World Bank: despite ‘fragile’ global economy, low oil prices to spur recovery in developing countries

13 January - After an economically disappointing 2014, developing countries can expect an uptick in growth in the new year as soft oil prices, a stronger United States economy, and continued low global interest rates help fuel their recovery, according to a new flagship study issued by the World Bank Group.

The biannual Global Economic Prospects report, released today, projects a global economic expansion of 3 per cent for 2015, 3.3 per cent for 2016, and 3.2 per cent in 2017 – a boost following last year’s anaemic 2.6 per cent growth.

At the same time, the report adds, developing countries are expected to surge from last year’s 4.4 per cent growth to 4.8 per cent in 2015 and then strengthen to a more robust 5.4 per cent by 2017.

“In this uncertain economic environment, developing countries need to judiciously deploy their resources to support social programs with a laser-like focus on the poor and undertake structural reforms that invest in people,” explained World Bank President Jim Yong Kim in a news release marking the report’s launch.

“It’s also critical for countries to remove any unnecessary roadblocks for private sector investment,” Mr. Kim continued. “The private sector is by far the greatest source of jobs and that can lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty.”

Despite the positive developments, the report paints a largely mixed picture depicting both the growing momentum of economic activity in the United States and the United Kingdom amid healing labour markets and a stuttering recovery in the Eurozone and Japan.

In addition, a number of risks continue to overshadow the potential of full global recovery, particularly weak global trade, possible financial market volatility, the strain low oil prices will place on oil-producing countries, and the risk of prolonged...
stagnation or deflation in the Eurozone or Japan.

“Worryingly, the stalled recovery in some high-income economies and even some middle-income countries may be a symptom of deeper structural malaise,” cautioned Kaushik Basu, World Bank Chief Economist and Senior Vice President. “As population growth has slowed in many countries, the pool of younger workers is smaller, putting strains on productivity.”

Nevertheless, Mr. Basu added, there are “some silver linings behind the clouds.”

“The lower oil price, which is expected to persist through 2015, is lowering inflation worldwide and is likely to delay interest rate hikes in rich countries. This creates a window of opportunity for oil-importing countries, such as China and India,” he said, noting the World Bank’s expectations for India’s growth to rise to 7 per cent by 2016.

The developing world and large middle-income countries are, in fact, expected to benefit from lower oil prices. In Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey, the fall in oil prices will help lower inflation and reduce current account deficits. Meanwhile, exporting countries, such as Russia, can expect their economies to contract as a result, prompting opportunities for wide-scale structural reforms.

“Lower oil prices will lead to sizeable real income shifts from oil-exporting to oil-importing developing countries,” said Ayhan Kose, Director of Development Prospects at the World Bank.

“For both exporters and importers, low oil prices present an opportunity to undertake reforms that can increase fiscal resources and help broader environmental objectives.”

**Millions of children face ‘untold misery’ as powerful winter storm sweeps Middle East – UN**

13 January - At least seven million internally displaced and refugee children are in desperate need of assistance as bitter winter snows and torrential rains continue to batter the Middle East, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) urged today.

Briefing the press in Geneva this afternoon, UNICEF’s Christophe Boulierac warned that the number of children who need clothes and winter items is increasing exponentially. Six children have already died due to the extreme weather. Temperatures in parts of Syria are currently reaching -11 degrees Celsius.

Living in tents, unfinished buildings and inadequate shelters, more and more children are being exposed to sub-zero temperatures, heavy snow and strong winds. This leaves them vulnerable to respiratory tract infections and other illnesses associated with cold weather.

To respond to the dire needs, UNICEF is delivering warm clothing, blankets, heating supplies, cash and vouchers to 916,000 children in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey of the 1.3 million target children. In Syria, where war nears its fourth year, winter supplies have reached 350,000 children.

The rain and heavy snow have caused havoc and “untold misery” for so many, Mr. Boulierac said. In the Idleb governorate 300 tents were swept away by floods, affecting about 1,000 people. Fires have started in some dwellings because people do not have security lights or have burned plastic to stay warm.

Most families do not have access to fuel or electricity, or simply cannot afford to buy it. In recent weeks for example, the cost of diesel increased by a further third, 16 per cent of gasoline. The price of fuel had increased 350 per cent since the beginning of the crisis.

