South Sudan: UNICEF celebrates ongoing demobilization of child soldiers

11 February - The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is applauding the release of another 300 children from an armed group in South Sudan – the second such UN-backed demobilization of child soldiers in less than a month.

“For every child released, it’s the chance for a new life,” UNICEF South Sudan Representative Jonathan Veitch stated in a press release issued earlier today and welcoming the news.

Two weeks ago, an initial group of 249 children – ranging from 11 to 17 years of age – was released by the South Sudan Democratic Army (SSDA) Cobra Faction at the village of Gumuruk in Jonglei state. The release was marked by a ceremony overseen by UNICEF and the South Sudan National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission during which the child soldiers reportedly surrendered their weapons and uniforms. Further phased releases of the other children are planned over the coming month.

According to the UN agency, some of the child soldiers have been fighting for up to four years and many have never attended school. In the last year alone, 12,000 children, mostly boys, have been recruited and used as soldiers by armed forces and groups in South Sudan as a whole.

The security situation in South Sudan deteriorated steadily over the past year since political in-fighting between South Sudan's President Salva Kiir and his former deputy, Riek Machar, started in mid-December 2013. The hostilities subsequently turned into a full-fledged conflict that has sent nearly 100,000 civilians fleeing to UNMISS bases around the country. The crisis has uprooted an estimated 1.9 million people and placed more than 7 million at risk of hunger and disease.
Nonetheless, a recent peace deal between the warring factions has fostered hope of a definitive end to the year-long conflict.

In the two weeks since the first group’s release, 179 children have returned home to their families while 70 others continue to live in the UNICEF-supported interim care centre as family tracing and reunification efforts are carried out.

Meanwhile, the 300 children released in the current demobilization will spend their first night in an interim care centre where they will be provided with food, water and clothing and also gain access to health and psychosocial services.

“We are witnessing the negative consequences that being in an armed group has had on the boys; some are withdrawn while others exhibit violent and aggressive behaviour. Instead of playing, they march up and down,” Mr. Veitch continued.

“To avoid the risk of re-recruitment and to ensure that each child can fulfil their potential, they need a protective environment where they not only receive food and water, but also counselling, life skills and the opportunity to go back to school.”

The press release explained that UNICEF has chartered flights and delivered truckloads of water and sanitation, education and health supplies to support the children and maintained a 10-person staff on the ground to oversee the release and reintegration programme.

Nonetheless, it added, the costs involved in operating a successful release and reintegration initiative were onerous and the agency would require further funding and assistance.

UNICEF, in fact, estimates the costs for the release and reintegration of each child at $2,330 for a two-year period. Although some funding has been forthcoming, the agency is appealing for an additional $13 million.

Top UN development programme official starts West Africa visit focused on Ebola recovery

11 February - The top United Nations development official, tasked by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to lead the Organization’ system-wide Ebola-related recovery effort, today began a visit to West Africa, where a new study recommended better programs for women who have been disproportionately impacted by the disease.

Meanwhile, UN the World Health Organization (WHO), in its latest update, reported that the number of new cases of Ebola in West Africa rose for the second straight week. WHO also noted that the fatality rate among hospitalized cases remains high – between 53 per cent and 60 per cent.

“The spike in cases in Guinea and continued widespread transmission in Sierra Leone underline the considerable challenges that must still be overcome to get to zero cases,” WHO said.

Liberia, which continued to report a low number of new cases, announced that schools will be reopened on 2 March, according to the latest update from the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER).

Helen Clark, Administrator of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) started today a one-week visit to West African which will include stops in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, where there have been almost 23,000 reported Ebola cases with almost 9,000 reported deaths.

Her visit aims at affirming the continued commitment of the UN to addressing the ongoing crisis, and support for the recovery process. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon tasked UNDP to lead the UN system on Ebola-related recovery.

As part of the overall response, UNDP’s recovery initiatives are focused on four pillars: economic opportunities and jobs;
recovery of the health system; resilient governance for recovery, peace and stability; and risk management to deal with any future outbreaks.

