UN delivers much needed humanitarian supplies to vulnerable groups Syria

14 April - Despite huge challenges in getting access, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has managed to deliver much-needed humanitarian supplies to Qamishli in north-east Syria, a spokesperson for the agency said today.

UNICEF has managed to deliver 43 trucks containing humanitarian provisions to the town, spokesperson Christophe Boulierac told reporters in Geneva, noting that the trucks had passed through the Nusyabin crossing point in Turkey over the past few days with supplies to assist 2.3 million people in need.

Contained in the shipments are water treatment products, hygiene and baby kits, water purification tablets, washing powder and soap, diarrhoea disease sets, and midwifery kits and the delivery comes at a critical time when access all over Syria remains a major challenge for UNICEF and other humanitarian actors.

In north-east Syria alone, around 1 million children are in need of humanitarian assistance. A further 5.6 million children country-wide are in urgent need, including more than two million children living in hard-to-reach areas with limited or no access to humanitarian assistance.

Mr. Boulierac quoted the words of Hanaa Singer, UNICEF Representative in Syria, who said: “The delivery is a significant break-through but it is certainly not enough and we would need more to reach children impacted by the conflict across the country especially those living in hard-to-reach areas.”

For information media - not an official record
Meanwhile, the Commissioner General of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Pierre Krähenbühl, wrapped up a humanitarian mission to Damascus, during which he held a meeting with the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister, Faisal Miqdad, as part of the joint UN effort.

UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness said Mr. Krähenbühl underlined the importance of resuming distributions to civilians remaining in or unable to leave the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk; of ensuring the safe exit of those civilians wishing to temporarily leave the camp; and of broadening the humanitarian response to those civilians from Yarmouk who have arrived in areas in the immediate vicinity of the camp.

According to Mr. Gunness, the Syrian Government responded positively and Mr. Krähenbühl reported that UNRWA had been able to distribute humanitarian supplies.

“Access yesterday and today to civilians from Yarmouk who arrived in nearby Yalda is a positive development and the result of dialogue with the government,” said Mr. Krähenbühl. “UNRWA hopes to build on this in coming days.”

Welcoming the Government’s close cooperation with the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Gunness stressed that he is well aware of the fact that the situation remains critical for thousands of civilians and he stressed that the agency would spare no effort in finding ways to assist civilians inside Yarmouk and to further improve the support to those who have fled the camp.

He would be following developments in the coming days very closely, he said, reiterating UNRWA’s call for all possible measures to be taken to ensure respect for and protection of Palestinian and Syrian civilians inside Yarmouk. He also drew attention to the fact that civilians in several other Palestine refugee camps in Syria also face extreme hardship.

**Emerging threats demand renewed fight against sexual violence in conflict – UN envoy**

*Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Zainab Bangura, briefs journalists. UN Photo/Loey Felipe*

14 April - Those who use rape as a weapon of war are becoming increasingly “brutal and ruthless,” the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Conflict said today, warning against a lax attitude that would allow emerging armed groups to gain further ground and continue committing such atrocious crimes.

“We have made tremendous progress in the last few years, but we must redouble our efforts in the face of new threats,” Ms. Zainab Hawa Bangura told journalists at a UN Headquarters briefing this afternoon, which coincided with the one-year anniversary of the abduction by Boko Haram of 276 school girls in Nigeria.

She urged the international community to renew its commitment and apply increased pressure so as not to lose the ground we have gained and to meet the demands of new and emerging threats. To garner this support, Ms. Bangura will present the Secretary-General’s 2015 report on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence to the Security Council tomorrow.

The report, documenting horrendous crimes committed in conflict zones around the world between January and December 2014, identifies some 19 countries and lists 45 armed groups suspected of committing these crimes, including state forces, opposition groups and violent extremist groups. Combating sexual violence in conflict remains a challenge in Europe, Asia, South America and the Middle East. Indeed, it is a “global problem,” the Special Representative said.

The report chronicles the disturbing trends of new and emerging non-State actors, listing some 45 armed transnational groups suspected of rape and other forms of sexual violence. It records how this new threat—different from traditional Government security forces—use sexual violence to persecute ethnic and religious minorities and target people based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Crimes committed by non-State actors who may not follow the same rules of engagement and may not respond the same penalties. They also subjugate women as a “tactic to terrorize” and their use of modern day technology to advance
mediaeval beliefs is alarming because social media helps them get their message out.

