In the headlines:

• Libyan parties set 16 December as date to sign political agreement – UN envoy
• COP21: encouraged by climate talks, Ban urges negotiators to ‘make final decisions for humanity’
• Ukraine could again slip into cycle of calm giving way to savage fighting – senior UN rights official
• Burundi: Ban condemns attacks on military camps; urges stakeholders to uphold rule of law
• Ceasefire in Homs has ‘great value’ in showing a nationwide truce in Syria is possible – UN envoy

Libyan parties set 16 December as date to sign political agreement – UN envoy

11 December - The new United Nations envoy for Libya announced today that the parties to the country’s political dialogue process have agreed to set 16 December as the target date to sign the UN-facilitated agreement on forming a national unity government, aiming to bring an end to the crisis that has left nearly 2.4 million Libyans in desperate need of humanitarian assistance.

Briefing the Security Council via videoconference just after two-day deliberations on the issue wrapped up in Tunis, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) Martin Kobler said the talks in the Tunisian capital had culminated in agreement on a number of key points.

Firstly, he said, the political settlement should be held on the basis of the Libyan Political Agreement negotiated within the framework of the UNSMIL-facilitated political dialogue and he added that notwithstanding the legitimate concerns by some of the parties regarding some elements of the Libyan Political Agreement, there would be no reopening of the text.

Additionally, Mr. Kobler said the participants of the political dialogue, numbering up to 40 men and women, decided to publicly announce 16 December as a target date for their signature and lastly, they had unanimously called on all political and security actors to create a conducive environment to enable a future Government of National Accord to assume its responsibilities in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, without threat or intimidation.

“Critically, participants in the political dialogue highlighted the urgency, the time factor. Libya is in a race against time, it’s very social fabric, national unity and territorial integrity are directly endangered by the forces of extremism and terrorism, the likes of Da’esh [also known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL], which are actively consolidating and seeking to extend their influence beyond areas under their immediate control,” said Mr. Kobler, adding that many participants referred to the imminent danger of Da’esh expansion.
At the same time, he warned that the two institutions at the centre of the political conflict in Libya are beginning to show dangerous signs of internal fragmentation.

“The military conflict, particularly in Benghazi, continues to exact a heavy toll on the civilian population, adding to the existing humanitarian situation,” Mr. Kobler continued, noting that much of Benghazi – “the cradle of 17 February revolution” – is now a wasteland.

He also highlighted the deteriorating Libyan economy due to falling oil revenues and rapidly depleting financial reserves.

Further, he reported that nearly 2.4 million people require immediate humanitarian assistance, of which 435,000 are estimated to be internally displaced, in addition to several hundred thousand refugees and migrants.

Mr. Kobler said that Libya’s neighbours and others in the region and beyond have expressed a growing sense of alarm at the prospect of a spill over of the terrorist threat.

In southern Libya, he said, criminality and lawlessness have reached “endemic” levels as extremist and terrorist groups continue to expand their spheres.

“But in the face of all this, Libyans are overwhelmingly united on one key point. Libya can no longer wait for peace to come; the time has come to make peace,” stressed Mr. Kobler.

Mr. Kobler stressed that the meeting in Tunis revealed that the Libyans expect support from the Security Council and from the wider international community, and he emphasized that this support is indispensable to help them to forge “peace through unity.”

The UN envoy also said that the forthcoming High-Level Ministerial Conference in Rome hosted by Italy and the United States will provide an opportunity for the international community to speak with a strong and united voice in support of the Libyan Political Agreement.

In the context of the Rome Conference, Mr. Kobler highlighted a few key points, on behalf of the Libyan dialogue participants. Firstly, he said the Security Council must unequivocally support the outcomes of the Libyan political dialogue and the Political Agreement as this would “send a clear message to those whose narrow agendas continue to stand in the way of peace.”

He added that efforts must be made to ensure that technical support to the future Libyan Government of National Accord is “visible, tangible and sustainable” for quick delivery.

Further, Mr. Kobler said that concerted efforts will need to be exerted to address the humanitarian situation and the “terrible plight” endured by the civilian population and also mobilizing international support to assist Libyan authorities to take decisive measure to combat, contain and eliminate the threat of Da’eesh.