In other news, UNMEER reported that a new study by UNDP shows that “women have been disproportionately affected by the Ebola virus because they serve as family caregivers and health workers, take part in traditional practices and rituals, and trade across borders where they come into contact with many people.”

“The disparities are most visible in Guinea’s most affected areas. In Guékédou, for instance, women represent 62 percent of the infected, and in Télémilé, 74 percent,” according to the UNDP study cited by the UN mission report.

“The study finds large numbers of women have lost their livelihoods due to reduced productivity in agriculture, slowing down of trade and small business activity,” it said. “In addition, maternal deaths have increased because of reduced antenatal and neonatal care.”

According to the study, recovery plans should incorporate gender considerations, and countries need to put in place specific social protection programmes for women.

**UN health agency urges stepped-up surveillance to prevent spread of measles in the Americas**

11 February - The recent outbreaks of measles – one of the leading causes of deaths among young children – in the United States and Brazil suggest that immunization rates in some areas have dropped below levels needed to prevent the spread of imported into the Americas, according to the United Nations health agency.

The UN World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization, based in Washington, D.C., reported in a press release issued Tuesday that there were 147 confirmed measles cases in four countries of the Americas this year as of February 8.

“Of that total, 121 cases were in the United States, linked primarily to an outbreak that began at Disneyland in California last December,” the PAHO/WHO press release said, adding that a single case in Mexico was also tied to that outbreak. Of the remaining cases, 21 were in Brazil and four were in Canada.

“Thanks to high levels of immunization, the Americas have been on track for more than a decade to be formally declared free of measles,” said Dr. Cuauhtemoc Ruiz, head of PAHO/WHO’s immunization programme. “Maintaining high levels of vaccine coverage is key to preventing and halting outbreaks and to protect our populations from the constant threat of imported cases.”

Measles had been considered eliminated from the Americas since 2002, due to the absence of endemic transmission of the disease as the result of the region’s success in achieving high levels of immunization, through routine immunization programs and mass vaccination campaigns such as the annual Vaccination Week in the Americas, which PAHO/WHO have spearheaded for the past 13 years.

Now, measles elimination “is facing major challenges, with several ongoing importations of measles in some countries,” PAHO/WHO said in an epidemiological alert distributed Tuesday to member countries across the region.

The alert urges countries to strengthen measles surveillance activities and to “take appropriate measures to protect residents in the Americas against measles and rubella.”

“Countries in the Americas have reported cases imported from other regions every year during the past decade, but until recently, they did not lead to significant outbreaks,” said Dr. Ruiz. “The current outbreaks point to gaps in immunization that could allow measles and other vaccine-preventable diseases to take hold again and begin spreading in our hemisphere.”

Measles vaccine has been used for more than 50 years and has proven to be safe and effective. Globally, measles vaccine
prevented an estimated 15.6 million deaths between 2000 and 2013.

PAHO/WHO recommends that children receive two doses of measles-containing vaccine before their fifth birthday and that levels of coverage with two doses be maintained at 95 per cent or more to prevent the spread of imported cases. Currently, an estimated 92 per cent of 1-year-olds in the Americas receive a first dose of measles vaccine.

PAHO, founded in 1902, is the oldest international public health organization in the world. It works with its member countries to improve the health and the quality of life of the people of the Americas. It also serves as the Regional Office for the Americas of the Geneva-based WHO.

**UN-hosted Forum opens in New York, seeks to identify aims on women’s health for post-2015**

11 February - United Nations Headquarters in New York hosted the inaugural World Women’s Health and Development Forum today, bringing together world leaders, representatives of UN system entities, scientists, healthcare professionals, and members of civil society, the media and the private sector to discuss how best to advance the health, wealth and empowerment of women worldwide.

The two-day High Level Forum was organized by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Royal Academy of Science International Trust (RASIT), focusing on the outcomes desired from the Post-2015 development agenda and identifying the main challenges facing countries in developing and enhancing women’s health.

Princess Nisreen El-Hashemite, the Forum’s founder and Executive Director of RASIT, said that the Forum would aim “to identify the main challenges facing countries for developing and enhancing women’s health. It will reflect practices, information-sharing mechanisms and concrete actions for the health and development of women and girls, taking into consideration different needs of different societies and cultures.”