“Our opponents are brutal and relentless. They are cunning and even if we relax for a moment they may gain the upper hand,” said Ms. Bangura, calling on the international community to find new ways to deal with the emerging threats and warning against a “culture of denial and silence.”

Governments where the crimes occur must foster national ownership and leadership of solutions. In 2014, some countries progressed on the issue. In Colombia, the law broadened on the definition of sexual violence to include provisions that now protect survivors and ensure that they have a prominent place at the table in peace negotiations to end that country's decades-long civil war.

In its recommendations, the report underscores the need for broader efforts to strengthen institutional safeguards against impunity. For example, in the past year military and police officers in countries covered by the report have been indicted, prosecuted, and convicted on charges of conflict-related sexual violence. More women must be involved in peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes, she said.

It is also critical to increase medical, psychosocial, legal and economic services and support for survivors so that they can rebuild their lives. National and regional early warning systems that sound the alarm against escalating sexual violence should be adopted to help prevent these atrocities before they occur.

“A country that does not respect women in peace time will not protect women in conflict. Change the dynamics and change the opportunity for women,” Ms. Bangura declared.

In a recent interview with the UN News Centre, she stressed that the countries where these crimes are being committed have to make sure they have the political will and commitment. “The donors who are supporting them need to make sure they provide the resources to support these countries so that they take the necessary action,” she added.

Libyan political parties, activists conclude second round of UN-backed talks

14 April - A second meeting of Libyan political parties and activists, facilitated by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), concluded its deliberations today in the Algerian capital by reiterating the commitment to the political dialogue as the only option to resolve the crisis in Libya.

At the opening session on 13 April jointly presided over by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya and Head of UNSMIL, Bernardino León, who also updated the participants on the various tracks of the Libyan political dialogue process.

Mr. León noted that the participation of new personalities from across the diverse political and social spectrum could only enrich the ongoing discussion and overall dialogue process, according to a statement released by UNSMIL.

He said that today participants reaffirmed their call to all parties to immediately halt armed hostilities and create a conducive environment for the Libyan dialogue, and stressed that a comprehensive solution for the crisis in Libya can only be achieved through dialogue.

Participants also expressed grave concern over the escalation of terrorist acts, which threatens national security and underscored the need for concerted efforts to combat all forms and manifestations of terrorism as represented by Ansar Al-Sharia, D’aesh and Al-Qaeda regardless of motives. They also stressed the need to take all necessary steps to combat such terrorist threats in Libya.

Also, participants expressed the need for all other tracks, which articulate the views and tendencies of broad and diverse sections of the Libyan people, to join efforts in support of the main political track that aims to reach a comprehensive
solution for all political and security aspects of the crisis in Libya.

Expressing broad support for the overall framework outlined in the “Draft Agreement on the Political Transition in Libya”, participants put forward a number of constructive and positive ideas to enhance the draft agreement. They also underlined the importance of reaching a comprehensive solution for all manifestations of the crisis in Libya, including political and security aspects.

They stressed the need to expedite the agreement on the formation of the government through an agreed action programme and interim security arrangements that include a ceasefire, as well as monitoring arrangements for the removal or arms and the dissolution of all armed groups according to a national plan on disarmament, demobilization and integration in civil and security institutions.

Participants in today’s talks also reiterated that the primary responsibility is with the State in implementing the security arrangements outlined in the draft political agreement. Underscoring the importance of the principle of inclusivity, the meeting stressed the need for adequate mechanisms to engage all segments and components of the Libyan people as equal partners in the efforts to rebuild the new Libya. They affirmed the need to promote policies that respect diversity and denounce all kinds of discrimination and exclusion.

UNSMIL reports that the parties also called on all parties to redouble their efforts and mobilize quickly to alleviate the humanitarian suffering endured by a large segment of the Libyan people, especially displaced persons and refugees, and to address problems relating to the delivery of humanitarian aid.

They condemned violations of human rights law, and specifically noted the need to find a prompt solution for those detained outside the law and abductees.

**Doha: UN anti-crime conference session urges boosting assistance to trafficking victims**

**14 April** - With human trafficking now a global criminal enterprise generating billions of dollars every year, United Nations officials stressed today during a high-level event at the UN Crime Congress in Doha, Qatar, that victims of the crime need broad based assistance for their recovery.

Almost every nation in the world is affected by human trafficking either as a country of origin, transit, or destination. The victims are exploited in a range of different sectors, with some 53 per cent involved in sexual exploitation and 40 per cent in forced labor, according to 2011 figures.

