” commit crimes in its name.

“[They] must teach their followers the true meaning of reconciliation, understanding and mutual respect,” Mr. Ban emphasized. “All…crimes committed in the name of religion are crimes against religion,” he stressed, condemning the atrocities committed by Da’esh, Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda and “other sectarian and terrorist groups.”

Convinced that the scourge of violence in the name of religion calls for concerted action by governments, religious communities, civil society and the media, Mr. Ban highlighted the upcoming launch, during the 70th session of the General Assembly, of a plan of action on the prevention of violent extremism.

Often bearing “the brunt of violent ideologies,” women and young girls must be provided with a stronger, more equal platform, as a “means of advancing respect, changing mindsets and shifting global consciousness,” he said.

Youth must also be a priority, as the age profile of some countries is sometimes cited as a reason to issue warnings that a “surging” population of young men inevitably drives increased violence and insecurity.

Noting that many countries with a high proportion of young people have not suffered violence though, the UN chief pointed to factors such as long-term economic decline, limited educational and employment opportunities, as well as exclusion from social, cultural and political participation.

But in all the international community does against radicalization, the respect of international law always must prevail and leaders and policy-makers must recognize a powerful truth – “the larger the spaces for democracy and fundamental freedoms, the smaller the chances for extremism and violence.”

There is no greater cause today than building bridges of understanding and cooperation among communities, Mr. Ban stated. “Our challenge is to go beyond the notion of tolerance or simply acknowledging or abiding the existence of the other. No one wants to be merely tolerated, as if there is something wrong with them. Tolerance must be more active and dynamic.”

The importance of human rights in fostering development and peace remained a constant theme during the Secretary-General’s visit to Kazakhstan and reverberated widely during his remarks to the press with the country’s Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov later in the day.

Once again drawing from the Universal Declaration on Human Rights’ entreaty for the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion across the world, Mr. Ban explained that in Kazakhstan, as anywhere else, “all religious and
minority groups should be guaranteed this right on an equal footing.”

“Governments around the world should recognize the decisive role of this and other fundamental freedoms in fostering pluralism, understanding and democracy,” he told reporters, adding that Kazakhstan should also continue to make progress on human rights, including the development of “a comprehensive National Human Rights Action Plan.”

“Let us work together to help people everywhere around the world so that they can achieve their dreams,” Mr. Ban concluded. “Dreams – everybody should be able to live in peace, harmony and friendship and well-being and dignity.”

**Women and girls in Africa ‘being left behind’ in fight against HIV/AIDS – UN report**

10 June - Despite considerable advances made in the global response to the AIDS epidemic over the last several decades, young women and adolescent girls in Africa “are still being left behind,” according to a new joint report from the United Nations and the African Union.

In the sub-Saharan region, AIDS-related illnesses remain the leading cause of death among girls and women of reproductive age. In 2013, 74 per cent of new HIV infections among African adolescents were among adolescent girls, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) said in a statement.

Young women and adolescent girls acquire HIV on average five to seven years earlier than young men, and in some countries in the region, HIV prevalence among this population can be as much as seven times that of their male counterparts.

“In the absence of a vaccine, ending gender-based violence, keeping girls in school and empowering young women and adolescent girls are the best options we have available,” Sheila Tlou, UNAIDS Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa, said.

In order to guide regional and global advocacy and inform political dialogue on HIV prevention and treatment among young women and adolescent girls, UNAIDS and the African Union have launched a joint report entitled Empower young women and adolescent girls: Fast-Tracking the end of the AIDS epidemic in Africa.

The document outlines three political commitments to advance the rights and empowerment of Africa’s young women and girls to help Fast-Track an AIDS response firmly rooted in gender equality and social justice.

The commitments are to stop new HIV infections among young women and adolescent girls in order to ensure that AIDS is no longer the leading cause of death among adolescents; to empower young women and adolescent girls through comprehensive sexuality education; and to prevent HIV infections among children and keep their mothers alive.

