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In the headlines:

- 2015 presents historic opportunity to improve people’s lives, says UN Assembly President
- UN envoy says Libya talks will ‘take time’ to end fighting, agree political settlement
- Top UN relief official warns humanitarian workers facing ‘increasingly complex’ situations
- Syrian refugees face ‘abject poverty, dire living conditions,’ UN study warns
- Journalism after ‘Charlie’: in Paris, UNESCO hosts day of reflection, free speech debate
- UN strongly deplores civilian deaths as Ukraine fighting continues
- Security Council reaffirms peacebuilding as key element of UN post-conflict assistance
- UN envoy for Cyprus concerned about ‘impasse’ in negotiations

2015 presents historic opportunity to improve people’s lives, says UN Assembly President

14 January - The next several months will present a historic opportunity to agree on an “inspiring” agenda that will directly improve the lives of people around the world, United Nations General Assembly President Sam Kutesa said today as he outlined his objectives for 2015.

“As we embark on the critical task of formulating an inclusive and transformative post-2015 development agenda, I call on Member States to approach the negotiations with a positive and constructive spirit,” Mr. Kutesa told the 193-Member Assembly this afternoon.

During his briefing, he looked back at the world body’s achievements during the last half of 2014, spotlighting, among others: the unprecedented international response to the Ebola crisis, and the historic establishment of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER); the endorsement of the outcome of the first World Conference on Indigenous Peoples; and completion of preparatory work for intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda.

Looking ahead, he said the success of the new development agenda will depend on Member States’ ability to match ambitions with adequate means of implementation, he added, emphasizing that it will be critical to ensure coherence between the elaboration of the post-2015 agenda and the preparatory process for the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in July.

On climate change, Mr. Kutesa said the 20th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 20) to the landmark UN Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in Lima, Peru, last month, laid the groundwork for a universal and meaningful agreement to be finalized in Paris in December this year.

Meanwhile, the upcoming Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, scheduled for Japan in March, is expected to result in a post-2015 framework dealing with that issue, with a view to enhancing preparedness and strengthening countermeasures to climate-related disasters.
The devastating Ebola epidemic is another issue of major concern for the General Assembly, Mr. Kutesa said. “Throughout the crisis, the efforts of national governments have been heroic, as have been those of humanitarian staff, nurses, doctors, burial workers and ordinary civilians.”

But, he added: “We must redouble our efforts and remain seized of the crisis as the most affected countries face the devastating, long-term implications of the epidemic.” It is equally important to foster cooperation between the UN and regional and sub-regional organizations.

Peace and security, which the Assembly President said lies “at the very heart” of the UN’s mission, came under jeopardy in 2014 with the myriad conflicts worldwide serving as stark reminders of the need for peaceful settlement of disputes. To that end, the Arms Trade Treaty’s (ATT) coming into force on 24 December certainly contributed to arms control.

The brutal terrorist attacks carried out by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram; the murders of school children in Pakistan; and the heinous terrorist attacks in Paris, Nigeria and elsewhere have put in sharp focus the rising threat of terrorism and extremism, Mr. Kutesa said.

The UN must re-double its efforts to combat extremism and terrorism in all their forms, he said, emphasizing that there is no justification for such attacks.

On the promotion of equal rights, Mr. Kutesa recalled that the current 69th session of the General Assembly marks the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Conference on Women. This would provide a good opportunity to give even greater focus to advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment in the post-2015 agenda, he added.

Mr. Kutesa said he also looked forward to the unveiling of the Permanent Memorial to Honour the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade in March, as part of the International Decade for People of African Descent, launched by the Assembly last month.

Also this year, the United Nations will celebrate its 70th anniversary. It is therefore critical to consider reform and ways to strengthen the organization so that it better able to meet the world’s increasingly complex challenges. Security Council reform remains a priority. On revitalizing the General Assembly, Mr. Kutesa said that the recurring challenges in the completion of the work of the Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary) should be addressed.