In 2010, the UN established a Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking in Persons and the high-level event discussed the achievements of the Fund and the challenges it has faced over the past five years.

“The Fund helps to ensure that women, children and men who have been exploited by traffickers are identified and provided with the assistance, protection and support needed for their physical, psychological and social recovery,” said Yury Fedotov, the Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, said that assistance is crucial “in ensuring the full access to an effective remedy for victims, including rehabilitation, reintegration and redress for any harm committed against them” and in preventing “re-victimization and re-trafficking of victims.”

However, in practice, trafficked persons are frequently left without remedies or the assistance necessary to start a rehabilitation or reintegration process, she added.

Ms. Giammarinaro stressed that a strong partnership with non-governmental organizations is necessary to effectively address the scourge. She strongly urged Member States to contribute generously to the UN Trust Fund.
“The role of the Trust Fund is crucial. It is not meant of course to replace state action. States have their obligations and have to fulfill their obligations in the field of victims’ right protection, including allocating adequate funding for NGOs,” she added.

The first three-year grant-cycle of the Fund ended last December and a total of 11 projects in Albania, Cambodia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, France, Kenya, Israel, Moldova, Nepal, Nigeria and the United States received nearly $750,000 dollars.

Each year, some 2,000 victims benefitted from direct assistance, including provision of shelter, basic health services, vocational training and schooling, as well as psychosocial, social and economic support.

Mr. Fedotov said the continuing difficulties in raising money for the Trust Fund, despite its tangible achievements, remain a key challenge in providing meaningful assistance.

Since it was established, the mechanism has received just over $2 million in paid contributions from 19 Member States and some 30 private-sector donors, as well as individuals.

“While these contributions have been very gratefully received, they remain below the level of funding needed, and I hope we can rely on your support to ensure that the Trust Fund can have the reach and impact envisaged by the Global Plan of Action,” he said.

Two representatives of non-governmental organizations assisting victims of trafficking in persons in Nepal and Nigeria, Sunita Damuwar, President of the Board of Shakti Samuha, and Paul Adepelumi, Executive Director of the African Centre for Advocacy and Human Development (ACAHD), were among the participants of this high-level event.

Ms. Damuwar described the work done by her organization in Nepal. She showed a scarf “made by our trafficking survivors who live in our shelter home.”

Mr. Adepelumi explained that thousands of Nigerian girls work in the sex industry and that “many are found in Europe.” He added that the root causes of this human trafficking are “widespread poverty” and conflict.

**UN rights experts welcome Blackwater sentencing, urge greater accountability for private security**

**14 April** - The outsourcing of national security to private firms creates risks for human rights and accountability, the United Nations working group on the use of mercenaries confirmed today as it welcomed the sentencing of four former Blackwater Worldwide personnel for the 2007 killing of 14 unarmed Iraqi civilians.

The four security personnel were convicted for the shooting deaths of 14 unarmed Iraqis in Baghdad’s crowded Nissour Square in 2007. Another 17 Iraqi civilians were also injured when the private contractors opened fire.

According to a press release issued by the UN’s human rights office (OHCHR), one Blackwater security guard was convicted to life in prison while three others were sentenced to 30 years.

“We endorse the sentences meted out to the private military actors in this landmark trial,” said Elzbieta Karska, the working group’s chairperson, in the press release. “Private military and security companies must always be held accountable for violations committed under international human rights and humanitarian law.”

However, Ms. Karska added, such examples of accountability are the “exception rather than the rule.”

“The difficulty in bringing a prosecution in this case shows the need for an international treaty to address the increasingly
significant role that private military companies play in transnational conflicts.”

Ms. Karska and the Working Group acknowledged that the adoption of a new international legal instrument within the UN would provide a clear framework to effectively monitor abuses and violations of human rights committed by private security contractors and develop an independent avenue to compensate victims of such violations.

The Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination was established in 2005 by the then Commission on Human Rights. It is composed of five independent experts serving in their personal capacities: Ms. Elżbieta Karska (Chairperson-Rapporteur, Poland), Ms. Patricia Arias, Mr. Anton Katz (South Africa), Mr. Gabor Rona (United States/Hungary), and Mr. Saeed Mokbil (Yemen).

The UN human rights experts are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN human rights system, is the general name of the independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms of the Council that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world.

