UN warns of ‘urgent’ humanitarian situation as Boko Haram attacks spill over Nigeria border

13 February - As the continuing violence in north-east Nigeria spills across the country’s borders and into neighbouring Chad, Cameroon and Niger, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) today sounded the alarm for the tens of thousands of Nigerian refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) currently in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.

“We are extremely concerned about the humanitarian situation, as several thousand people are at present without any assistance,” UNHCR spokesperson Adrian Edwards said in a press release.

“We are working with authorities to securely deploy aid workers as soon as possible and at the same time we are preparing for rapid evaluation and response assessments.”

In December, the first results of a continuing Nigerien Government census, organized with UNHCR’s technical support, revealed that at least 90,000 people, including Niger nationals previously living in Nigeria, had found refuge in Niger’s Diffa region since May 2013. Many have chosen to remain close to the border, hoping to return to their home villages when the situation calms down.

Some 200,000 people have fled Nigeria to neighbouring countries, including Chad, Cameroon and Niger, according to figures from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), due to ongoing violence in Nigeria’s Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states caused by armed insurgents reportedly associated with extremist group Boko Haram.
The fighting, however, has spilled over into neighbouring regions, further threatening those refugees who initially escaped Nigeria. In the southern Nigerien region of Diffa, for instance, Niger armed forces have already engaged with the Boko Haram insurgents in running battles. In retaliation, Boko Haram has waged a series of attacks in Diffa town against civilians, including suicide bombings.

“This situation is being further exacerbated, as shops remain closed and humanitarian actors have had to significantly reduce their activities in the Diffa region because of the general insecurity,” Mr. Edwards continued. “At present there are no humanitarian actors left in Bosso.”

Meanwhile, the UNHCR spokesperson warned that the situation in Cameroon was just “as worrying,” citing reports of killings, abductions and violence in the country’s Far North region near the border with Nigeria. Insecurity was also making it increasingly difficult for UNHCR teams to access the border areas where refugees arrive before relocation to Minawao refugee camp, some 120 kilometres away, he added.

“The violence in Cameroon’s Far North is affecting tens of thousands of local residents too,” Mr. Edwards said. “UNHCR is working closely with the government of Cameroon and humanitarian partners to determine the scope and evaluate the situation on the ground, identify and locate the IDPs and to draw up a humanitarian response.”

Children’s education, nutrition fall victim to ongoing crisis in Yemen – UNICEF

13 February - The political and economic crisis engulfing Yemen is having a dangerous impact on the country’s youths, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said today as it warned that increasing numbers of children are suffering from malnourishment while fewer are attending school.

Phoning in to a press briefing in Geneva earlier today, UNICEF representative in Yemen Julien Harneis said that the situation in the country had become “particularly worrying” with around 900,000 Yemeni children currently malnourished, out of whom some 210,000 were suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

Although UNICEF had previously managed to help temper outbreaks of malnourishment, Mr. Harneis added that the UN agency was facing an uphill economic challenge due to a $60 million funding gap.

Despite the formation of a new Government in November 2014 aimed at ending a period of political turbulence and bringing about a full transition towards democracy, Yemen continues to be plagued by violence and mass political demonstrations.

Just yesterday, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the Security Council in New York that Yemen was “collapsing before our eyes” and that the country sat on the “brink” of outright conflict.

Mr. Ban has also voiced serious concerns about developments following the abduction by the opposition group Ansarallah of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi’s chief of staff and the resignation of the President and Prime Minister amid a takeover of the capital, Sana’a by secessionist Houthi militants. This followed a steady deterioration since the beginning of the year as Government forces clashed with militant groups throughout the capital.

At the same time, the Secretary-General cautioned yesterday that “widespread and lethal” attacks by Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and escalating hostilities between AQAP and the Houthis had pushed the country to the edge of civil war. These developments, coupled with a burgeoning humanitarian crisis which has enveloped an “astounding” 61 per cent of the population, now threaten regional and international peace and security.

