Central Africa still burdened by multidimensional crisis, Security Council told

11 June - The Central Africa region is still facing many challenges, including an economic crisis aggravated by the drop in oil prices, rising youth unemployment, and terrorist activities, as well as the cross-border impact of crises in Central African Republic (CAR) and Burundi, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for the sub-region warned today.

“The crisis in the CAR continued to have regional and multidimensional consequences with almost half a million refugees; ongoing gross violations of human rights; growing gang-related criminality; and environmental degradation in refugee areas,” Abdoulaye Bathily said, briefing the Security Council about the situation for the first time since November 2014.

In a Presidential Statement adopted during the same meeting, the Council echoed Mr. Bathily’s concerns, while welcoming the holding of the Bangui Forum for National Reconciliation from May 4 to 11, which ended “with the signing of a number of key documents, including a Republican pact for peace, national reconciliation and reconstruction, as well as with an agreement on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR).

In the Lake Chad Basin, “the dire humanitarian situation, resulting from attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram, continued to affect the population, including in Cameroon and Chad”, stressed Mr. Bathily, who also heads the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA).

The Security Council Presidential Statement condemned the increase in attacks perpetrated by the terrorist group and expresses concern that its activities continue to have adverse humanitarian impact: along with the displacement of an
estimated 74,000 Nigerians into neighbouring Cameroon, there are 96,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Cameroon, and in Chad almost 20,000 Nigerian refugees, 8,500 returnees and 14,500 IDPs.

“Recent attacks by the terrorist group highlight the need for the affected States to remain vigilant and engaged”, the Special Representative warned.

Further, over the past six months, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) also continued to pose a threat to regional security, particularly in CAR and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, noted UNOCA chief. In spite of ongoing efforts, the number of civilians abductions unfortunately increased, he said, adding that more than 200,000 persons still remain displaced across the region.

Nonetheless, the surrender of senior LRA commander Dominic Ongwen in January 2015, and his subsequent transfer to the International Criminal Court, marks a significant step forward with regard to criminal justice, stated Mr. Bathily. “Ongwen’s removal from the battlefield sends a strong message to remaining LRA fighters and signifies that international efforts to combat the group are bearing fruit.”

UNOCA, as well as UN political and peacekeeping missions in the region, were urged by the Council to enhance these efforts in support of the implementation of the United Nations Regional Strategy to Address the Threat and Impact of the Activities of the LRA.

In coordination with the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA), UNOCA also continued working to consolidate their activities in combatting maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea, the Special Representative assured, as well as working on a sub-regional strategy to tackle the growing phenomenon of poaching in central Africa.

Gaza: UN envoy welcomes temporary opening of Rafah crossing

"I hope that the security conditions will allow for this decision to be extended and that Rafah can be open on a regular basis,” Mr. Mladenov declared. “The need for the full lifting of all closures however remains. A sustainable solution to address the situation also requires the return of control of the crossings in Gaza to the Palestinian Authority.”

Currently, Palestinians in Gaza can enter and exit the Strip through three potential access points – the Rafah Crossing connecting Gaza with Egypt and the Kerem Shalom and Erez crossings connecting into Israel. Two other crossings – at Sufa and Karni – have been closed.

The closures have only added to Gaza’s woes as the enclave seeks to rebuild from the destruction caused by last summer’s 51-day conflict and remains heavily reliant on imported construction materials.

During a recent visit to Gaza at the end of April, Mr. Mladenov pledged ongoing UN support for efforts to reconstruct the war-ravaged enclave, lift Israel’s years-long blockade there and help strengthen Palestinian unity.

Today, he reiterated the Organization’s call for a return to dialogue in the region and measures to build a viable two-state solution.

“A permanent end to the suffering of the Palestinian people can only be achieved through an end to occupation and
realization of the two-state solution in which Gaza is an integral part of the Palestinian state.”