Special Procedures’ experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

“There can be no justice without effective accountability and redress mechanisms for victims,” Ms. Karska continued, noting that human rights violations committed by private security companies cannot remain unpunished.

“States have a responsibility to ensure that victims and their families have equal and effective access to justice, as well as adequate, effective and prompt reparation for the harm suffered.”

UN chief appoints actor Daniel Craig as global mine action advocate

14 April - The United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today announced the designation of renowned actor Daniel Craig as the first UN Global Advocate for the Elimination of Mines and Explosive Hazards.

In a brief ceremony held at UN Headquarters, the Secretary-General thanked Mr. Craig for his commitment to support the UN’s vision of a world free from the threat of landmines and explosive remnants of war.

“Along with moviegoers worldwide, I have been on the edge of my seat watching Mr. Craig, as James Bond, defuse ticking time-bombs with seconds to spare. I am even more excited that Mr. Craig has agreed to use his star power to draw attention to the noble causes of mine destruction and mine awareness,” said Mr. Ban.

“As 007, Mr. Craig had a ‘licence to kill.’ Today we are giving him a ‘licence to save,’” said the UN chief.

The designation is one of a number of events organized to observe the 10th anniversary of the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action and the Secretary-General expressed hope that Mr. Craig would raise public awareness about UN mine action efforts, visit mine action programmes worldwide, and assist in raising political and financial support.

Mr. Craig, who has said he looks forward to taking up the Secretary-General’s invitation to visit UN mine action programmes in the coming months, added that he was humbled by his designation.

“The briefing from the Secretary-General, and from all of the United Nations staff I have met, demonstrated the enormity of the task,” he said. “The use of improvised explosive devices in Iraq, Somalia and Mali; the widespread use of ‘barrel bombs’ in Syria, and the landmine contamination in Cambodia, Colombia and Afghanistan must all be addressed simultaneously. It
is a big job. The United Nations needs political and financial support to succeed."

Designation as UN Global Advocate for the Elimination of Mines and Explosive Hazards applies for three years but Mr. Craig has a long standing interest in the global campaign to ban landmines and explosive remnants of war and has already done work for the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), narrating two videos for the office in 2014.

The Secretary-General paid tribute to Mr. Craig’s work and that of the Mine Action Service, which has been working to clear mines, educate people on risks, assist victims, destroy stockpiles and advocate for the elimination of landmines and explosive hazards since 1997.

“The United Nations is playing a vital role in freeing the world from the threat of mines and explosive remnants of war,” said Mr. Ban. “I welcome the support of Mr. Craig to work on these issues. I count on his advocacy to make a difference.”

Ban urges global community to ‘never forget’ Nigerian girls on anniversary of abduction

14 April - On the one-year anniversary of their abduction by the extremist group Boko Haram, the kidnapped girls of Chibok, Nigeria must not be forgotten, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared today as he reiterated his call for their immediate release and safe return to their families.

“While some of the girls were fortunate to have escaped, the fate of many still remains unknown,” Mr. Ban said in a statement issued by his spokesperson.

Some 276 girls were abducted by Boko Haram from their school in Chibok, located in Nigeria’s restive north-eastern Borno state, in April 2014, as the militant group ramped up brutal attacks targeting the African country’s children.

Since then, Mr. Ban said, hundreds of thousands of children had been displaced from their homes and deprived of their rights to live and grow up in safety, dignity and peace.

The Secretary-General also voiced deep concern at the group’s “repeated and cowardly” attacks targeting schools.

According to a report released yesterday by the UN Children Fund (UNICEF), Missing Childhoods, more than 300 schools were damaged or destroyed and at least 196 teachers and 314 schoolchildren killed by the end of 2014 as a result of the conflict in northeast Nigeria between Boko Haram, military forces and civilian self-defence groups.

“Going to school should not have to be an act of bravery,” the Secretary-General’s statement continued. “The children of north-eastern Nigeria and neighbouring countries must be allowed to live in peace and enjoy their right to a safe education.”

As the Government of Nigeria and regional powers ramp up their legitimate offensive against Boko Haram, Mr. Ban reminded all those involved that their response to the extremist group’s attacks “must be fully consistent with international law and not create additional risks for the protection of children.”