In today’s briefing, Mr. Harneis provided an equally sobering perspective on the situation regarding children’s education in the country.

UNICEF has long noted that access to education in Yemen remains one of the biggest challenges facing children in Yemen.
today, particularly as the “multiplicity of localized conflicts” impacts the ability of some 200,000 children to attend school. In a situation report released in late January, UNICEF noted that in affected districts the dropout rate among children – mainly girls – is over 20 per cent.

Meanwhile, according to the same report, an estimated 7,500 children are expected to contract vaccine-preventable diseases with serious consequences, and many more children suffer repeated bouts of diarrhoea and respiratory infections.

Mr. Harneis, in fact, confirmed that the “biggest worry” regarding vaccinations is whether or not the supply chain for the vaccine against tuberculosis could be interrupted. In addition, he noted that, as a transit country for migrants coming from Africa, Yemen also remains exposed to a possible return of polio.

At the same time, the World Food Programme’s (WFP) Elisabeth Byrs also addressed the briefing, explaining the despite the “challenging operational context,” the food agency’s activities had “not been significantly affected.”

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that some 61 per cent of the population in Yemen is in need humanitarian assistance – that is almost 16 million Yemenis who desperately need food, clean water and sanitation. In addition, some 10.6 million people face food insecurity; 5 million of them are in a severe food crisis.

The Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, Johannes van der Klauw, said today that despite the political crisis, delivering principled humanitarian assistance to all those in need is possible, especially through partnerships with various organizations. “It is essential that humanitarian aid is de-linked from the political situation.”

**Ebola: UN health agency turns to foreign medical teams in last phase of combat against virus**

13 February - The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) announced today that it will huddle with medical teams from outside the Ebola-affected countries next week in Geneva to see how they can help in the last phases of the fight to bring the number of cases down to zero.

Meanwhile, UN Development Program (UNDP) Administrator Helen Clark arrived in Monrovia, Liberia, as part of her visit to West Africa focusing on Ebola-recovery, saying: “Ebola is very hard to beat, but it's being beaten in Liberia.”

Earlier, Miss Clark met with a number community groups in Conakry, Guinea, where she stressed the vital importance of community advocacy in stopping the outbreak. Her mission will conclude with a visit to Sierra Leone early next week.

UNDP is working with the national authorities and local, regional and international partners, including the African Development Bank, the European Union and the World Bank, on an Ebola Recovery Assessment, and in support of national strategies, as part of its mandate to the lead the UN system in the Ebola-related recovery efforts.

The World Food Programme (WFP), meanwhile, stressed the need to support communities once they are Ebola free. WFP is providing these communities with three months of food assistance so they can restart their livelihoods, and it is also supporting local markets and economies by purchasing local products.

WFP has forged a new partnership with WHO to support health workers in getting to zero cases by providing operational support to 63 field surveillance sites, some deep in the jungle.

In Geneva, Dr. Ian Norton, who heads WHO’s medical team in West Africa tackling Ebola, told reporters that during the technical meeting from 17 to 19 February, options would be discussed on how foreign medical teams could get involved with other pillars of Ebola-response, including surveillance and social mobilization.

“Many of the teams were ready to stay for several months in order to safely reactivate the essential healthcare services of the
three affected countries,” according to Dr. Norton. “A specific section of the meeting would look at improved safety and improved patient care.”

He described foreign medical teams as clinical providers – doctors and nurses – coming from outside of their countries of origin into a country with a health emergency.

There were currently 58 such medical teams working at 66 Ebola treatment centres in the infected areas in West Africa. They were provided by some 40 different organizations dealing with the Ebola response, according to WHO.

Dr. Norton said the foreign medical teams had been part of a “fire-fighting stage of the response” when the lack of clinical capacity was hampering the rest of the response.

He noted that the focus now was on the public health stage, with a view to bringing the number of cases down to zero.