“As we work with our communities, our networks, our health service providers and our governments, we must commit to demanding a comprehensive focus on young women in the AIDS response,” said Rosemary Museminali, UNAIDS Representative to the African Union.

The report launched 8 June as part of the 26th Gender is My Agenda Campaign pre-summit to the African Union meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa.
At annual meeting, UN committee on space issues renews focus on sustainability and climate change

10 June - The Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space opened its annual session in Vienna today with the role of sustainability and climate change in outer space activities taking centre stage, the United Nations space agency has reported.

In a press release issued by the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA), the UN agency confirmed that, for the first time in its history, the Committee would address transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities and how they relate to the safety of space operations and the long-term sustainability of outer space activities.

According to UNOOSA, the Committee will also engage in “a preparatory exploration” of the topics set to be covered during a joint ad hoc meeting of the First and Fourth Committees of the General Assembly in late October which will, in turn, place the report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Transparency and Confidence-building Measures in Outer Space Activities at the centre of all considerations.

In addition, a side event hosted on 11 June by the Government of France will see experts address delegations on the role played by satellites in confronting climate change as well as how space can contribute to understanding global warming and how to help societies mitigate its consequences.

Consideration of space and development at the current session of the Committee builds upon the outcome of the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, widely known as ’Rio+20,’ in which Governments recognized the importance of space-derived data.

To that point, the Committee’s Working Group on the Long-term Sustainability of Outer Space Affairs will continue to negotiate a set of voluntary guidelines, which, when finalized, is expected to provide a foundation for national and international practices and safety frameworks for conducting outer space activities.

The Committee’s session, which runs through 17 June, will also host Russian cosmonaut Alexei Leonov in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of his historic mission as the first human to walk in space.

UN health agency begins review of MERS outbreak in Republic of Korea

10 June - A joint mission by the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) and the Republic of Korea's Ministry of Health and Welfare to review the situation regarding the outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS CoV), has begun its work in Seoul, the agency confirmed today.

Initial recommendations provided by the joint mission, which began yesterday, have been welcomed by the Government, said a WHO press statement.

The mission, which will end its in-country visit on Saturday, 13 June, is assessing the epidemiological pattern of MERS CoV in the Republic of Korea as well as the characteristics of the virus and clinical features and reviewing the public health measures implemented to date.

“The exchange of information and experience has included the provision of detailed information about the outbreak and the control measures that have been put into place, as well as discussion of existing challenges,” said Dr. Keiji Fukuda, WHO Assistant Director-General for Health Security, who is co-leading the mission.
Dr. Fukuda said that current efforts to control the outbreak and prevent further spread are being intensified. WHO has been working closely with the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention on response measures since the outbreak began.

According to WHO, there have been 108 confirmed cases of MERS CoV (including 1 confirmed case in China) reported in the Republic of Korea so far, with 9 deaths. Whenever an emerging pathogen like the MERS virus appears in a new setting, for example, in a new country, a timely and thorough investigation is critical, particularly to assess whether the virus and its transmission are changing, and to ensure implementation of the most appropriate control strategies.

The evidence presented thus far suggests that the pattern of the outbreak in the Republic of Korea may be similar to MERS outbreaks that have taken place in health care facilities in the Middle East. However, the situation is rapidly evolving and investigations are ongoing.

The initial recommendations made today by the joint mission are that infection prevention and control measures should immediately be strengthened in all facilities across the country. All patients presenting with fever or respiratory symptoms should be asked about: contact with a MERS patient; visits to a health care facility where a MERS patient has been treated; and history of travel to the Middle East in the 14 days before symptom onset.

Any patient with positive responses should be promptly reported to public health authorities and managed as a suspected case while the diagnosis is being confirmed.

Close contacts of MERS cases should not travel during the period when they are being monitored for the development of symptoms. Strong consideration should be given to re-opening schools, as schools have not been linked to transmission of MERS-CoV in the Republic of Korea or elsewhere.