“On this day, I reaffirm my support to the governments and peoples of the region in the fight against Boko Haram,” the statement concluded. “I stand in solidarity with the families of all abductees, especially children, their communities and society at large.”
Security Council imposes arms embargo on Yemen rebels, demands all parties resume UN-backed talks

14 April - Alarmed at the military escalation by Houthis in many parts of Yemen and the “significant and rapidly deteriorating” humanitarian situation, the United Nations Security Council today approved an arms embargo against the rebel group’s leadership and demanded that all parties refrain from unilateral actions that could undermine the country’s UN-facilitated political transition.

The measure was approved through a new resolution adopted by a vote of 14 in favour, with one abstention (Russia). The text demanded that Houthis immediately and unconditionally end violence, withdraw forces from areas they have seized, relinquish all arms, cease activities undermining the authority of the country’s legitimate Government, refrain from provocation against neighbouring States, release the Defence Minister, General Mahmoud al-Subaihi, and end the recruitment of children.

The resolution also called upon all Yemeni parties, particularly the Houthis, to abide by the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative and its Implementation Mechanism, the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue conference, and relevant Security Council resolutions and to resume and accelerate inclusive United Nations-brokered negotiations, including on issues relating to governance, to continue the political transition.

It demanded that all Yemeni parties adhere to resolving their differences through dialogue and consultation, reject violence as a means to achieving political goals, and refrain from provocation and all unilateral actions to undermine the political transition.

As well as adding Abdulmalik Al-Houthi and Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, the son of Yemen’s former President, to the list of individuals subject to the sanctions imposed by paragraphs 11 and 15 of resolution 2140 (2014), the resolution also decided to impose an arms embargo meaning that all Member States would immediately take necessary measures to prevent direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer to, or for the benefit of Mr. Saleh, along with Abdullah Yahya Al Hakim, Abd Al-Khaliq Al-Huthi, and individuals and entities designated by the Committee established pursuant to paragraph 19 of resolution 2140 (2014).

Meanwhile, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein responded to the growing number of civilian casualties and widespread destruction of public buildings and infrastructure in recent weeks.

He reminded all parties to the conflict in Yemen to ensure the prompt investigation of any attacks resulting in civilian casualties and to ensure the scrupulous respect of international human rights and international humanitarian law.

“Every hour we are receiving and documenting deeply disturbing and distressing reports of the toll that this conflict is taking on civilian lives and infrastructure,” said United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein.

“Such a heavy civilian death toll ought to be a clear indication to all parties to this conflict that there may be serious problems in the conduct of hostilities.”

In addition to hundreds of fighters, at least 364 civilians are reported to have lost their lives since March 26, including at least 84 children and 25 women. Another 681 civilians – possibly more – have been injured. Dozens of public buildings, including hospitals, schools, airports and mosques have been destroyed in airstrikes, through shelling and other attacks.

Over the past week, street fighting also intensified in densely populated areas, particularly in Aden between armed groups affiliated with President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi on one side, and those affiliated with the Houthis and the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh on the other. There have also been accounts of recruitment of children as fighters in Aden, Dhale and Mareb.
“The parties to the conflict are obliged to ensure that international humanitarian law and international human rights law are scrupulously respected and that the civilian population is protected,” said Mr. Zeid. “Any suspected breach of international law must be urgently investigated with a view to ensuring victims’ right to justice and redress and to ensure that such incidents do not recur.”

Several recent airstrikes by coalition forces have hit residential areas and civilian homes in Amran, Taiz, Ibb, Aljawf and Sa’da, with one, on a military base in Taiz on Saturday, hitting a residential area about 500 metres away, killing ten civilians and injuring seven.

He stressed that parties to the conflict should take all feasible measures to avoid locating military objectives in populated residential areas and must exercise maximum care to ensure that civilians and civilian objects are protected against dangers arising from military operations, and he called for the thorough and transparent investigation of such incidents by coalition forces.

Among 52 public buildings either partially or completely destroyed in the past three weeks, eight hospitals were hit in Sana’a, Sa’da, Dhale and Aden, with 17 schools and educational institutions in Aden, Dhale, Hajjah, Ibb and Sana’a also destroyed. The country’s three main national airports and its main power station have also been damaged, as well as bridges, factories, farmland and mosques.

“Hospitals and ambulances must be safe from attacks and allowed to function at all times. Intentional attacks on hospitals or ambulances being exclusively used for medical purposes would amount to war crimes,” Zeid said.

He also warned that the intentional targeting of civilians not taking direct part in hostilities would amount to a war crime, citing particular reports of the killing of civilians by snipers located on rooftops in Dhale, and he also pointed to arbitrary arrests, indiscriminate firing at protesters and attacks against media premises by Houthi-affiliated forces.