**UN envoy says Libya talks will ‘take time’ to end fighting, agree political settlement**

14 January - The top United Nations official in Libya, Bernardino Léon, has said today that a new round of UN-led political talks in Geneva to bring peace to the country represent the start of a “long process”, aimed at bringing an end to fighting in the country and to reach a political settlement.

“This is going to take time,” said Mr. Léon, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), as he briefed journalists in Geneva.

“We are not expecting to have a breakthrough tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. There is a gap between the parties, which is becoming more complicated. There is more fighting on the ground, so we will try to facilitate these talks and to help them to reach common ground. But it is not going to be easy.”

After the first round of peace talks stalled in October last year, Mr. Léon launched a lengthy consultation process during which he travelled through the country and met with many different Libyan stakeholders. The talks that opened today represent the culmination of that process and he said they would aim to find consensus on a political settlement to the country’s crisis, including establishment of a national unity Government representing all Libyans.
“We are talking of course about Libyans willing to engage and to agree on the main principles,” he said, citing respect for democratic principles, State institutions and the ideas and values of the 17 February revolution, along with the rejection of terrorism. “For all Libyans agreeing on these principles, we are proposing an agreement and we are proposing a new unity government to start solving their political differences.”

Underlining the need to re-start dialogue and achieve the second goal of the talks, which is to stop the fighting, he described the increasing political and security turmoil in the country, including the formation of competing institutions and Governments, the opening up of new battle fronts and a surge in terrorist activity.

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“He pointed to a statement made by the Governor of the Central Bank of Libya which warned that the country is running out of time and stressed the urgent need to address all the country’s problems to avoid complete chaos.

“Whatever is affecting Libya is affecting the whole region,” Mr. Léon said. “It’s affecting the Mediterranean, the Middle East, it’s affecting the Sahel; Europe. So it’s really a very serious issue.”

He stressed that decisions on Libya’s future would not be taken in Geneva. Rather, proposals would be made there and debated before being put to the people of Libya. The broad representation of those involved in the Geneva talks is such because the aim is to reach a settlement with broad agreement, Mr. Leon said, promising full transparency.

Top UN relief official warns humanitarian workers facing ‘increasingly complex’ situations

14 January - During a lecture delivered at the Council on Foreign Relations, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator described the increasingly complex environments in which humanitarian actors work, as they deal more and more with the consequences of crises whose roots lie in poor governance, political paralysis, underdevelopment, and rising levels of poverty and inequality.

“The challenges facing organizations working in the humanitarian field reflect the wider challenges facing the entire United Nations,” said Valerie Amos, who heads the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

“How do we live up to the values in the UN Charter? How do we safeguard human rights, protect civilians and help secure a more peaceful and a more just world?”

She described some of the insights held by those working in the humanitarian field, notably the fact that breaking cycles of violence requires engagement of political actors with communities to find sustainable solutions to crises.

To fulfil that need, she called for a stronger and possibly “more interventionist” global architecture for dealing with the humanitarian consequences of conflict. States also needed to live up to their responsibility to protect civilians from harm and multilateral institutions had to be able to step in where they failed to do so.

The tools currently available to the international community were “extremely limited” despite the complexity of the challenges they face, she said, looking to international humanitarian law, which, although it provided means for tackling challenges arising from conflicts, lacked implementation and required stronger vision and commitment from governments, multilateral institutions and humanitarian agencies.

The result was not only continued danger for humanitarians trying to provide assistance around the world but the “manifest failure” of political leaders to protect their people, with humanitarian organizations forced to fill the “glaring gaps” left. Such situations increased the difficulties associated with separating humanitarian responses from political imperatives in places like Syria, Iraq, Ukraine and Gaza.
“We have a responsibility to be strong advocates for the people caught in the midst of conflict and many Governments don’t like what we say,” she said, noting that 155 aid workers had died, with 134 others kidnapped in the course of 251 attacks on aid workers in 2013. “We are constantly ‘under fire’ – both literally and figuratively.”