In an interview with UN Radio after she delivered her welcome message, Dr. El-Hashemite noted that there is currently insufficient knowledge within academia and the health care industry about women's health, including non-communicable diseases and mental illnesses.

“It is important to realize that women and men have different medical needs,” she said. “As a doctor and a scientist, and as a woman, I call on ministries of health to establish office of women's health, wish a mission of protecting and advancing the health of women broadly.”

The Executive Directors of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), Babatunde Osotimehin, and the Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, were also expected to address the opening session of the event.
**Venue for UN-mediated political talks shifts to Libya, as national stakeholders seek peace**

11 February - Libyan stakeholders have convened in the western Libyan city of Ghedames for the latest round of United Nations-facilitated dialogue aimed at resolving the North African nation’s political crisis, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) said today.

In a press release, UNSMIL noted that the talks, the previous two rounds of which were hosted by the UN Office at Geneva, brought “all invited participants” together for the first time and were conducted in “a constructive and positive atmosphere.”

“Discussions focused on the points that were agreed upon in the agenda of the dialogue, including proposals for organizing the work ahead and agreement on a clear timetable that takes into consideration the wishes of the parties to reach a speedy political solution to prevent further security and political deterioration and end the institutional division that threatens the country’s unity,” UNSMIL explained, adding that participants had agreed to continue the dialogue in the coming days.

In addition, the Mission noted, participants at the meeting also called on all parties to work towards a “military de-escalation on all fronts” to allow continued dialogue amid a “positive environment.”

Libya's protracted conflict has caused a humanitarian crisis with at least 120,000 people forced to flee their homes, resulting in consequent shortages in both food and medical supplies along with mounting numbers of casualties.

A recent burst of violence has further rattled the war-weary nation, in conflict since the beginning of its civil war in 2011, which resulted in the ouster of late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

In the eastern city of Benghazi, an uptick in violence has seen 450 people killed since October 2014 as residents continue to face shortage in medical care. Moreover, upwards of 15,000 families – some 90,000 people – have been displaced.

**UN-backed report urges greater violence-prevention efforts for Africa’s children**

11 February - African girls and boys continue to be subjected to distressing levels of physical, sexual and emotional violence despite the significant legal and policy measures adopted throughout the region, according to a new United Nations-backed report.

Launched today at UN Headquarters in New York, *The African Report on Violence against Children* is the first comprehensive report of its kind in the region and builds upon the commitment put forward by African Union Member States to promote a so-called “Africa Fit for Children.”

The report was presented at a press briefing co-organized by the Permanent Mission of Zambia to the UN, the African Union, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, and the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF).

Although it acknowledges the notable progress made across Africa and fuelled by African States’ ratification of international and children’s rights instruments, the report also admits that such advancements may be hampered by the weak implementation of laws and policies, under-resourced and under-staffed social services, and harmful practices that remain embedded in long-standing community traditions.

The gains made across the continent for children’s rights have so far been remarkable. The report, in fact, notes that
countries such as Angola and Ethiopia have made great efforts to incorporate anti-violence against children measures within their development agendas. Meanwhile, in Kenya, Tunisia, South Sudan and Togo, corporal punishment has been prohibited. All African countries have legal provisions criminalising sexual violence, abuse and exploitation.

The report, which reviews the prevalence and magnitude of different forms of violence against children in different settings across Africa, nonetheless advances a series of recommendations in order to further solidify the improvements already made in child welfare, including reinforcing national legal and policy frameworks to prohibit violence against children in all its forms and establishing clear prevention and response mechanisms, and strengthening the development of effective protection systems.

It also recommends building and supporting effective national programmes and services to protect children from violence; developing evidence-based advocacy strategies and implementing a pan-African campaign to change attitudes and behaviour that condone violence against children in African society; and ensuring co-ordination and synergy amongst national, pan-African and global actors – a crucial step for strengthening child protection systems that are comprehensive, well-coordinated and adequately resourced.