Underlining the important role of civil society, particularly in the midst of an armed conflict, he urged all sides to negotiate a swift end to the bloodshed and devastation in Yemen.

“The people of Yemen have already suffered for too long and the calamitous effects of the conflict are already going to take years, if not decades, to reverse,” the High Commissioner said. “Most of the country is now suffering from the effects of armed conflict, with the situation particularly devastating in Sana’a, Aden, Dhale, Sa’da, Hudayda, Lahj, Ibb, Taiz, Amran and Hajjah. The humanitarian situation is appallingly bad, compounded by wanton violence, lawlessness and serious human rights violations.”

**South Sudan: UN official meets displaced people sheltering at protection sites in Malakal**

14 April - The United Nations Deputy Special Representative for South Sudan visited Malakal today, meeting with local officials and community leaders of some 26,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) who are being sheltered by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

Recent fighting between youths from the Dinka and Shilluk communities triggered an influx of more than 4,000 new IDPs into the UN protection sites in Malakal two weeks ago.

Moustapha Soumaré, Deputy Special Representative for South Sudan, toured the Mission’s two protection sites, as well as an extension site currently under construction to relieve overcrowding at the existing facilities for displaced people, a UN spokesperson said today at a Headquarters press briefing.

During his visit, Mr. Soumaré said he was impressed by the progress made in the building of a new extension that will host these recently arrived civilians, as well as other people who have been under UN protection for many months.
The UN’s Mission in South Sudan is currently sheltering more than 117,000 displaced people throughout the world’s youngest nation, which is the highest number since December 2013, when this current crisis started.

**UN warns of 2050 deadline for dwindling water supplies, urges government action**

14 April - Although the world’s water supplies are expected to remain sufficient for a global population of nine billion in 2050, continuing overconsumption and the impact of climate change will diminish their availability in many of the planet’s neediest regions, according to a new United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report.

The report – entitled Towards a water and food secure future and launched today at the World Water Forum in concomitance with the World Water Council – urges government policies and public and private investment to ensure that crops, livestock and fish are sustainably produced in ways also aimed at safeguarding water resources. Without such measures, the report warns, efforts to reduce poverty, increase incomes and ensure food security in many developing nations will become increasingly difficult.

“Water, as an irreplaceable element of achieving this end, is already under pressure by increasing demands from other uses, exacerbated by weak governance, inadequate capacities, and underinvestment,” said FAO Deputy Director-General Natural Resources, Maria Helena Semedo, in a press release marking the report’s publication.

“In an era of accelerated changes unparalleled to any in our past, our ability to provide adequate, safe and nutritious food sustainably and equitably is more relevant than ever.”

FAO statistics note that by 2050 some 60 per cent more food will be needed to feed the world, placing added stress on water supplies as global agriculture rushes to meet that demand. Agriculture is already the most water-intensive industry, accounting in many countries for around two-thirds or more of supplies drawn from rivers, lakes and aquifers.

In addition, the dire straits facing the world’s water situation was recently amplified in the UN’s 2015 World Water Development report, released by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and in time for World Water Day, marked each year on 22 March.

According to UNESCO, the planet will face a 40 per cent shortfall in water supply in 2030 unless the international community “dramatically” improves water supply management. Demand for water is slated to skyrocket 55 per cent by 2050 while 20 per cent of global groundwater is already overexploited.

Improvements to the overall outlook, however, are possible, says the FAO.

In its report, the UN agency, in fact, calls for governments to help farmers increase food output using increasingly limited water resources and empowering them to better manage risks associated with water scarcity. Moreover, water rights, the report states, need to be allocated in fair and inclusive ways.

“This is an opportune time to re-visit our public policies, investment frameworks, governance structures and institutions,” Ms. Semedo concluded. “We are entering the post-2015 development era and we should mark it with solid commitments.”
At Doha Crime Congress, UN experts cite ‘shift’ as more States move away from death penalty

14 April - As the 13th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice continued its work in Doha, Qatar today, high-level UN, academic and Government experts at a panel discussion on death penalty advocated moving away from the punishment as there is no empirical evidence that it deters crime.

“Over the lifetime of the United Nations, the balance has shifted, and today, more than 160 Member States have either abolished the death penalty or do not practice it”, said UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ivan Šimonović, who moderated the discussion.