**In Kyrgyzstan, UN chief celebrates parliaments as beacon of human rights efforts**

11 June - The world’s parliaments play a “fundamental” role in ensuring human rights protections for the global citizenry and, as a result, must reflect international human rights standards in their legislation, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon affirmed today as he continued on his Central Asian trip with a visit to Kyrgyzstan.

Addressing reporters in the country’s capital of Bishkek earlier this morning alongside the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Almazbek Atambaev, the Secretary-General lauded the “great progress” made by Kyrgyzstan in transitioning to parliamentary democracy since the country’s period of ethnic tensions in 2010.

The country and its Government, he said, now had “strong plans” to promote inter-ethnic harmony and protect the rights of all, including minorities, especially as it continued down the road of judicial and law enforcement reforms.

Similarly, during his address to the International Conference on Development of Parliamentarianism, Mr. Ban equally celebrated the “critical” role played by Kyrgyzstan’s Parliament, the Jogorku Kenesh, in building a renewed country.

“Despite the enormous challenge of creating a sustainable parliamentary system in a country recovering from conflict, you have achieved much progress,” he said.

“Kyrgyzstan adopted a progressive constitution with clear separation of powers, guarantees of fundamental human rights and respect for the rule of law,” continued Mr. Ban. “The country underscored that commitment by ratifying a number of international human rights treaties.”

As an institutional beacon of democracy, parliaments play a fundamental role in guarding human rights – in Kyrgyzstan as elsewhere – regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, religion or any other status, the Secretary-General added.

“There can be no peace without development. Likewise, there can be no development without peace and security. And neither is possible without respect for human rights,” he stated. “In that spirit, I urge you to complete the unfinished agenda of judicial and law enforcement reforms, and reinforce Parliament’s essential role in advancing human rights.”

Arriving in the western Kyrgyz city of Osh later in the day, the Secretary-General also hailed the role played by civil society organizations in acting as “a bridge between the people and the authorities” and as a foundation for democratic and human rights principles across the world.

In 2010, Osh was the epicentre of violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks which ultimately consumed large swathes of the country.

At least 300,000 people became internally displaced following the violence, while nearly 100,000 others fled into neighbouring Uzbekistan. The Kyrgyz health ministry recorded a death toll of almost 200 but some senior officials in the country’s interim Government said the number of casualties could be much higher.

Today, Mr. Ban said, civil society organizations had helped the city and country transcend the divisions that had previously led the Kyrgyzstan down the road to tragedy.

“The work of civil society organizations ranges from speaking out against human rights violations to promoting innovation; form offering alternative models of service delivery to advocating for an inclusive society; from facilitating the work of the Government to sometimes challenging it,” he declared in remarks delivered to local civil society representatives.
Decline in Ebola cases stalls in West Africa, UN health agency reports

11 June - The number of Ebola cases in West Africa has increased for the second straight week, with the number of cases that arose from unknown sources of infection highlighting the challenges still faced in finding and eliminating every chain of transmission, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

And the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) reported today that “five new Ebola cases were confirmed in Sierra Leone on 8 June, the highest number in a single day for many weeks.”

The UN mission also drew attention to the latest progress report in the response to the Ebola outbreak at the 210-day mark since the establishment of UNMEER, which warned that “the outbreak is not over and the response efforts must be sustained until we get to zero cases throughout the region and are able to stay at zero for several months.”

In his report, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon wrote that “the International Ebola Recovery Conference that I will convene on 10 July 2015 will be an opportunity for the international community to demonstrate its continued shared commitment to the affected countries to get to zero and to stay there.”

In the latest Ebola update, WHO reported that “in recent weeks, the decline in case incidence and the contraction of the geographic area affected by Ebola virus disease (EVD) transmission that was apparent throughout April and early May has stalled.”

The update said 31 confirmed Ebola cases were reported in the week ending 7 June: 16 cases in Guinea and 15 in Sierra Leone, making it “the second consecutive weekly increase in case incidence, and the highest weekly total number of cases reported from Sierra Leone since late March.”