She also pointed to the financial pressures on humanitarian work as needs grow around the world. In 2015, 78 million people in 22 countries require urgent humanitarian assistance, in the form of shelter, health care, education and food, at a cost $16.4 billion.

“[That money] will help people to survive,” Ms. Amos said. “But what it will not do is help people to rebuild their lives, because without resolution to conflict, people will continue to flee brutality.”

Despite the dangers and pressures, she noted that humanitarian groups continue providing assistance around the world every day, and said she would continue pushing for better protection of civilians in conflict, whether calling on States to deliver on their duty to protect their citizens or highlighting governments and militaries the devastating impact that the use of explosive weapons has on people living in densely populated urban areas.

Solving the problems faced by humanitarian workers and finding the right approaches to resolving them would be a priority for consultations leading up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which she noted would be the first ever such conference.

“At that Summit, we will have a unique opportunity to reshape our approach to humanitarian aid and the way we do humanitarian business,” she said.

**Syrian refugees face ‘abject poverty, dire living conditions,’ UN study warns**

14 January - As the Syrian civil war continues to rage into its fifth year, large numbers of refugees fleeing the hostilities are steadily slipping into abject poverty due to the breadth of the crisis and “insufficient support” from the international community, the head of the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) warned today.

The agency’s latest study on the plight of those displaced by the conflict, entitled Living in the Shadows, reveals evidence of a “deepening humanitarian crisis” affecting the 150,000 refugees profiled with one in six Syrian refugee households living in abject poverty and two-thirds of refugees across Jordan now living below the poverty line, according to an agency press release.

“Unless the international community increases its support to refugees, families will opt for ever more drastic coping strategies. More children will drop out of school to work and more women will be at risk of exploitation, including survival sex,” António Guterres, head of UNHCR, said as he launched the report from Jordan, where he is scheduled to meet with refugees in the capital, Amman, and at the Za’atari camp.

“I am here to express my solidarity with Syrian refugees, as the impact of snowstorm Huda is still tangible and posing an even greater strain on their already dire living conditions,” he added, referring to the deadly winter storm that has swept across the Middle East over the past few days.

In its findings, the report notes that almost half of the households visited by UNHCR researchers had no heating, a quarter had unreliable electricity, and 20 per cent had no functioning toilet. In addition, rental costs were accounting for more than half of household expenditures, forcing refugee families to share accommodations in order to reduce costs.

With the fighting in Syria continuing unabated, many refugees are also finding themselves increasingly dependent on assistance. Jordan, for instance, has a registered Syrian refugee population of 620,000 with an estimated 84 per cent residing outside of refugee camps. Mr. Guterres warned that this places an excessive burden on Jordanian resources and infrastructure and represents “a dramatic pressure in the economy and the society of the country.”
Mr. Guterres has long lamented that international funding for the many refugee populations scattered across the world is drying up, leaving many of the most vulnerable exposed to the hardships of displacement. In Jordan, where UNHCR is making an effort to address the “critical” situation through a monthly cash assistance programme targeting 21,000 Syrian families, over 10,000 additional families nonetheless remain unassisted due to lack of funds.

“The generosity of the Jordanian people and the Government needs to be matched by massive support from the international community – support for the refugees themselves and for the local populations hosting them, but also structural and budgetary support to the Jordanian Government for education, health, water and sanitation and electricity to enable it to cope with this enormous challenge,” Mr. Guterres concluded.

**Journalism after ‘Charlie’: in Paris, UNESCO hosts day of reflection, free speech debate**

14 January - In the wake of last week’s attack against French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, the United Nations agency mandated to protect free expression today hosted at its Paris headquarters a day of reflection and held a wide-ranging debate on press freedom.

“The attack against *Charlie Hebdo* was an attack against freedom of expression, a pillar of this shared vision, whose flag bearers are journalists,” said Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as she opened the proceedings.

Participating in the event were members of French and international media, UNESCO Member States, opinion-makers and journalism schools. The programme was opened by Ms. Bokova and leading French cartoonist Plantu.