In a press release marking the report’s launch, Marta Santos Pais, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, underscored that freedom from violence remains “critical to achieving a sustainable future in which every child can grow up healthy, resilient, well-educated, culturally sensitive and effectively protected.”

“Ensuring that the protection of children from violence remains at the heart of the post-2015 development agenda,” Ms. Pais declared. “It’s crucial to safeguard children’s safety and development, to achieve social progress across all regions, and to build a world fit for all children.”

**Ending exclusion, empowering youth key to bridging social divide in Central African Republic – UN**

**11 February** - Grass-roots involvement and inclusion, especially of youth, is vital to rebuild war-torn Central African Republic (CAR), where unemployment is running at over 20 per cent, and more than 60 per cent of young people are living in extreme poverty, the top United Nations official responsible for Africa at the Organization’s development agency has stressed.

“The solution is youth: this country belongs to you, it is you who will have to build this nation,” said Abdoulaye Mar Dieye, the head of the Africa bureau at the UN Development Programme (UNDP) as he concluded a five-day official visit to the CAR.

Mr. Dieye addressed a group of young people to build a cultural and sports centre in the CAR capital of Bangui. A total of 1,000 young women and men will take part in the programme, receiving a salary and promoting dialogue in neighbourhoods across the capital, according to UNDP.

With an overall unemployment rate of 20.3 percent in 2010, the Central African Republic (CAR) is unlikely to reach its target of achieving full employment by 2015, UNDP said, citing the national UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) report, which noted that women and young people are particularly affected and the situation is likely to have worsened since the onset of the crisis.

And more than half of the country’s population, about 2.5 million people, is in need of humanitarian assistance, and more than 60 percent of the population continues to live in extreme poverty. In addition, ongoing sectarian violence has uprooted more than 850,000 people.

Mr. Dieye also said massive investments are required to bridge the social divide in CAR.

“Widespread poverty, inequality, exclusion and a weak State in a country with high economic potential: these are the
ingredients of the crisis in the Central African Republic,” he concluded.

UNDP said the Government is pinning its hopes on the Forum of Bangui, a national gathering on reconciliation to be held in March. The event is widely expected to help restore peace and to forge a shared vision for the country, and it was preceded by a series of popular consultations organized throughout the country.

During his visit, Mr. Dieye met the Head of State, Catherine Samba-Panza, the Prime Minister, the President of the Transitional Parliament, government ministers, as well as the Head of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the country (MINUSCA), Babacar Gaye.

He also met Dieudonné Kombo Yaya, the President of the National Electoral Authority, the body responsible for organizing a constitutional referendum, as well as general and presidential elections this year, and called on the international community to help fund the remaining gap.

“Just the same way that the West African region supported the elections in Guinea-Bissau, regional communities should support the…elections,” he said. The budget of the electoral assistance programme is $44 million and UNDP is managing its basket fund.

Working in close collaboration with the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSCA), UNDP’s priorities are social cohesion and community resilience; support for the transition – including the organization of elections – the fight against impunity and insecurity; and aid coordination.

The CAR transitional government has adopted a roadmap which prioritizes the political dialogue; national reconciliation; the organization of elections; support for the process of restoring peace and security; community recovery; and humanitarian assistance, according to UNDP.

**Somalia: UN, partners welcome new Cabinet, note inclusion of women**

11 February - The United Nations has urged the new Somali Government to move quickly to deliver on its ‘Vision 2016’ agenda following the approval of a Cabinet that hat includes enhanced participation of women ministers.

“The participation of women, youth and minority groups and the commitment to work in an accountable way will remain vital as we move forward,” said a statement issued by the UN, African Union (AU), European Union, Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the United Kingdom and the United States after the Cabinet was approved yesterday by Somalia’s Parliament.

The statement said “2015 is a critical year to ensure continued success on the road to sustained security and stability in Somalia and to improve the lives of ordinary Somalis.”

The UN Security Council yesterday issued a statement to the media welcoming the Cabinet and “stressed the need for the Federal Government to accelerate delivery of the milestones of the Federal Government’s ‘Vision 2016.’”