“Despite these positive developments, however, a number of States continue to impose the death penalty,” he told the panel, one of the many events taking place during the UN Crime Congress, which opened Sunday and is expected to conclude on 19 April.

The participants at the panel included the Minister of Justice of Italy, Andrea Orlando, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Christof Heyns, the Deputy Director in Penal Reform International in charge of regional Middle East and North Africa office, Haitham Shibli, a non-governmental organization working on penal and criminal justice reform, and Jeffrey Fagan, Professor at Columbia Law School in New York.

Mr. Šimonović stressed that Amnesty International noted in a recent report on global sentences and executions that in 2014 there were fewer registered executions but there was an increase of people condemned to death.

“The spread of drug trafficking and terrorism is an important factor for many States when considering to retain or even reintroduce the death penalty,” he added, noting that China, Iran, Viet Nam, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Malaysia have the highest rate of executions for drug trafficking.

The event, organized with Italy, provided the opportunity to present a publication by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Moving away from the Death Penalty, Arguments, Trends and Perspectives. The book, launched at UN Headquarters in October 2014, has been translated into Arabic and will be available soon, said Mr. Šimonović.

“The world is certainly moving away from the death penalty, in just the way the world moved away from slavery, from judicial torture and from other such practices”, Mr. Heyns said, recalling that in 1948, only eight States had taken the death penalty out of their laws.

“Now, 99 have done so,” he said, adding that only five States now execute more than 25 people a year – China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United States.

The Special Rapporteur stressed that “the most important consideration coming into play over the last seven years is that it is not clear that the death penalty has any special deterrence value. In fact, there is no evidence to that effect.”

“The death penalty creates a false sense of security,” he continued, underscoring that the punishment will not solve the problem of criminal activity and that countries should rather focus on better policing and addressing underlying causes.

Mr. Heyns said that there has been a “shift” regarding death penalty. “It seems that it is a matter of decades before there will be a situation where it is very likely that very few States will still have the death penalty officially in their books.”

Regarding the situation in the Middle East and North Africa, Mr. Shibli stressed the use of death penalty on a very wide and
vague scope in the region.

He took the examples of Yemen, where there are more than 360 crimes punishable by death penalty, Morocco where there are more than 325, and Egypt with more than 40.

“It is widely used in the criminal law as a punishment in the region,” Mr. Shibli said. “Generally in the region now, especially after the political instability, the governments feel more at ease in using the death penalty.”

Mr. Fagan discussed the situation in the United States, where capital punishment is a legal sentence in more than 30 states. He pointed out empirical research that shows that “there is no evidence that death penalty has any greater deterrent effect than would other punishments.”

“Deterrence is one of the essential justifications. Without that justification, I think there is a constitutional issue,” he added.

He said that because of that evidence, things are changing in the United States. “There is a deep change in the American society in respect to the beliefs about the death penalty,” he concluded.

UN urges Kenya to reconsider Dadaab camp closure, displacing some 350,000 refugees

14 April - The United Nations refugee agency today urged Kenyan authorities to reconsider their decision to shut down within the next three months Dadaab refugee camps, a decision that would require some 350,000 Somalis to return to their country and would cause “extreme” humanitarian consequences.

“Large-scale returns are still not possible in many parts of the country, in particular to South Central Somalia,” spokesperson for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Karin de Gruijl, told journalists in Geneva.

The Government’s decision was announced this past weekend following the horrific attack at Garissa University in Kenya earlier this month, the agency said, referring to the 2 April assault on the campus for which Somali-based Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility.
According to the UN Security Council, which strongly condemned the attack, dozens were killed, scores injured and many held hostage and others unaccounted for, the vast majority of whom were students.

“UNHCR too has been shocked and appalled by the Garissa attack. High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres and his staff stand in solidarity with the people of Kenya. We reiterate our condolences to the families of all the victims,” said Ms. de Gruijl said today.

Yet forcing refugees back to Somalia would have severe practical consequences, and would be a breach of Kenya’s international obligations. Kenya has hosted and protected refugees from violence and persecution in neighbouring Somalia for more than two decades, she added.

UNHCR is working closely with the Government of Kenya and understands the current regional security situation and the seriousness of the threats Kenya is facing. It recognizes the Government’s obligation to ensure the security of its citizens and other people living in Kenya, including refugees.

“We are thus urging the Kenyan authorities to give the matter further consideration. UNHCR stands ready to work closely with the Government of Kenya to strengthen law enforcement at Dadaab and support other measures to protect refugees and Kenyans alike against possible intrusion by armed actors from across the border,” Ms. de Gruijl said.