The latest WHO statistics show that nearly 23,000 people have been affected by Ebola with more than 9,200 deaths.

WHO also reported that despite improvements in case finding and management, burial practices, and community engagement, the decline in case incidence has stalled.

In other news the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) said that more than $56 million is urgently needed to provide vital reproductive, maternal and newborn health services in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

This amount, according to the agency, will cover the initial six months of the UNFPA-led Mano River Midwifery initiative – a new Ebola-response effort that would increase the number of health workers to ensure that women and girls of childbearing age stay healthy and safe despite the crisis. The funds will also cover the cost of contact-tracing to identify all potential contacts of Ebola cases and help prevent infections.

“Our response is urgent as we have to save lives and stop the spread of Ebola now,” said UNFPA Executive Director, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin in a press release. “We must also strengthen health systems and build resilience for the future. By expanding midwifery, we will increase the number of health workers and ensure safe delivery for mothers and newborns.”

UN chief calls for tolerance, acceptance after three Muslims Americans shot in North Carolina

13 February - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has expressed his “deepest condolences” to the families of three Muslim Americans who were killed in the state of North Carolina earlier this week, a UN spokesperson confirmed today.

Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha and Deah Shaddy Barakat, were reportedly shot to death on 10 February in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, sparking concerns that the three might have been targeted because of their religion. Media reports suggest that the families of the deceased believe the murders should be considered a hate crime while initial investigations cite a long-running parking dispute as the catalyst behind the incident.

Responding to questions at the daily press briefing at UN Headquarters in New York, UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric said Mr. Ban had been “deeply moved” by the scenes of thousands of Americans and others from around the world “coming together to mourn the lives” of the three victims.

“At a time of troubling tensions stoked by those who seek to twist the teachings of faith and sow division, these three young people represented the best values of global citizenship and active community compassion to build a better world for all,” Mr. Dujarric added.
The Secretary-General’s comments reiterate multiple appeals from the UN for tolerance and acceptance amid increasing extremism throughout the world and a series of atrocities committed by groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Boko Haram.

Last Friday, the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Genocide, Adama Dieng, and the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, Jennifer Welsh, called on all political leaders to “exercise and encourage restrain and to refrain from incitement to hostility or violence,” and encourage religious leaders to “act responsibly” and refrain from fuelling tensions with any provocative language.

In addition, they recalled that the 2005 World Summit outcome document commitment by Member States to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity also includes a commitment to prevent the incitement of these crimes.

**States agree key document on route to climate change agreement – UN**

**13 February** - A key milestone on the route to a new, universal agreement on climate change was reached today in Geneva, with a week of United Nations-facilitated discussions among over 190 States ending with successful conclusion of the negotiating text for a binding treaty expected to be adopted in Paris at the end of this year.

“This fulfils the internationally-accepted timetable for reaching a possible treaty because it alerts capitals to the fact that a legal instrument could be adopted in Paris,” said Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in a press release.

“It does not, however, set this possibility in stone – it merely opens the door for this possibility. As for the legal nature of the agreement, this will only be clarified later in the year.”

Successful construction of the negotiating text kick-starts a year of intense negotiations towards the new agreement, expected to be finalized at a Paris Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC in December. The Geneva talks gave 194 countries a chance to follow-up on the work done at the Lima Climate Change Conference held at the end of last year, which produced elements for the negotiating text, known as the Lima Call for Climate Action.

The text agrees today covers the substantive content of the new agreement including mitigation, adaptation, finance, technology and capacity-building. Countries worked hard to identify the main choices, put their views forward and add more sharpened options to the text.

“The text was constructed in full transparency. This means that although it has become longer, countries are now fully aware of each other’s positions,” Ms. Figueres said. “I am extremely encouraged by the constructive spirit and the speed at which negotiators have worked during the past week.”