In Syria, UNICEF and its partners have distributed winter clothing for 350,000 children as well as tents and hygiene kits. The UN agency is also supporting Syria’s Ministry of Education in providing fuel tanks and radiators in 65 schools for
40,000 children and 1,400 teachers.

The prevailing harsh winter and snowstorm has created untold miseries amongst the displaced population. A hospital in the area has reported increased respiratory and infectious diseases in children. And it is reported that five people died in or near Damascus due to the bad weather. Another child died, with his father and another adult in Lebanon while crossing the Syrian-Lebanese border into Lebanon.

In preparation for winter, UNICEF in Lebanon had stored 28,000 winter kits, but is saying now that may be insufficient as the number of vulnerable children has spiked. UNICEF Lebanon’s winter items and vouchers had been provided to 200,000 children in the most exposed areas of the country, including in elevated areas such as Aarsal and it aimed to reach a total of 478,000 children in the coming weeks.

In Jordan, UNICEF is providing them with winter kits and cash assistance to some 100,000 Syrian refugee children and their families. In Turkey, the winter response had reached 62,000 children, including 22,000 children from Kobane aged three to 11 years in Suruc. And in Iraq, winter clothing kits had been distributed to over 200,000 children in over 100 hard-to-reach and high altitude areas.

Despite all these humanitarian operations, major challenges persist, Mr. Boulierac stressed, emphasizing that the number of vulnerable children grows on a daily basis and that they often move around making planning very difficult. He appealed to donors for funding so that UNICEF could continue its work.

In India, UN chief commends country’s leadership on climate change

13 January - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today before departing India met with Indian President Pranab Mukherjee and Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar to discuss India’s leading role in climate change reform.

Speaking to reporters after planting a tree at the Ministry of the Environment, Mr. Ban said that he is counting India’s continuing leadership role in the global effort to address climate change. He welcomed India’s use of innovative technologies, such as the Canal Top Solar Power Plant, which he inaugurated this past Sunday on a visit to Gujarat.

“Nature does not wait for us. Nature does not negotiate with us,” he said, emphasizing that it is up to people to make sure that the world is environmentally sustainable.

Mr. Ban commended the leadership roles of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Environment Minister Javadekar and said he counted on the country’s ongoing efforts to tackle climate change – a “defining issue of our times.”

Recalling his visit to Gujarat, while attending the Vibrant Gujarat Summit meeting, Mr. Ban underlined the importance of using innovative technologies. He also welcomed the Government’s ‘100 Smart Cities’ initiative.

Calling it a moral and political responsibility, the Secretary-General said that young people today are looking to leaders to make the future sustainable for all.

“I hope many countries in the world will emulate such leadership. At the same time I expect, as one of the most critically important Member States of the UN and one of the fastest growing economies, India should lead this campaign to address climate change so that we will be able to have a universal and meaningful climate change agreement in Paris in December.”

The Secretary-General and President Mukherjee also discussed Security Council reform, sustainable development as well as terrorism.
UN-hosted Libya political talks to open tomorrow in Geneva

13 January - The United Nations is gearing up to kick-start a new round of political talks this week aimed at pacifying the deepening political and security crisis afflicting Libya, the UN Mission in the strife-torn country has announced.

In a press release issued today, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) said it will go forward with planned talks with all major Libyan stakeholders to be held at UN Office in Geneva tomorrow, 14 January, in an attempt to reach agreement on how to peacefully manage the remainder of the transitional period.

“UNSMIL views this new round of dialogue as providing a key opportunity for the Libyan parties to engage in a political process that paves the way towards breaking the political deadlock underlying the political crisis and institutional crisis that have engulfed the country,” the Mission explained.

“In launching this new round of talks, UNSMIL reminds all parties that dialogue is an inclusive and transparent process that is driven by the higher Libyan national interest, including safeguarding the country’s national unity and territorial integrity,”

The move follows a recent outburst of violence which has further rattled the beleaguered nation, in conflict since the beginning of its civil war in 2011 which resulted in the ouster of late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

In addition to mounting numbers of casualties, the continuing fighting has also 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.

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

UNSMIL voiced hope that the planned talks would manage to secure the necessary arrangements for bringing about a total cessation of armed hostilities while also encouraging a phased withdrawal of all armed groups from all major towns and cities, including the capital, Tripoli, in order to allow the Government to reassert its authority over institutions and strategic installations.