Citing the Agreement as a “unique opportunity”, Mr. Kobler said that it is unlikely that there will be other opportunities without inflicting further suffering and hardship on the Libyan people.

“Once the Agreement is signed, we will immediately assist in broadening the basis of support for the new Government which should ultimately based in Tripoli. Through engagement with the militias, political parties, tribal elders, and civil society, we will advocate for acceptance of the Libyan Political Agreement,” said Mr. Kobler.

Lastly, he appealed to the sense of patriotism and statesmanship of Libya’s leaders to give consideration to the country’s higher national interests and the long-term welfare of its people. Their support to the Agreement “will be the first step on Libya’s road to peace, security and prosperity.”
COP21: encouraged by climate talks, Ban urges negotiators to 'make final decisions for humanity'

11 December - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today said that he is encouraged by progress of the talks at the UN climate change conference (COP21) in Paris, where the negotiations under way are perhaps the most significant and complex ever attempted.

“I’d like to take this moment to highlight, commend and appreciate the strong commitment and engagement of ministers, negotiators and all the staff who are engaged in this very difficult negotiation,” Mr. Ban told reporters at a press conference, alongside French Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius, at the Paris-Le Bourget site.

For almost two weeks, government representatives have been working to reach a new universal climate change agreement to limit global temperature rise to less than two degrees Celsius.

“I have been attending many difficult multilateral negotiations, but by any standard, by far, this negotiation [...] is the most important for humanity,” he continued. “Very limited hours remain.”

The UN chief said there are still several outstanding issues, such as differentiation, the level of ambition and climate financing, but that thanks to many years of negotiations the parties already have “very good solutions.”

“This morning we have a much cleaner, streamlined text,” Mr. Ban explained. “This is a good basis for further negotiations. Many brackets have been dropped and only a few brackets remain.”

Reminding that even though as Secretary-General of the UN he is not engaged in negotiations, he said he is urging negotiators to make their decisions based on a global vision.

“This is not a moment of talking about national perspective. Good global solutions will help good local solutions,” he stressed, appealing to all countries to “make final decisions for humanity.”

Right before the press conference, Mr. Ban and Minister Fabius, who is also President of COP21, met to discuss the latest developments and to prepare for the adoption of the agreement, now expected tomorrow.

“We’ve worked a lot these past days,” said Mr. Fabius at the press conference. “This morning we finished our collective work at 6am, and now I’ll be holding consultations with all the groups.”

“Let me simply tell you that we are almost there, that I’m optimistic, that the preparations towards this ambitious agreement have been good, and that following these consultations, tomorrow morning at 9 I will be able to present a text to all parties, which I’m sure will be approved and will be a big step forwards,” the French Minister added.
Ukraine could again slip into cycle of calm giving way to savage fighting – senior UN rights official

11 December - A senior United Nations human rights official warned today that the fighting in Ukraine, which has recently decreased, could erupt again with a massive civilian toll in a conflict that has already left over 9,000 people dead and nearly 21,000 injured over the past two years.

“We should not also forget that the current relative calm in the conflict area may be just another manifestation of the repeating pattern we have been observing in Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict,” UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Šimonović told the Security Council.

“A surge in hostilities accompanied by massive civilian casualties, which is followed by a ceasefire agreement, which is then followed by a decrease in hostilities and civilian casualties, and which is once again followed by a new escalation of hostilities,” he said referring to the current reinvigorated ceasefire agreed on in August.

“This must not happen again. The overall death toll of the conflict is already too high,” he added, stressing that the current figure in eastern Ukraine of at least 9,115 people killed is a conservative estimate, with the real number considered to be higher.

Implementation of the previous ceasefire accords is the only viable strategy for achieving a peaceful solution in the eastern Donbas region, which is key to resolving the human rights crisis in Ukraine, he said.

In a report issued earlier this week the UN Human RightsMonitoring Mission in Ukraine warned that the situation remains “highly flammable” due the inflow of ammunition, weaponry and fighters from Russia into territories controlled by armed groups.