The next step is for negotiators to narrow down options and reach consensus on the content. Formal work and negotiations on the text will continue at the Climate Change Conference in Bonn in June with two further formal sessions planned for later in the year, as well as ministerial-level meetings that will take place throughout 2015.

“These opportunities will help to ensure that countries have opportunities to work with each other at several political levels—what is needed now is vertical integration so that the views of heads of state, through ministers and to negotiators reflects a seamless and consistent view of ambition, common ground and ultimately success in December,” Ms. Figueres said.

The negotiating text is available on the UNFCCC’s website and will be edited and translated into the UN’s official languages. After this, the text will be communicated to the world’s capitals by the UNFCCC secretariat in the first quarter of 2015.
On World Radio Day, UN stresses need to empower youth voices for a sustainable future

13 February - As the international community marks the 2015 edition of World Radio Day, United Nations officials have called for the greater participation of young people in utilizing the medium as a critical tool for shaping a sustainable future.

“Young women and men are not sufficiently represented in the media -- an exclusion that often reflects a wider social, economic and democratic exclusion,” Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), said in her message for the Day.

“Young producers and broadcasters are still rare. Too few programmes are devoted to or designed by young people. This deficit explains the many stereotypes concerning young people circulating in the media and over the airwaves.”

In 2011, the UNESCO General Conference proclaimed 13 February as World Radio Day, the day United Nations Radio was established in 1946. Radio is the most prevalent mass medium, with the ability to reach up to 95 per cent of the world's population.

As a result, World Radio Day aims to celebrate radio as a medium; to improve international cooperation between broadcasters; and to encourage major networks and community radio alike to promote access to information, freedom of expression and gender equality over the airwaves.

This year, the Day's principal theme is the promotion of youth in radio, both as a conduit for the greater participation of young people in radio journalism and communications as well as encouraging the world's under-30 population in being facilitators for sustainable development.

Ms. Bokova noted that people under the age of 30 are more than half of the world's current population yet, she added, they remain underrepresented in radio, leading to exclusion, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and entrenching inequality.

As a result, UNESCO has taken the initiative to boost youth voices across the radio waves through the promotion of workshops and initiatives aimed at empowering young people around the world.

“Young people are taking action as both citizens and freelance journalists and many of the major media companies depend on their work but we need to do more,” Ms. Bokova continued. “By giving young people a voice, we can catalyse new energy to rejuvenate and develop societies. By supporting young people, through education and training in the media professions, through media content, we can help create more inclusive and prosperous societies.”

In his message for the Day, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon similarly declared the important role radio can play for youth across the world and for the post-2015 development agenda.

“As the international community shapes new sustainable development goals and the new global agreement on climate change, we need to hear the voices of young women and men loudly, strongly and urgently.”
Mali: UN launches probe into violent demonstration against peacekeepers in Gao

13 February - The United Nations appointed a high-level team to conduct an Inquiry into the events of 27 January, when a violent demonstration against the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) resulted in the death and injury of protesters in the northern city of Gao.

On 29 January, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the investigation “to determine the facts surrounding this tragic incident.” In that earlier statement, he deplored the incidents that took place on 27 January during a demonstration in front of the MINUSMA base in Gao and said that he was saddened by the violence that surrounded the demonstration and the reported death of at least three protesters and the injury of several others.

The United Nations received assurances of full support when it informed the Government of Mali of the Inquiry, said the UN today.

Today, the UN announced that the probe will be conducted by three independent experts: Bacre Waly Ndiaye of Senegal (team leader), Ralph Zacklin of the United Kingdom and Mark Kroeker of the United States, each with extensive international experience.

The Inquiry team will travel soon to Mali to establish, swiftly and comprehensively, the facts surrounding the demonstration, to the UN.

UN and partners seek $30 million for flood response, recovery in Mozambique

13 February - United Nations agencies joined the wider humanitarian community and non-governmental organizations in Mozambique to launch today a $30.1 million response and recovery proposal to meet the needs of more than 160,000 people affected by hard-hitting floods in the Zambézia Province of central Mozambique.