Among those invited to the upcoming first round of political talks, the UN Mission said it had called upon political and civil society representatives to also attend. Meanwhile, subsequent rounds, potentially scheduled for next week, would include representatives from selected municipalities from across the country.

“A process like this cannot satisfy everyone in everything,” the UNSMIL press release continued.

“But what is important is that the Libyans seize this opportunity and take the necessary risks for peace by joining these talks, for they will be certain to achieve more by participating rather than by staying away.”
UN rights office ‘deeply deplores’ latest Boko Haram attack in Nigeria

13 January - The United Nations human rights office has condemned the latest spate of violence committed by Islamist extremist group Boko Haram amid reports of renewed mass killings and mass forced displacement in north-eastern Nigeria.

Speaking at a press briefing in Geneva earlier today, Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the UN agency deeply deplored “the vicious, ruthless attacks against civilians” in and around the Nigerian town of Baga, in Borno State, where Boko Haram has reportedly been operating since 3 January.

“The deliberate targeting of civilians is clearly prohibited by international law and we are very concerned at reports that there were children and elderly people among the victims,” the OHCHR spokesperson told reporters.

According to the initial “shocking” accounts, she continued, were reports that girls, possibly one as young as 10, were also forced to carry out attacks at marketplaces in nearby Maiduguri, also in Borno State, and in Potiskum, in Yobe State. Ms. Shamdasani emphasized that the use of a child to detonate a bomb was “not only morally repugnant but constitutes an egregious form of child exploitation under international law.”

Just last week, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) reported that the number of Nigerian refugees seeking safety in Chad due to the precipitating security situation had almost quadrupled over the past 10 days after attacks by Boko Haram uprooted about 7,300 Nigerians. Most of the refugees, the agency added, were forced into western Chad, where many are now staying with local communities in villages around 450 kilometres north-west of the capital, N'Djamena.

Meanwhile, a spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said the 3 January attack on the town of Baga alone caused 3,400 people to flee to Chad.

In her briefing, Ms. Shamdasani said OHCHR urged the Nigerian Government to act swiftly to restore law and order in the area while also ensuring that security operations are conducted in line with international law and full respect for human rights.

“We also urge Nigerian authorities to redouble their efforts to create conditions for an effective investigation into the incidents, with a view to establishing the facts surrounding the killings and holding the perpetrators accountable.”

Asia-Pacific growth to pick up moderately in 2015 – new UN report

13 January - Developing countries in Asia and the Pacific are forecast to grow at an average of 5.8 per cent this year, up from 5.6 per cent in 2014, spurred by decreased inflation and a steep decline in oil prices, according to a new United Nations report that indicates that structural reforms and lower oil prices can boost growth for sustainable development.

Growth in the region is being driven by improved economies in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Korea and Thailand, reports the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in its Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2014: Year-end Update. The report also found that growth in the region still remains...
below pre-crisis levels.

“Despite improved prospects, many developing economies in the region face structural constraints which have kept them from realizing their growth potential,” ESCAP Executive Secretary Dr. Shamshad Akhtar said in Bangkok as she unveiled the report today.

“Infrastructure shortages remain acute and growth has not translated into enough decent jobs,” she added. Structural reforms in India and Indonesia are projected to help increase growth to 6.4 and 5.6 per cent, respectively, from 5.5 and 5.2 per cent, respectively, in 2014. Growth in China is forecast to hover around 7 per cent in 2015.

The Year-end Update also estimates that for energy-importing countries, a $10 per barrel drop in the price of oil in 2015 would translate into an increase in GDP growth of up to 0.5 percentage points. However, reduced growth in Russia could deprive neighbouring Central Asian countries of $1.7 billion in remittances.

Among the growth drivers in the region, Thailand’s economy, after the sharp slowdown to 0.8 per cent in 2014, is forecast to grow by 3.9 per cent due to increased short-term consumer and investor confidence following the end of the protracted political instability.

However, likely capital volatility in 2015, triggered by developed world monetary policies could slash Asia-Pacific GDP growth by up to 0.7 percentage points, ESCAP estimates, advocating sound macroeconomic management and macroprudential policies to address this.

On the domestic front, developing countries in the region need to bridge physical and social infrastructure gaps that need an annual investment of $815 billion, according to the Year-end Update. It outlines ways to increase infrastructure financing and recommends labour market reforms to increase decent job opportunities.