It also reported that serious human rights abuses against people in the territories controlled by the self-proclaimed “Donetsk people’s republic” and “Luhansk people’s republic” continue, including killings, torture, ill-treatment, illegal detention and forced labour.

Echoing this, Mr. Šimonović told the Security Council that local residents remain without effective protection of their rights, with places of detention maintained by the armed groups virtually inaccessible for independent oversight.

“These are the places where human rights abuses are most frequently reported, and where victims are most vulnerable,” he added, citing reports of overcrowding, insufficient nutrition, lack of adequate medical treatment, as well as of numerous cases of ill-treatment, torture and forced labour, including women mock executions, beatings and electrocution.

Referring to lack of medical care and social services, with funerals becoming unaffordable and the onset of winter and obstacles faced by humanitarian organisations potentially worsening the situation, he quoted one in Donetsk telling the Mission: “We are afraid to give birth and we are afraid to die.”

He also cited allegations of enforced disappearances, arbitrary and incommunicado detentions, torture and ill-treatment by Government forces against people suspected of supporting the two self-proclaimed republics, and called for a prompt investigation of every reported case.

UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson noted that the majority of provisions of the ceasefire agreements reached this year and last in Minsk, Belarus, remain unimplemented, due to divergent interpretations, including conditions for holding local elections in rebel-controlled areas, control over border areas and the departure of foreign armed groups, amnesty and “special status” constitutional changes.

“These problems threaten the whole political process,” he told the Council. “The conflict zone remains highly militarized. There is a danger of serious escalation.”
He also stressed the urgent need to tackle mines and explosives that were left after the fighting and are now the leading cause of death and injuries in eastern Ukraine. “This problem requires sustained attention, through stepped up awareness-raising, education and humanitarian mine action programmes,” he said.

“All parties must, without delay, work toward a durable political solution. Greater political will and flexibility must be demonstrated by all concerned. Millions of women, children, elderly and persons with disabilities, are directly affected on both sides of the contact line. Further delays will mean further suffering for far too many people, now hoping for a peaceful holiday season.”

Addressing the Council by link-up from the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, the Director of Operations of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), John Ging, reported on his mission to eastern Ukraine.

“I witnessed the devastating impact of the conflict, in particular on the most vulnerable: the elderly and the sick: 2.7 million people are living in non-Government-controlled areas with limited freedom of movement, and 800,000 people live in difficult and dangerous conditions along the contact line between Government and non-Government-controlled areas,” he said.

“Over the past days I have seen the unacceptable physical hardships and indignities faced by people, so many of them elderly, simply trying to move about their own country to access basic services such as healthcare and pensions. People have to queue on the roadside for hours and hours to cross the contact lines, often overnight, in freezing conditions with no shelter or sanitation facilities.”

He protested “in the strongest possible terms” the suspension of humanitarian programmes and the expulsion of humanitarian actors by the de facto authorities in non-Government controlled areas.

“Closing protection, food, health, water, shelter and recovery programmes has had a devastating impact on an already vulnerable and suffering people,” he stressed.

**Burundi: Ban condemns attacks on military camps; urges stakeholders to uphold rule of law**

**11 December** - United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon today condemned the attacks by groups of unidentified assailants on military camps in Bujumbura early this morning and said that such acts of violence can lead to a further destabilization of the situation in crisis-torn Burundi.

“The Secretary-General urges the leadership of these groups and the national authorities to refrain from any further escalation of violence or retaliation and stresses that anyone responsible for ordering or committing human rights violations will be held individually accountable,” said a statement issued by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson in New York.

Further, the Secretary-General appealed to all national stakeholders to uphold the rule of law and urged the authorities to help create the conditions for a credible and inclusive dialogue that can address the deep political challenges facing the country.

“The United Nations extends its full support and assistance to all efforts aimed at promoting a peaceful settlement of the crisis,” the statement concluded.

According to media reports, the clashes between the troops left 12 insurgents dead and another 20 have been arrested.