This event follows last week’s deadly terrorist assault on the editorial staff at *Charlie Hebdo*, and the subsequent hostage siege at a kosher supermarket in Paris. Seventeen people were killed in those attacks.

In her remarks, Ms. Bokova expressed alarm at the deliberate attack on journalists.

“The numbers are staggering. Every seven days, one journalist is killed for doing his or her job. Nine of ten cases go unpunished. This is simply unacceptable,” the Director-General said.

“As the United Nations agency mandated to protect freedom of expression and press freedom, UNESCO stands up every time a journalist is killed and we call for effective justice,” she said.

Today’s event included two roundtable discussions with media companies on the safety of journalists, and on the vital role played by media in nurturing public debate, promoting dialogue and building bridges.

The first discussion featured several media officials, including Swedish journalist Magnus Falkhed, Janine Di Giovani, Middle East Editor of *Newsweek*, Georges Malbrunot from the French daily *Le Figaro*, John Ralston Saul, President of PEN International, Omar Belhouchet, a journalist with *El Watan* and Ernest Sagaga, head of Human Rights and Safety at the International Federation of Journalists.

The second round table on “Intercultural Dialogue and Fragmented Societies” examined ways to advance respect for diversity and freedom of expression and how to build mutual understanding and tolerance across different media.

Participating in that dialogue was President of the French Constitutional Council Robert Badinter, Chief Rabbi of France Haim Korsia, the Rector of the Grand Mosque in Paris Dâhil Boubakeur, and Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun.

On Sunday, Ms. Bokova along with UNESCO staff participated in the 1.5 million-strong Paris solidarity march with French President Francois Holland and some 40 other heads of State and Government. Staffan de Mistura, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s Special Envoy, represented the UN at the march and joined in expressing the Organization’s revulsion for
terrorism.

**UN strongly deplores civilian deaths as Ukraine fighting continues**

**14 January** - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has condemned the shelling which resulted in the deaths of at least 11 civilian bus passengers amid ongoing fighting in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donetsk.

According to a statement released by Mr. Ban's spokesperson at UN Headquarters in New York today, the Secretary-General remains “deeply disturbed” by the renewed escalation in hostilities in Ukraine and deplores the incident which, he said, was a “stark reminder of the urgent need to halt the violence.”

In addition, the spokesperson underscored Mr. Ban's appeal for the incident to be investigated and those responsible to be brought to justice.

Media reports state that 11 Ukrainian civilians were killed and at least 17 others injured on 13 January when shelling targeting a nearby Government-held roadblock went astray and hit the passenger bus on which they were traveling.

“The Secretary-General exhorts all sides to respect the cease-fire and return to the implementation of the Minsk agreements, which remain a solid base for resolving this conflict,” continued the statement, referring to the fragile peace plan signed in the Belarussian capital on 5 September.

Mr. Ban “notes the ongoing diplomatic efforts of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany towards this end and encourages all concerned to continue to seek means of restoring peace and ensuring the stability, territorial integrity and unity of Ukraine,” the statement added.

The latest figures from the UN human rights office, OHCHR, and the UN's World Health Organization (WHO), paint a stark picture of the reality on the ground for millions of people living in the regions directly affected by the conflict, such as Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Dnipropetrovsk, where hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain trapped.

In late February 2014, the situation in Ukraine transcended what was initially seen as an internal Ukrainian political crisis into violent clashes in parts of the country, later reaching full-scale conflict in the east. Despite the Minsk cease-fire, the situation in Ukraine has since continuously deteriorated, with serious consequences for the country's unity, territorial integrity and stability.

From mid-April to 12 December, at least 4,707 people were killed and 10,322 wounded by fighting. Since the tenuous ceasefire began, at least 1,357 fatalities were recorded. Moreover, the UN has recently reported that since March 2014, more than one million people have been displaced from the conflict-affected areas, including nearly 530,000 people within Ukraine, of whom at least 130,000 are children.