“In addition,” it said, “cases were reported from a widening geographical area in Guinea and Sierra Leone, and the continued occurrence of cases that arise from unknown sources of infection highlights the challenges still faced in finding and eliminating every chain of transmission.”

WHO again noted the importance of “improved communication with local communities” as “essential to understand and address any concerns that prevent cases and deaths from being reported, and chains of transmission from being detected.”

To date, the Ebola outbreak has affected more than 25,000 people, mostly in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, with more than 11,000 deaths.
UN urges greater use of advance passenger information to stem flow of foreign terrorist fighters

11 June - A United Nations counter-terrorism body is calling for expanding the use of advance passenger information (API) to stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, and recommends a number of measures to help overcome the challenges associated with using this important tool.

“Today, we have indications that more than 25,000 people have travelled abroad from more than 100 States to join terrorists groups, including the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL),” said Hassan Baage, Deputy Director of the Assessment and Technical Assistance Office of the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED).

“API is an electronic communications system that collects a passenger’s biographical data and basic flight details provided by an airline carrier,” he explained at a press conference at UN Headquarters. The data is generally collected from the passenger’s passport or other government-issued travel document at the time of check-in, and includes details such as a passenger’s name and date of birth.

Last September, the Security Council adopted a resolution calling on Member States to require that airlines operating in their territories provide API to the appropriate national authorities in order to detect the departure, from their territories, of individuals designated by the Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee.

According to a report by CTED, only 51 Member States currently use an API system, despite their potential to interdict foreign fighters and to enhance border and aviation security generally.

Further, only 12 of these 51 countries have interactive API systems that are able to conduct passenger risk assessments in near real-time, “alerting border-control agencies and airline carriers to potential FTFs [foreign terrorist fighters] before they board a flight.”

A number of factors explain the low usage, such as the complexity of the systems and the high degree of technical capacity and skill they require, their costs and the privacy and data-protection-related concerns to the collection and use of API, the reports notes.

With respect to the low usage of API, privacy and data-protection concerns have received the most attention as potential causes, noted Mr. Baage.

“However, as API being essentially the data contained in the machine-readable zone of a passenger’s passport, the transfer of API to border-control authorities only gives border-control authorities earlier access to passenger data that would otherwise be presented by the passenger to such authorities for inspection upon arrival.”

To overcome the key challenges that API is facing, the reports makes 12 recommendations, including the development – with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Customs Organization (WCO), and the International Air Transport Association (IATA) – of plans and projects, with a particular focus on States affected by the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon.
UN rights chief urges Pakistan Government to reintroduce death penalty moratorium

11 June - The top United Nations human rights official has urged the Government of Pakistan to reinstate its moratorium on the death penalty amid a sharp uptick in the number of executions in the country, the Organization’s human rights office reported today.

The Asian country cancelled its moratorium on the death penalty in the aftermath of the deadly Peshawar school attack in December 2014 which left over 100 people dead, the majority of whom were schoolchildren.

“Pakistan has gone from zero to 154 executions in just six months, making it the third most prolific executioner in the world,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein stated in a press release.

“I share Pakistan’s outrage and grief at the senseless killing of 145 people, including 132 schoolchildren, by the Pakistani Taliban in December last year, but I am very disturbed that the response of the Pakistani authorities has been to execute just as many people in the six months that have passed since the massacre,” he added.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner (OHCHR), more than 8,000 people remain on death row in Pakistan, of whom approximately 800 were reportedly juveniles at the time of the offense. The Government initially lifted the moratorium only for terrorism-related crimes but in March 2015 ended the moratorium for all capital offences.

Mr. Zeid dismissed the idea that mass executions could deter the kinds of “heinous crimes” committed in Peshawar as “deeply flawed and misguided” and warned that such an approach risked compounding injustice as “no justice system in the world is infallible.”