Jennifer Topping, UN Resident Coordinator and chair of the Humanitarian Country Team in Mozambique said: “The floods have devastated large parts of some of the most disadvantaged and productive communities in Mozambique.”

Earlier in the week, the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) approved a $3.2 million allocation to support the most affected populations in accommodation centres in Zambézia.

“Every bit of help will be necessary to make sure people don’t slip further into deprivation and can return quickly to productive livelihoods,” assured Ms. Topping.

The objectives of the proposal strategically cover immediate response as well as a 3-4 month recovery phase that encompasses lifesaving assistance to flood victims, such as shelter, water, sanitation, food, health and education.

Interventions focusing on early economic recovery are also included. Funds will be utilized to restore livelihoods and homes; boost logistics and operational capacity to expeditiously distribute relief items; and stimulate local recovery and reconstruction activities and markets.

Limited access to affected areas continues to hinder effective response. Flooding in the Licungo river basin has caused

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serious damage to numerous roads and bridges, especially in Zambézia where an estimated 70 per cent of the province remains unreachable by land.

In 30 days, as the waters recede and access to flooded areas improve, the proposal will be updated to reprioritize the top needs.

**UN Economic, Social Council President urges action ‘now’ to bolster health systems in Ebola-hit counties**

In addition to lives lost and the socio-economic impact of the Ebola outbreak, the long-term impact on families – with at least 3,700 children in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone losing one or both parents to the virus – further underscores the dire need to invest in better health care systems, Martin Sajdik, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), has said.

Mr. Sajdik, in a recent opinion piece for *US News & World Report* underscored that the unprecedented Ebola outbreak that has plagued West Africa for months, killing more than 9,000 people, derailing economies and rolling back years of solid development gains, might have been prevented if the world had done more earlier to help improve the region’s “dilapidated and underdeveloped” public health care systems.

“This pandemic was largely preventable had the international community prioritized Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia’s weak health systems, bolstered [their] under-resourced human capacity and infrastructure, and ensured that these West African countries’ emergence from conflict and instability were better managed,” he asserted.

Mr. Sajdik maintains that to prevent future pandemics, the emergency Ebola response in the affected countries must be linked to long-term efforts to strengthen national health systems.

While quarantines, beds and medical workers are essential in stemming the tide of the toll, “going forward,” the ECOSOC President said, “we must not focus solely on a reactionary response,” adding the importance of setting up resilient societies that are more immune to current and future pandemics.

When identifying solutions for a comprehensive and multi-sectoral response to the Ebola outbreak, he continued, the vital work of ECOSOC prioritizes prevention in an effort to identify solutions. “We need to address the root causes rather than just symptoms.”

He recalled that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said that “mitigating the consequences of Ebola will demand a coordinated global response comparable to what is being provided to end the outbreak.”

In that regard, the African Union Centre for Disease Control and Prevention is commendable, and developed countries should generously support it to assist in reducing regional communicable diseases.

“We must provide the necessary technical assistance and capacity-building to make sure it is equipped with the latest technologies necessary to respond effectively on the Ebola outbreak and any pandemic in the future,” noted Mr. Sajdik.

At the same time, he said that while the international community’s accent on good governance is commendable in post-violence and post-conflict, it should also focus on adequate health care systems, clean water and sanitation, education and poverty alleviation to make the ground that spreads disease infertile.

“Now is the time to show that such pandemics can only be averted through long-term development investments,” the ECOSOC President stressed. “It should be our number one priority, from Vienna to Windhoek, Bogota to Bangkok, and Manila to Minneapolis.”

Indeed, Mr. Sajdik continued, the probability of another pandemic is high, thanks to a warming climate that will make the
spread more likely, more deadly and more efficient.