Burundi has been in the midst of a political crisis that has driven countless people fleeing to safety in neighbouring countries since President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to run for a controversial third term earlier this year. Mr. Ban and a host of senior UN officials including the High Commissioner for Human Rights have repeatedly called for calm and the resumption of the national dialogue that was suspended in mid-July.
Ceasefire in Homs has ‘great value’ in showing a nationwide truce in Syria is possible – UN envoy

11 December - The United Nations in Syria and its partners have evacuated more than 300 fighters along with their families from the last rebel-held neighbourhood of the western city of Homs, as part of a local truce the UN Special Envoy for Syria has described as having “great value” toward demonstrating that a nationwide ceasefire is “doable.”

The Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, said “the UN’s clear goal is to reach, as soon as possible, a nationwide ceasefire,” Deputy UN Spokesperson Farhan Haq told the regular press briefing at UN Headquarters today.

Meanwhile, “initiatives like this one bring relief to besieged or isolated communities and have great value,” Mr. Haq quoted the envoy as saying. “They help the perception that a nationwide ceasefire brokered by the members of the International Syria Support Group is doable and that the UN can and will do its part.” Technical preparatory talks for the next International Syria Support Group meeting are taking place today in Geneva, Switzerland.

The evacuation operation from Homs was carried out on Wednesday when a UN team and its partners moved about 700 people, including 30 wounded, from the Al Waer neighbourhood and transferred to Idlib governorate, as stipulated in a local ceasefire agreement.

The spokesperson said the evacuation, in addition to the previous entry of humanitarian assistance on 5 December, made a significant change in the lives of more than 60,000 people with limited access to such assistance living inside Al Waer and the wider geographic area of Homs, one of the most heavily damaged cities in the Syrian war that erupted in 2011.

Also today, the Geneva-based UN refugee agency reported that the first group of 163 Syrian refugees had arrived to Canada as part of the recently announced humanitarian initiative which would provide a new life for 25,000 Syrian refugees.

As the situation in Syria continued to deteriorate with many falling below the poverty line, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) urged other countries to engage in similar programmes, in addition to the 30 that had pledged more than 160,000 places for Syrian refugees under resettlement and humanitarian admission schemes to date.

It is estimated that 10 per cent of the 4.1 million registered refugees in countries neighbouring Syria were vulnerable and in need of resettlement or humanitarian admission to a third country.

In related news, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) announced that the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O’Brien, would visit Syria from 12 to 14 December.

Mr. O’Brien would see for himself the situation on the ground and the activities of the United Nations agencies, and would try to refocus the world’s attention on the 13,500 million people inside Syria who were in desperate need of aid and protection.

As the fifth winter of this conflict gets underway, more than 13.5 million people need basic aid and protection. They face daily deprivation and brutality. Four out of five Syrian families now live in poverty, and millions do not have enough food, clean water or shelter.

Also on Syria, the agreement between the United Nations and the Syrian Government concerning the Status of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism was signed in New York this morning. With that agreement, the Syrian Government agreed to provide support to the Mechanism to conduct its activities in accordance with Security Council resolution 2235 (2015).
The Mechanism’s mandate is to identify to the greatest extent feasible individuals, entities, groups or governments who were perpetrators, organisers, sponsors or otherwise involved in the use of chemicals as weapons, including chlorine or any other toxic chemical, in the Syria as determined by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons’ (OPCW) Fact Finding Missions.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had announced the Joint Investigative Mechanism to be fully operational on 13 November, and its first report is expected sometime in February 2016.

**Women in US lagging behind in human rights, UN experts report after ‘myth-shattering’ visit**

11 December - While praising the current United States administration for its commitment to women’s equality, United Nations experts warned today that the extreme polarization of US politics is “profoundly” affecting the Government’s ability to guarantee women’s human rights, and even to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

“The US, which is a leading State in formulating international human rights standards, is allowing its women to lag behind,” said the UN Working Group on discrimination against women in law and practice in a news release issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

As regards the women’s anti-discrimination convention, the experts noted that the US is one of only seven countries which have not ratified the treaty, widely known as CEDAW. “We are of the unreserved opinion that ratification of CEDAW is crucial, on both the domestic and the global levels, in order to confirm the US commitment to substantive equality for women in all spheres of life,” they underscored.