“Experience has clearly shown that the use of the death penalty cannot and does not debunk violent extremist ideologies,” the High Commissioner continued. “More often than not, the masterminds and financiers of such attacks remain at large – and may even use examples of possible miscarriages of justice as tools to recruit more individuals to their twisted causes.”

To that point, he acknowledged the massive challenges faced by Pakistan in combatting terrorism but stressed that the country’s response must be rooted in international human rights law.

“The best deterrents of serious crimes lie in ensuring respect for the rule of law and due process; ensuring that those suspected of such crimes are promptly and properly investigated and prosecuted; and in ensuring that the authorities engage closely with the communities affected by such violence,” he concluded.

“Compromising on human rights may foster a sense of impunity and injustice, potentially leading to increased radicalisation towards violence and ultimately undermining the effectiveness of counter-terrorism measures.”

Photo: UNODC
‘Inaction on climate change now will cost us all in the future,’
UN labour chief warns work summit

11 June - The head of the International Labour Organization today opened a summit meeting devoted to tackling climate change as a unique opportunity for job creation and economic growth, saying that up to 60 million jobs can be created in a greener, low carbon economy if the right policies are adopted.

“Inaction on climate change now will cost us all in the future,” ILO Director-General Guy Ryder said in his keynote address to the World of Work Summit taking place during the International Labour Conference, bringing together the agency’s member States at its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

Mr. Ryder underlined both the challenges and opportunities presented by a transition to greener economies, and kicked off this year’s summit that focused on climate change, ahead of a UN conference on the issue this December in Paris.

“We are beginning to witness very clearly how the effects of climate change ripple through enterprises and labour markets,” he said. “We also see that this is different from one region to the other, across segments of the labour force, indeed from one occupation to another.”

While some countries are struggling with persistent droughts, he said, others simply witness changes in the timing and rhythm of their agricultural and even their fishing seasons, affecting food production and security, and peoples’ incomes.

“But we now also know that there is much potential for more and better jobs if we work towards sustainable development – so this is a debate about opportunity as well,” he said.

The ILO chief kicked off a high-level panel on ‘Climate Change and the World of Work’ that discussed how governments, workers and employers can help build resilience and create solutions in pursuit of social justice, productive employment and sustainable enterprises, and ensure a just transition for all.

“Young people expect us to leave behind a viable planet where they can enjoy a decent life and decent work,” he said.

Addressing the younger generation, frequent UN collaborator Pharrell Mr. Williams, the Grammy-winning American singer and songwriter of, among others, the global hit Happy, called on the international community to tackle the dual challenges of climate change and youth unemployment.

“I believe that climate change is one of the defining issues of our time, one that threatens our very existence on Earth,” said Williams in a video address at the Summit. “We’ve also got another serious problem on our hands: millions of young people who don’t have jobs, and don’t have access to the education and skills they need to get them.”

Williams called on the key players of the world of work – governments, employers and workers – to ensure that green, decent jobs are right at the top of the agenda when the world meets at the climate change conference at the end of the year.
An age-old model of healthy living, the Mediterranean diet is now under threat – UN

11 June - The Mediterranean region is undergoing a “nutrition transition” away from its traditional diet, long revered as a model for healthy living and sustainable food systems and known for preserving the environment and empowering local producers, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has warned.

Such is the finding of a new report presented today at EXPO Milano by the FAO and the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM), a group of 13 countries cooperating in the fields of agriculture, food, fisheries and rural territories in the region.

“The Mediterranean diet is nutritious, integrated in local cultures, environmentally sustainable and it supports local economies,” explained Alexandre Meybeck, Coordinator of FAO’s Sustainable Food Systems Program. “This is why it’s essential that we continue to promote and support it.”

The Mediterranean diet’s focus on vegetable oil, cereals, vegetables and pulses, and its moderate intake of fish and meat, has been associated with long and healthy living. Because it is largely plant-based, the diet is comparatively light on the environment, requiring fewer natural resources than animal production.