“On Ebola, especially, we must seize this moment before another 9,000 are killed. The time to act is now, when the spotlight of the news is upon us and public opinion makes action palatable. This is the time to show that such pandemics can only be averted through long terms investments in the development of societies,” he declared.

Mr. Sajdik’s call to action echoes a similarly strong call he made in a Presidential Statement issued following a special meeting of ECOSOC in New York this past December, in which he stressed “we have to get the response right,” and emphasized that pledges for the Ebola response must have sustainable impact on the ground and leave behind the foundation for robust public health systems.

UN deputy chief, top Sudan official meet in New York, discuss peace, security issues

13 February - The United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, Jan Eliasson, has met with Ibrahim Ghandour, Deputy Chairman of Sudan’s National Congress Party, to discuss the National Dialogue called for by President Bashir of Sudan and ongoing efforts to end hostilities in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile.

The two met yesterday and also on the agenda for Mr. Eliasson and Mr. Ghandour, who serves as Assistant to President Bashir, was the situation in Darfur, together with ongoing discussions on an exit strategy for the African Union-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).

Mr. Eliasson underscored the need to end the fighting in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, and to ensure humanitarian access to people in need. He also stressed the importance of an inclusive and transparent National Dialogue for the achievement of lasting peace and development in Sudan.

The Deputy Secretary-General expressed concern over continued allegations of mass rape in the village of Tabit in Darfur and urged the Government of Sudan to allow UNAMID access to carry out a full investigation into the incident.

Egypt: UN’s Ban welcomes release of detained journalists, urges fair trial

13 February - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has applauded the decision by Egyptian authorities to release on bail the detained Al Jazeera journalists, Mohamed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed, bringing an end to their 400-day ordeal.

In a statement released by his spokesperson’s office, Mr. Ban said he hopes that both Mr. Fahmy’s and Mr. Mohamed’s cases, as well as those of other journalists currently held in detention, will be resolved “expeditiously and in accordance with Egypt’s international obligations to protect the freedoms of expression and association.”

The two journalists were arrested in 2013 along with their Australian colleague, Peter Greste, or carrying out legitimate news reporting activities, according to the UN human rights office (OHCHR), and were subsequently convicted and sentenced in June 2014 by an Egyptian court.

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a binding treaty that Egypt ratified in 1982, states that ‘Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.’

Nevertheless, journalists working for other media organizations have reported being attacked by Government supporters
after being accused of working for Al Jazeera. A video also emerged last year which appeared to show a police officer threatening a camera crew working for another TV station that, if they did not stop filming, he would tell bystanders they worked for Al Jazeera so that they would be attacked.

UN rights expert calls for halt to Indonesia executions, cites international obligations

13 February - A United Nations human rights official has today urged Indonesia not to follow through with the executions of eight people who were convicted of drug-related offences.

UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Christof Heyns, urged a halt to further executions of people convicted of such offences, after six prisoners were executed in January and Indonesian officials announced that eight more would be executed by firing squad in the coming days.

“Under international law, the death penalty is regarded as an extreme form of punishment which, if it is used at all, should only be imposed for the most serious crimes, that is, those involving intentional killing, and only after a fair trial, among other safeguards,” Mr. Heyns said.

“However, despite, several appeals by UN human rights experts and civil society organizations urging the Indonesian Government to reconsider imposing the death penalty for drug related offences, the authorities decided to execute six people by firing squad on 18 January 2015.”

The UN human rights office says that the available information suggests that the 14 people were convicted after unfair trials. Twelve of the people are foreign nationals who did not receive adequate interpreting services or the right to translators or lawyers at all stages of their trials and appeals.

“Any death sentence must comply with international obligations related to the stringent respect of fair trial and due process guarantees, as stipulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Indonesia is a State party,” Mr. Heyns said. “I previously expressed concerns over the imposition of death penalty for drug related offenses, and that such death sentences undertaken in contravention of Indonesia’s international human rights obligations is tantamount to an arbitrary execution.”