The experts said their 10-day official visit to the US, which ran from 30 November-11 December, was particularly timely since the political rhetoric of some of the candidates for the upcoming Presidential elections has included “unprecedented hostile stereotyping of women” along with “increasingly restrictive legislative measures by many of the states to prevent women’s access to exercise of their reproductive rights.”

They also noted that a wide diversity in state law and practice in the US makes it impossible to give a comprehensive report, but what they found nevertheless pointed to an “overall picture of women’s missing rights.”

“We understand the complexity of federalism, but this cannot be regarded as a justification for failure to secure these rights, which are universal, indivisible and inalienable,” the experts underscored.

They also stressed that while all women are the victims of these missing rights, those who are poor, belong to Native American, Afro-American and Hispanic ethnic minorities, migrant women, LBTQ women, women with disabilities and older women are disparately vulnerable.

They noted that the women in the US do not take their “rightful place as citizens of the world’s leading economy,” as they face barriers in campaigning for political office and are 72 in global ranking for representation in the legislature.

Further, the experts also observed the nationwide absence of the right to paid maternity leave, and cautioned that US women face ever increasing obstacles to accessing reproductive health services, both as a result of legislative restrictions in many states and because of violent attacks on reproductive health clinic staff and patients.

They also found that between 1990 and 2013 maternal mortality increased by 136 per cent, with Afro-American women at four times the risk.

“We witnessed the intimidation and harassment in our visits to clinics,” they added. Indeed, just before their arrival in the US, people were killed at the Planned Parenthood Family Planning Center in Colorado.
The UN human rights experts noted that, despite the efforts of the current administration to take measures to eliminate violence against women, such violence is persistent and is exacerbated by the lack of gun control.

“We were appalled by the over-incarceration of women, mostly for non-violent crimes, and the failure to find non-custodial solutions for mothers of dependent children,” they said, expressing deep concern at the women prisoners’ conditions, which include mass accommodation spaces, over-crowding in cells, solitary confinement, shackling during childbirth and lack of support for re-entry.

Highlighting the “deeply disturbing” condition of migrant women in detention centres, in particular women with minor children who are in prolonged detention, the experts said that proper health care services are not systematically provided in a timely manner to these women, despite the horrifying physical and emotional ordeals endured by many of them in their transit to the US.

“We also received allegations of women being subjected to an ‘expedited removal process’ resulting in the denial of many legitimate asylum claims,” they added.

The UN Working Group delegation, which included human rights experts Eleonora Zielinska, Alda Facio and Frances Raday met with Government officials at the federal and state levels, representatives of civil society organizations, academics as well as practitioners.

They also held meetings with representatives of civil society organizations, as well as academics, practitioners and individual women in Washington D.C., Alabama, Oregon and Texas and will present a comprehensive report with its conclusions and recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council in June 2015.

Special Rapporteurs, who are not UN staff and are independent from any government or organization, are appointed by and report to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council.

As Central African Republic prepares to vote, UN rights chief warns of inter-communal strife

11 December - On the eve of a constitutional referendum meant to help stabilize the Central African Republic (CAR) amid conflict between Muslims and Christians, the United Nations human rights chief today voiced deep concern at mounting sectarian language, warning of possible “dramatic consequences” given the highly volatile pre-election atmosphere.

“I strongly condemn the incitement of violence and provocation of inter-communal tensions by some armed groups and political leaders. This could very easily lead to yet another wave of targeted attacks in the country,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said in a statement.

“I am also deeply concerned that all sides, including the authorities at the highest level, are calling for vigilante groups to be established. The increasing tendency among Christians and Muslims to organize in self-defence groups and to exclude any person not considered part of their community is deeply worrying.”

The referendum is taking place this weekend, and Mr. Zeid deplored the violent incidents that erupted in Bangui, the capital, earlier this week after the list of eligible candidates for the presidential elections, to be held later this month, was made public.

He called upon the State authorities to take urgent action to stem incitement to violence and hatred, and ensure accountability for human rights violations.