But globalization, food marketing and changing lifestyles – including in the roles women play in society – are altering consumption patterns in the Mediterranean, away from fruits and legumes towards more meat and dairy products, according to the report.

With products being increasingly sourced from outside the region and diverse local landscapes being transformed by monoculture production, traditional food systems are affected by these shifting dietary habits.

Tourism, urban development, depletion of natural resources, as well as a loss of traditional knowledge all contribute to the rapid diminishing of genetic diversity in crops and animal breeds across the Mediterranean, the report warns.

While Southern countries continue to struggle with undernutrition, a number of others throughout the region are burdened with obesity and overweight. At the same time, the region as a whole is seeing a rise in chronic diet-based diseases that increasingly lead to disability and death.

In this context, policy makers, researchers and the food industry need to pay more attention to increasing food consumption and production in ways that preserve local resources and knowledge. Awareness campaigns should drive up consumer demand for traditional Mediterranean products, with an eye on better integrating current food trends and consumer habits with the use of local products across the region.

In support of such goals, CIHEAM today issued the Med Diet EXPO Call to Action, pushing for efforts to preserve Mediterranean agro-ecosystems, make the region’s food systems more sustainable, and ensure food security and nutrition for a growing population.

FAO and CIHEAM are jointly developing case studies on ways to increase production sustainably and promote adherence to traditional diet patterns. The Call to Action also details a three-year pilot project in CIHEAM countries, along with special guidelines for improving the sustainability of diets in the Mediterranean.
Central African Republic: UN body urges creation of environment conducive for elections

11 June - The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission has called on all stakeholders in Central African Republic (CAR) to help promote an environment conducive to holding elections ahead of the country’s upcoming parliamentary vote.

A statement issued today by the Commission’s CAR Configuration said it had taken note of the “commendable progress” to date in the processes of preparation for the elections and welcomed the “determination and commitment” of the international and national stakeholders in implementing the concluding documents of the Bangui Forum.

The country’s parliamentary elections are slated for next month and have sparked hope among many in the international community that they may bring an end to hostilities.

More than two years of civil war and sectarian violence have displaced thousands of people in CAR amid ongoing clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka alliance and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian. The UN estimates that some 450,000 people remain displaced inside the country while thousands of others have sought asylum across the borders.

Nevertheless, the CAR Configuration “acknowledged with concern” the existing financial gap of $21 million toward the electoral budget which it said could jeopardize the “vital step” of disarmament and demobilization as well as the establishment of a Special Criminal Court.

It called on international partners to “redouble efforts – in a spirit of solidarity and generosity – to support key processes, including the elections, aimed at ensuring the consolidation of security, democracy and social cohesion,” said the statement, which follows the informal meeting of the Configuration held on 8 June.

Pope Francis and UN agency discuss sustainable future of agriculture

11 June - Addressing over a hundred delegates attending a United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) conference in Rome, Pope Francis today urged Member States to work toward combatting food waste, reducing the volatility of food prices, and creating a sense of global solidarity to ensure food security for all people.

“If all Member States work for one another, consensus for action by FAO will not be late in arriving and, moreover, FAO’s original role will be rediscovered,” the Pope declared during a special audience at the Vatican, as he cited the agency’s Latin logo, ‘fiat panis,’ or ‘let there be bread.’

“Volatile food prices prevent the poor from planning ahead, from being able to count on getting even a minimum level of nutrition,” the Pontiff continued. “Let us seek another path.”

In a separate meeting with FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva, Pope Francis underscored the importance of the UN agency’s ongoing efforts to decentralize “so as to be in the midst of the rural world, in order to understand the needs of the people the Organization is here to serve.”

The Pontiff, however, also drew attention to the dangers of market influences and speculation on agriculture, voicing concern over large scale acquisitions of agricultural land by transnational companies and governments which, he said, “not
only deprives farmers of an essential good [but also] affects the sovereignty of nations.”