He said the International Covenant provided that anyone sentenced to death shall have the right to seek pardon or commutation of the sentence.

“I regret that the authorities continue to execute people in violation of international human rights standards,” said Mr. Heyns. “I urge the Government of Indonesia to establish a moratorium on execution with a view of its complete abolition, in order to comply with the international move towards the abolition of the death penalty.”

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.
Saudi Arabia invites UN health team in precautionary measure against spread of respiratory virus

13 February - The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) today announced it is dispatching a mission to Saudi Arabia next week at the request of the Government to take preventive measures for a possible upsurge of cases of a respiratory virus linked with camels known as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV).

Globally, there have been reports of at least 975 cases of the MERS virus, with 358 deaths, according to WHO.

“New cases were now being reported on an almost daily basis,” WHO scientist Dr. Peter Ben Embarek told reporters in Geneva today.

There were also reports, for the first time, of a case in the Philippines, involving a nurse who had returned from Saudi Arabia and had tested positive two days earlier, according to WHO. All of her contacts in the Philippines are now being followed, some of whom are showing signs of respiratory syndromes, but have tested negative thus far, the agency added.

Dr. Ben Embarek said that since the latest large outbreak in May/June 2013, there had been a smaller surge in Saudi Arabia, which could typically be explained due to small hospital outbreaks. People were getting it through some sort of contacts with camels, or through close contact with primary cases in hospitals or households.

He also said there were sporadic cases in Oman and the United Arab Emirates, but it was not yet established whether there was a seasonality regarding the disease, or if it was connected to camel husbandry practices.

On why the virus was centred in Saudi Arabia, Dr. Ben Embarek responded to a reporter’s question by saying that it was present in the whole region, with Saudi Arabia being the largest, central country there. Patients in Saudi Arabia also seemed to be more likely to seek medical treatment.

A WHO mission would be going to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, next week at the request of the Saudi Government, in order to take preventive measures for a possible upsurge of cases in the spring, he said.

Dr. Ben Embarek also said there was a need to increase surveillance in other parts of the world with large camel populations. Camels were not showing severe symptoms, perhaps some mild respiratory syndromes, which would not normally attract attention.

When it came to human cases, said that those with weak immune systems were at most risk, while healthy young adults would normally not show serious symptoms, he said.

He noted the fatality rate was 35 percent, and it was not easily transmissible among humans.

Dr. Ben Embarek said that the vast majority of the cases had had exposure to one of the countries in the region. If one was suffering from one of the underlying conditions, one should try to avoid contact with camels, be careful when visiting markets, apply good hygiene practices, and avoid unnecessary visits to health centres, given that the virus was suspected to be circulating there as well.

“Little is known on the exact risk factors and the ways the disease is transmitted, but close contact with camels and consuming raw camel milk ought to be definitely avoided,” according to the WHO doctor.
Ban condemns deadly attack on Shia mosque in Pakistan during Friday prayers

13 February - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemns an attack on a Shia mosque in Peshawar, Pakistan, during Friday prayers that killed some 19 people – including Mr. Naveed Abbas, a Pakistan national working with the UN Department of Safety and Security – and injured dozens of others.

The attack comes just two weeks after nearly 60 people were killed in another assault on a Shia mosque in southern Pakistan, which the UN chief also condemned.

“There is no justification for such crimes,” Mr. Ban stressed in a statement issued today by his spokesperson in New York.

According to the statement, the Secretary-General is deeply dismayed the repeated targeting of innocent people based on their religious beliefs and places of worship.

Mr. Ban called on Pakistani authorities to bring the perpetrators swiftly to justice. He also urges them to redouble their efforts “to protect religious and ethnic minorities and to combat terrorism in all its forms.”

The Secretary-General in the statement extends his heartfelt condolences to the victims’ families, the Government and the people of Pakistan.