A new wave of inter-communal violence erupted in September, killing at least 130 people, injuring 430 others, and triggering an 18 per cent increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs) to 447,500, after nine months of relative calm saw
IDPs returning home following over two years of fighting between the mainly Muslim Séléka and mainly Christian anti-Balaka groups.

Eleven cases of sexual and gender-based violence have also been documented since then and attacks against UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSCA) personnel and international troops are mounting, according to the statement.

Mr. Zeid noted that last month’s visit to Bangui by Pope Francis and his call for inter-communal reconciliation “has created a momentum which could overturn the downward spiral of the past months.”

He praised the efforts to promote inter-religious dialogue by Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyamene-Gbangou, President of the Evangelical Alliance, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, President of the Islamic Council, and Monseigneur Dieudonné Zapalainga, Archbishop of Bangui.

“To bring the country back to peace and stability, one of the key priorities, if not the most important, is to put an end to the long prevailing impunity,” he stressed. “The lack of accountability undermines the authority of State institutions and feeds the violence, by empowering armed groups and encouraging citizens to take justice into their own hands.” he added, calling for the establishment of a special criminal court.

Mr. Zeid urged the State authorities to reform the national army and investigate the mounting number of human rights violations it has been accused of, including alleged involvement in a mass prison escape and the killing of at least four Muslim civilians between 26 September and 17 October.

A first human rights report issued by MINUSCA and Mr. Zeid’s office today showed that, despite a general improvement between September 2014 and May 2015, human rights violations continued on a daily basis. At least 785 people, including 88 women and 43 children, were victims of abuse, including killings, torture, abductions, sexual violence and hostage-taking.

International Mountain Day: new UN study reveals disturbing hunger trends in highland areas

11 December - While global hunger figures are declining, the number of food insecure people in mountain areas rose 30 per cent over 12 years to nearly 330 million, according to a study released today by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and a partner agency on International Mountain Day.

“That means that one in three mountain people, both urban and rural, in developing countries faced hunger and malnutrition, compared to one out of nine people globally,” FAO said.

The UN General Assembly designated 11 December International Mountain Day and as of 2003, it has been observed every year to create awareness about the importance of mountains to life, to highlight the opportunities and constraints in mountain development and to build alliances that will bring positive change to mountain peoples and environments around the world.

This year, FAO, together with Mountain Partnership, mapped the vulnerability of highland peoples to food insecurity and found that the number of food insecure people living in mountain regions in developing countries grew to nearly 329 million in 2012, up from 253 million in 2000, even though the overall population of the world’s mountain peoples increased only by 16 per cent.

Mountain zones cover 22 per cent of the earth’s land surface and are home to 13 per cent of the human population, according to FAO.

“The living conditions of mountain peoples have deteriorated and their vulnerability to hunger has increased. Harsh climates
and the difficult, often inaccessible terrain, combined with political and social marginality certainly contribute to making mountain peoples particularly vulnerable to food shortages,” said FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva.

The study showed that the growing profile of hunger is not the only challenge that mountain-dwellers face, reporting that 90 per cent of them live in developing countries where most are dependent on subsistence agriculture, working in fragile ecosystems that are easily affected by climate change.

Almost 59 million mountain people in Africa were identified as vulnerable to food insecurity in 2000, a number that increased 46 per cent to 86 million by 2012, according to the study. The majority of vulnerable people are located in eastern Africa.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the total number of vulnerable mountain people increased by 22 per cent from more than 39 million in 2000 to nearly 48 million in 2012. However, the proportion of vulnerable mountain populations remained quite stable, it said.

Mountain populations of Asia are particularly prone to vulnerability, the study showed.

Results of the study show that more than 192 million people were considered vulnerable to food insecurity in 2012, an increase of over 40 million people, or 26 per cent, from 2000.

In mountain areas, where family farming and smallholder agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry are the prevailing farming systems, investments and technical support are needed to diversify and boost mountain production systems through, for example, integrating indigenous knowledge and traditions with modern techniques.