Meanwhile, declining global oil prices could reduce fuel subsidies that account for a large share of national budgets in many countries in the region. ESCAP estimates that savings from those subsidies could, for example, finance the provision of income security to the elderly and persons with disabilities as well as universal access to health and education.

“This is a particularly critical and opportune time to decrease subsidies,” the ESCAP Executive Secretary said, noting that this would not only reduce budgetary strains but also prepare governments for the near future when global financing may be even more challenging to secure.

“Reducing subsidies can raise significant public financial resources for productive investment in the region and could make needed funds available for financing sustainable development,” Dr. Akhtar concluded.

Central African Republic: UN agency warns of food insecurity amid ongoing instability

13 January - The unpredictable and hostile security situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) is having severe consequences for the country’s population still in dire need of humanitarian assistance, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) declared today.

Speaking at a press briefing in Geneva, WFP spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs pointed to the agency’s recent report evaluating the food security situation in the CAR and warned that 30 per cent of the total population, or some 1.5 million people, were considered as being in a moderate to severe food security situation.

The report – based on data collected from 2,166 households and covering all prefectures of the country between 13 and 25 September 2014 – assesses how the UN agency can best address the current needs of the CAR population. In addition, it maps the long-term negative effects food insecurity may have on children’s growth and people’s means of income, noting that displaced people...
living with host families and in camps were among the most vulnerable groups.

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

In December, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous warned of a potentially explosive situation in the CAR amid continuing violent clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka alliance and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian.

Ms. Byrs told reporters today that the WFP study had also found that those most affected by food insecurity in the CAR were poor households headed by women, displaced or returned persons, whose primary sources of food were markets, who did not have financial resources and had low levels of education. As a result, she cautioned, affected people, were now adopting coping strategies that were becoming increasingly damaging and dangerous.

Moreover, added the spokesperson, with the sale of food products accounting for 60 per cent of incomes across the CAR, a precipitous reduction in food production was also jeopardising household incomes and narrowing the scope of job opportunities.

**New UNICEF ‘atlas’ charts development disparities affecting China’s children**

13 January - A newly published atlas outlining the vast socio-economic discrepancies separating millions of Chinese rural children from their urban counterparts has been released in an effort to address the country’s inequalities and boost assistance for China’s most vulnerable youths, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) announced today.

In a press release marking the publication of *Children in China: An Atlas of Social Indicators 2014*, UNICEF warned that despite China’s “spectacular” economic development, “striking geographical disparities” continue to pose challenges to the survival, development and protection of millions of rural children across the country.

“China’s tremendous progress for children and women has been an important contribution globally to reducing poverty, child mortality and meeting international development goals,” said Gillian Mellsop, UNICEF’s Representative to China.

“Yet experience has taught us that we must look beyond national averages to see where disparity still exists so by disaggregating data, we can identify who the children are that are being left behind.”

According to the UN agency, China boasted “remarkable” achievements in poverty alleviation, ensuring universal access to primary education, promoting gender equality and reducing child mortality for its estimated 274 million children in 2013. In addition, the country’s national under-five mortality rate declined at an average annual rate of 7 per cent – from 61 per thousand live births in 1991 to 12 per thousand live births in 2013.

Nonetheless, UNICEF added, the latest figures provided by the Atlas reveal deep divergences between rural and urban areas and among eastern, central and western regions further indicating that “some children are missing out on access to health, education and protection services.”

In 2013, for instance, the under-five mortality rate was 1.4 times higher in rural areas than urban ones while infant mortality was 1.2 times higher. Moreover, in poor and western regions, children are more likely to be undernourished and have less access to pre-primary education and improved sanitary facilities.

Internal migration also widely affects children as many are subjected to hardships and discrimination, according to the Atlas.
As children move from rural areas to China’s cities, many remain unable to attend public schools. Others have to enrol in low-quality private schools and are confronted with high fees.

“In-country disparities mean that development outcomes for children and women in the poor rural areas of China are similar to those in low-income countries,” Ms. Mellsop continued. “In cities, migration and rapid urbanization present additional challenges related to urban poverty and vulnerability.”

Ms. Mellsop applauded the Chinese Government’s efforts to address the inequalities and to ensure that the benefits of the country’s rapid economic growth and development reach the most vulnerable children. At the same time, she cautioned, “the sheer scale and complexity of the challenge means that progress is gradual.”