He expressed the same tone of concern when discussing the state of food waste around the world, urging consumers to “decisively commit” to modified lifestyles and sustainable living.

“Sobriety is not in opposition to development, indeed it is now clear that the one is a necessary condition for the other,” he said.

**Colombia’s peace talks at risk amid renewed clashes, warns UN refugee agency chief**

11 June - Concerned at the recent armed clashes amid the ongoing peace talks on Colombia, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, today said these incidents have the potential to “derail” a long sought peace process, increasing risks for the civilian population.

“After decades of unrest, Colombians, especially the millions displaced, have longed for peace, pinning hopes on a negotiated settlement. Any disruptions in the peace process could jeopardize its chances of arriving at a positive outcome. I encourage both parties to move forward with negotiations and hope that the talks that have been taking place in Havana since 2012 will soon result in a peace agreement.”

Rebels from Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have been in talks with the government for the last 30 months, seeking to end a 51-year conflict that has made almost a quarter of a million victims.

According to media reports, tension mounted in recent weeks amid clashes between insurgents and Government soldiers.

“Protecting the civilian population from the consequences of conflict is critical to end the loss of human live,” reminded Mr. Guterres. “I firmly hope that the ongoing negotiations will soon lead to a historic opportunity for the country to overcome adversity,” he added.

However, Mr. Guterres welcomed the recent agreements that aim to establish a truth and justice commission, stop child recruitment and start demining activities in Colombia’s Department of Antioquia. “These steps open the doors to finding solutions for displaced populations and refugees in a way that guarantees their safety and dignity.”

**Coherent policy critical to tackling child labour, lack of decent jobs for youth – UN labour agency**

11 June - Around 20 to 30 per cent of children in low income countries complete their schooling and enter the labour market by the age of 15, according to a new International Labour Organization (ILO) report prepared for World Day against Child Labour which is marked worldwide tomorrow.

The World Report on Child Labour 2015 : Paving the way to decent work for young people shows that young persons who have been burdened by work as children are more likely to settle for unpaid family jobs and are more likely to be in low paying jobs.

“Our new report shows the need for a coherent policy approach that tackles child labour and the lack of decent jobs for youth together. Keeping children in school and receiving a good education until at least the minimum age of employment will determine the whole life of a child,” ILO Director-General Guy Ryder said in a statement.

“It is the only way for a child to acquire the basic knowledge and skills needed for further learning, and for her or his future
working life,” he added.

The report addresses the twin challenges of eliminating child labour and ensuring decent work for young people. Based on a 12 country survey, it examines the future careers of former child labourers and early school leavers.

The ILO’s most recent estimate is that 168 million children are in child labour, with 120 million of them aged 5 to 14 and as many as many as five million children are in slavery-like conditions.

The main findings of the report are that prior involvement in child labour is associated with lower educational attainment, and later in life with jobs that fail to meet basic decent work criteria. Early school leavers are less likely to secure stable jobs and are at greater risk of remaining outside the world of work altogether.

It also found that a high share of 15-17 year olds in many countries are in jobs that have been classified as hazardous or worst forms of child labour and that those in hazardous work are more likely to have left school early before reaching the legal minimum age of employment.

The report recommends early interventions to get children out of child labour and into school as well as measures to facilitate the transition from school to decent work opportunities for young people. Particular attention should be given to the 47.5 million young people aged 15 to 17 in hazardous work and the special vulnerabilities of girls and young women.

“National policies should be directed towards removing children and young people from hazardous jobs and, of course, towards removing the hazards in the workplace,” Ryder said.

To mark the World Day with its theme this year ‘No to Child Labour, Yes to Quality Education,’ hundreds of events have been scheduled in some 55 countries tomorrow. In Geneva, delegates will attend a panel discussion at the International Labour Conference aimed at drawing a new campaign for ratification of the ILO’s Forced Labour Protocol.