Promoting mountain products is the theme chosen for this year’s celebration of Mountain Day, according to FAO, which said globalization offers opportunities for mountain producers to market their high quality mountain products, such as coffee, cocoa, honey, herbs, spices and handicrafts.

**Ongoing border blockade on imports sends food and fuel prices ‘skyrocketing’ in Nepal – UN**

11 December - Warning of severe shortages of food and fuel now plaguing Nepal caused by the ongoing major disruptions in imports across its southern border with India, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) today predicted extreme hardship for the land-locked country if prices of basic food staples continue to soar.

“If trade remains restricted and food prices continue to rise, a serious humanitarian crisis will be hard to avoid,” said David Kaatrud, WFP Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific in a news release.

According to WFP, the border blockage that began in September to protest Nepal’s new constitution has already slowed trade, causing a food and fuel shortage since the last three months.

“People are struggling to feed their families as the cost of food rises beyond their grasp. Coming so soon after the recent earthquake, this crisis could severely test people’s ability to cope, and may lead to an increase in malnutrition,” said Mr. Kaatrud.

According to WFP, Nepal is heavily dependent on imports, especially from India and the border disruptions have led to the cost of some basic food staples, such as cooking oil, rice, lentils, sugar and salt to soar in recent weeks as supplies dwindled.

The UN agency said that the average price of lentils, pulses and cooking oil have increased by more than 30 percent since August and more than 50 percent since last year and in remote areas, including parts of the country worst hit by the 25 April earthquake and aftershocks, the price of food commodities has increased even further, doubling in some cases.
In Gorkha, a community close to the earthquake epicentre, a 25 kg sack of rice now costs 5,000 Nepali Rupees ($46.80) – up from 2,500 Rupees ($23.40) before the blockade and the price of cooking oil and sugar has also doubled in the town, said WFP.

Additionally, WFP said that the price of fuel also increased across the country, with the cost of refilling a cylinder of cooking gas costing from 1,500 Nepali rupees ($14.00) before the blockade to between 8,000 and 11,000 rupees ($75 and $102) today, an increase of as much as 630 per cent.

At the same time, the UN agency noted that a quarter of people in Nepal on less than $1.25 a day, and on average spend 60 percent of their income on food, which means that most have only a limited capacity to cope with shocks such as disasters and soared food prices.

“WFP urges all sides to once again allow the free flow of food items across the border to ensure that Nepalis, especially those who struggle on a day-to-day basis to feed their families, are not the ones who bear the burden of this protracted political stand-off,” said Kaatrud.

Moreover, WFP warned that the fuel shortage caused by the border blockages was hampering earthquake relief efforts and that there have been severe delays in WFP efforts to provide food assistance to more than 224,000 earthquake-affected people.

The agency said that it could only deliver one-third of food supplies earmarked for distribution by the end of the year and added that the delivery of non-food items, such as medicine and shelter material for winter, has also been severely affected by the dispute.

Earlier this week, UN agencies in a joint statement warned that the “health and humanitarian implications of the present scenario are grave” in Nepal and urged all sides to ease an effective blockade of the country’s southern border.

**Viet Nam: UN rights office alarmed at series of attacks against human rights defenders**

According to Ms. Shamdasani, the third such incident took place since September, when Mr. Nguyen Van Dai, a prominent lawyer and three other human rights defenders were beaten by a group of about 20 men armed with sticks at a training forum they were conducting.

She added that the police attempted to halt the forum but the 60 participants refused to leave, forcing the police to stay and monitor the session, following which the attack took place.

Further, Ms. Shamdasani said that in two other recent cases, in November and September, human rights lawyers and activists were attacked, apparently in reprisal for their work on sensitive cases.

“We have expressed our concern to the Vietnamese authorities over these attacks and sought clarification on serious allegations that plainclothes policemen were involved,” she added.
Ms. Shamdasani stressed that human rights defenders are entitled to particular protection by State authorities under international human rights law.

“The relevant standards are outlined in the Declaration on the right and responsibility of individuals, groups and organs of society to promote and protect universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly by consensus in 1999,” Ms. Shamdasani concluded.