Echoing Mr. Ban's condemnation of the incident, the UN Security Council also deplored the shelling in the “strongest terms” in a statement in which Council Members expressed their “deep sympathy and condolences to the families of the victims” while calling for “an objective investigation” to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Moreover, the Council underlined the need for all parties to the conflict to strictly observe the Minsk protocol and its implementing memorandum in order to wind down hostilities and move towards peace.
Security Council reaffirms peacebuilding as key element of UN post-conflict assistance

14 January - Peacebuilding is of “critical importance” as the foundation for sustainable peace and development in countries emerging from conflict, the United Nations Security Council declared today, unanimously adopting its latest measure reaffirming commitment to the practice.

In a presidential statement adopted as part of a briefing by the Chair of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), the Council recognized peacebuilding’s role as an “important element” of the UN’s efforts in post-conflict nations and reaffirmed that sustainable peace and security requires “an integrated sustained approach based on coherence among political, security and developmental approaches.”

“The Security Council underscores that peacebuilding, in particular, institution building, the extension of State authority and the re-establishment of core public administration functions, requires sustained international and national attention, and financial and technical support in order to effectively build and sustain peace in countries emerging from conflict,” the statement declared.

The PBC, an intergovernmental advisory body created in 2005 with a mandate to support peace efforts in countries emerging from conflict, plays a “unique role” in UN peacebuilding efforts, according to its website.

Principally, it is tasked with bringing together all of the relevant actors, including international donors and financial institutions, national governments, troop contributing countries; marshalling resources and advising on and proposing integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery and where appropriate, highlighting any gaps that threaten to undermine peace.

Addressing the Council members, Ambassador Antonio de Aguiar Patriota, Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations and Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission, pointed to the vast swathe of crises afflicting nations around the globe as indicative of the need for “further sharpening the tools at the disposal of the United Nations with a view to preventing relapse into violent conflict.”

“The crises in the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Libya, as well as the risks posed by the Ebola crisis, remind us that our response must be multifaceted, carefully sequenced and sustained over the long term,” Mr. de Aguiar Patriota told the Council Members.

“Attention and support to nationally-owned and inclusive political, socio-economic development and institution-building processes should be prioritized,” he added.

Nonetheless, he warned, peacebuilding is still being not granted “the sustained attention and commitment that is required by the international community to meet the complex and long-term challenges to sustainable peace.” In particular, he added, the implementation of peacebuilding was still being deprived of the critical financing mechanisms necessary for the fulfilment of its ambitions.

“Early investment in peacebuilding activities, including security sector and justice reform as well as socio-economic development, is a necessary complement to political and security focused mandates,” Mr. de Aguiar Patriota continued.

“The Commission will continue to support regional and national efforts aimed at catalysing greater international commitment to address this challenge.”
UN envoy for Cyprus concerned about ‘impasse’ in negotiations

14 January - The United Nations Special Adviser on Cyprus, Espen Barth Eide, voiced concern that, despite some recent openings in the talks, it has been impossible to get negotiations back on track.

“We were not able together to stack the package in the right order, so now we’re back in an impasse,” Mr. Eide said on Tuesday following a meeting with Turkish Cypriot leader Dervis Eroglu.

Mr. Eide, who is currently on a visit to Cyprus, added that he was in the country to listen to what Mr. Eroglu and Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades had to say about the current impasse.

Urging all parties to do their utmost to move back to the table and to create the necessary conditions for negotiations, the envoy said it was unfortunate that the impasse came about just as he was due to brief the Security Council.

“I have in meetings with the press said that I’m a realistic optimist; I still think that’s true,” he said. “But I’m getting more concerned, because I will remind you that in one of our earliest meetings at this particular place I said that if the impasse lasts a few weeks and maybe only a few months, it will not hurt the process in the long run. Now, I think that it’s actually beginning to hurt the process and we may see negative developments in the months to come.”

Mr. Eide called on the Security Council to work with both sides with the aim of resuming negotiations.