“UNICEF looks forward to continued collaboration with the Government to reach children everywhere and make sure they have their fundamental rights met.”

‘Dysfunctional’ Haitian Parliament deplored by UN and partners

13 January - Urging all Haitian stakeholders to form a consensus Government, the top United Nations official in in the country joined the ambassadors of several countries today in deploring the fact that the Haitian Parliament became “dysfunctional” after failing to hold elections within its constitutional framework.

Additionally, the extraordinary session of the National Assembly, which was convened to vote on the amendments to the Electoral Law, has also not taken place, said a statement issued by Sandra Honoré, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Haiti, and other members of the international community represented in the “Core Group” (Ambassadors of Brazil, Canada, France, Spain, the United States and the European Union, and the Special Representative of the Organization of American States).

“The ‘Core Group’ is gravely concerned that the Haitian Parliament has become dysfunctional due to the fact that elections have not been held within the constitutional timeframe,” a statement released by the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) said.

In this context, the “Core Group” expressed its support to Haiti’s President in the exercise of his constitutional duty to ensure the regular functioning of institutions. The “Core Group” said it trusted that the Executive and all the political actors will act with “responsibility and restraint.”

The “Core Group” welcomed the Political Accord recently concluded between President Michel Martelly and several opposition parties and called on all parties to join in on consensus in the “best interest” of the nation.

“Recognizing the recent efforts made by the President and other actors to rebuild confidence in the political process, the Core Group further calls on all stakeholders to continue negotiations with the objective of forming, as a matter of urgency, a consensus Government,” the Group said.

Haiti must also form a Provisional Electoral Council in the spirit of Article 289 of its national Constitution, and organise, as soon as technically feasible, inclusive, fair, and transparent elections in 2015, in order to consolidate democracy and stability.

Five years ago this week, on 12 January 2010 a devastating earthquake struck Haiti killing more than more than 220,000 people as well as 102 UN staff, delivering a major blow to country’s already shaky economy, infrastructure and political landscape.

Originally established on 1 June 2004 by a Security Council resolution, MINUSTAH’s mandate was increased after the earthquake to help the immediate recovery, reconstruction and stability efforts. The Council then requested MINUSTAH to further provide logistical support and technical expertise to assist Haiti’s Government to continue operations to build the
capacity of its rule of law institutions at the national and local level.

**Côte d’Ivoire: Welcoming recent progress, UN envoy urges vigilance in run-up to elections**

13 January - While praising Côte d’Ivoire’s significant progress towards lasting peace and economic recovery, the top United Nations official in the country told the Security Council today that vigilance and determination will still be required to hold onto recent gains and lay the ground for presidential elections next fall.

“I am optimistic for Côte d’Ivoire,” said Aïchatou Mindaoudou, said Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of the UN Operation, known as UNOCI, as she briefed the Council on efforts undertaken during the past six months to consolidate peace in the West African country and ensure steady economic gains.

Further, she said the completion of several major infrastructure projects, the return to the capital, Abidjan, of the headquarters of the African Development Bank, and the successful organization of several regional and international events are an indication of the renewed confidence of the international community towards Côte d’Ivoire.

The Special Representative emphasized that the Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara and his Government “have continued to take measures to consolidate reconciliation and national cohesion.”

While welcoming such measures, Ms. Mindaoudou underscored that several key areas would continue to deserve attention. “We must remain vigilant and determined to ensure that the hard-won gains that have helped advance the stability and prosperity of the country is irreversible,” she said.

For instance, the fight against impunity, which she flagged as essential for national reconciliation in Ivory Coast, is progressing slowly. “There should be intensified efforts to ensure that the perpetrators of human rights violations, including sexual abuse, are prosecuted and judged, especially when the alleged perpetrators wear uniforms,” she said.

With regard to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants, Ms. Mindaoudou said that process was advancing satisfactorily. However, she said that after June 2015, the target date set by the Ivorian authorities to complete the initiative, there would still be a surplus of about 14,000 ex-combatants to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society.

While noting that the security situation has “significantly improved,” Ms. Mindaoudou pointed out that armed robbery, banditry and other criminal activities continue to present challenges. At the same time, she was pleased to tell the Council there had been a slight decrease in inter-communal conflict.

As Côte d’Ivoire headed into an election year, she said that the country would still need support to consolidate the gains achieved so far, create a conducive environment for the presidential polls, and “to conduct the important processes [now under way] to an end.”