The 15 members of the Security Council “underlined the importance of the new political leadership in Somalia quickly delivering in priority areas, including the passage of key legislation to establish the National Independent Electoral Commission, progress towards the establishment and strengthening of interim regional administrations, the stabilization of areas recovered from Al Shabaab, and resuming the implementation and review of the Provisional Constitution, without further delay.”

Both statements welcomed the enhanced participation of women in the new Government.

The statement by the international partners also condemned the murder on Monday of a Member of Parliament, Abdullahi
Qayad Barre, who was killed by armed men in Mogadishu while on his way to Parliament.

**UN envoy and Syrian President discuss political solution to conflict, Aleppo fighting ‘freeze’**

11 February - After two days of intensive discussions in Damascus with Syrian authorities, including a long meeting with President Bashar Al-Assad today, the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for the country, Staffan de Mistura, stressed the importance of reducing the violence of the conflict to protect the Syrian people and to increase unimpeded access of humanitarian assistance to all those in need.

“The heart of my mission is to try and facilitate any political process that can lead to a political solution to a conflict which has lasted too long and which has no military solution,” said Mr. de Mistura. “I have also, as you can imagine, discussed the issue of the United Nations proposal for a ‘freeze’ to reach a reduction of the violence in the city of Aleppo.”

The Special Envoy said he could not currently elaborate on the details of the content of his discussions, bound as he is to report first to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and then to the Security Council, in a special meeting on 17 February.

Mr. de Mistura has since November been urging support for a local ‘freeze’ to the conflict around Aleppo, so that the growing threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) may be fully confronted and to create an environment whereby humanitarian aid could reach the beleaguered population.

“Our hope is that Aleppo could be a signal of goodwill, a confidence-building measure which could and can facilitate the restarting of a political process with a clear political horizon,” he said in January, stressing the need for parties to bear in mind the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, while also unconditionally adjusting their aspirations in line with new factors in the reality of the area, such as the presence of ISIL forces.

Mr. de Mistura believes Aleppo provides the best example of where the conflict could be halted locally, as fighting between opposition and Government forces had ground to a stalemate amid the steady advance of ISIL militants.

According to the UN, the conflict in Syria has sparked the largest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, with 7.6 million people displaced and 3.2 million refugees created by the conflict, as well as a further 12.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Well over 150,000 people have died in the conflict, with at least 680,000 injured. Several rounds of UN-mediated peace talks in Geneva among the parties last year ended without a settlement and the Organization has since been reiterating the need to press ahead with political negotiations to achieve the aims of the Geneva Communiqué.

**‘Enormous scale’ of Mediterranean migration tragedy emerges – up to 300 dead, says UN official**

11 February - With the number of refugees and migrants confirmed missing following their attempt to cross the Mediterranean into Europe revised from a total of 29 dead to as many as 300, the United Nations refugee agency said today that it is shocked by the new information emerging on the scale of the maritime tragedy.

“This is a tragedy on an enormous scale and a stark reminder that more lives could be lost if those seeking safety are left at the mercy of the sea,” said Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR Europe Bureau Director.

UNHCR gathered reports from the Italian Coast Guard and survivors who arrived in Lampedusa, discovering that initial reports widely underestimated the number of people involved in the crossing attempt.
A single dinghy was originally found, by the Italian Coast Guard and a merchant vessel on Sunday. 29 people from that craft died, while 110 survived. The migrants, mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa, left the coast of Libya in four dinghies on Saturday, drifting without food or water.

Three of the four dinghies have now been recovered. On one, only two out of 107 passengers survived while on another seven out of 109 survived. The fourth dinghy was reported to UNHCR by survivors and is still missing. The youngest of the missing is a 12 year old boy.

UNHCR reiterates its concern about the lack of a strong search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean. Europe's Triton operation, which is run by the European border protection agency Frontex, is not focused on search and rescue and is not providing the necessary tools to cope with the scale of the crises.

“Saving lives should be our top priority. Europe cannot afford to do too little too late,” said Mr. Cochetel.

At least 218,000 people, including both migrants and refugees have crossed the Mediterranean in 2014 and this trend is expected to continue in 2015.