UNHCR will also support other measures to protect refugees and Kenyans alike against possible intrusion by armed actors from across the border. In December 2014, a pilot scheme was launched to support people who seek to voluntarily repatriate to one of three relatively safe areas of Somalia, namely Luuq, Baidoa and Kismayo.
“We are ready to work with the Governments of Kenya and Somalia to step up this program where there are opportunities for voluntary repatriation,” UNHCR said, reiterating its commitment to support Kenya in its protection of Somali refugees going forward.

**UN Syria Envoy to hold consultations on re-start of peace talks**

14 April - The United Nations announced today that the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on Syria will proceed with a series of in-depth, separate consultations with Syrian stakeholders and regional and international actors to take stock of their views on reopening peace talks based on the 2012 so-called Geneva Communiqué.

According to a UN spokesperson, Staffan de Mistura was instructed by the Secretary General to enhance efforts towards full implementation of the plan, adopted after the first international meeting on the issue on 30 June 2012, and since endorsed by the UN Security Council.

The Communiqué lays out key steps in a process to end the violence. Among others, it calls for the establishment of a transitional governing body, with full executive powers and made up by members of the present Government and the opposition and other groups, as part of agreed principles and guidelines for a Syrian-led political transition.

Both the Special Envoy and his Deputy, Ramzy Ezzeldine Ramzy, are currently engaging these stakeholders on the nature of this process.

The Special Envoy is scheduled to brief the Security Council on the matter next week.

**UN condemns killing of Chilean peacekeeper in Haiti**

14 April - The United Nations called for a swift investigation into the shooting death of a Chilean peacekeeper in Haiti whose killing prompted strong condemnations from the UN mission on the ground as well as the Secretary-General and Security Council at the world body’s Headquarters.

The Chilean soldier of the UN Mission for Stabilization in Haiti (MINUSTAH), Second Sergeant Rodrigo Andres Sanhueza Soto succumbed to fatal injuries from a gunshot wound he received on Monday when his military vehicle was fired upon by violent protesters in the area of Ouanaminthe.

A UN team was immediately dispatched to the location to ascertain the facts and circumstances of the shooting, according to MINUSTAH.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today called for a swift investigation and urged the Haitian authorities to do everything possible to bring those responsible to justice.

His Special Representative in Haiti, Sandra Honoré, offered UN police support in this regard and called for the perpetrator to be brought to justice without delay.

“Armed violence is a criminal act which not only endangers people’s security but also the gains in peace and stability which the Haitian population has achieved so far,” Ms. Honoré said.

“The Mission continues to urge all Haitian stakeholders, civil society, political, religious and community leaders to continuously work against violence in all its forms,” she said. “As Haiti enters the 2015 electoral period, a climate of peace is in the interest of all.”

In New York, members of the UN Security Council issued a statement saying they looked forward to the completion of a
full and comprehensive investigation to determine the facts and circumstances of the incident.

Both the Secretary-General and the Security Council expressed their deepest sympathy to the family of the fallen peacekeeper, as well as to the Government and people of Chile.

**Spate of violent attacks in Mali draws UN rights office concern**

14 April - The United Nations human rights office today said it is “deeply disturbed” at the series of violent attacks that have occurred in the Gao and Kidal regions of northern Mali, making an already precarious security situation more volatile.

“We also deplore the continued targeting of UN personnel and humanitarian workers in the country,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani told reporters at a press conference in Geneva this afternoon.

Ms. Shamdasani said the increasing use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines in the North African nation has become very worrying. “We urge all parties to the conflict in Mali to ensure the protection of civilians, including UN personnel and humanitarian workers.”

Mostly recently, on Saturday, 11 April, two UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) national staff members were assaulted in Kidal town by three unidentified armed men. The day before, a civilian vehicle hit a mine or IED near Almoustarat in the Gao Region, seriously injuring two people. And on April 6, two peacekeepers were injured when a MINUSMA vehicle escorting a supply convoy hit an IED in Kidal.

On April 5, four rockets struck the town of Gao, causing the death of one woman and wounding three other people, including a four-year-old boy. And on 30 March, a group of armed men conducted a targeted attack against an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) vehicle in Gao, resulting in the death of one staff.

In total, since its establishment in 2013, MINUSMA has been attacked more than 60 times, causing more than 35 peacekeepers to be killed and a total of more than 200 casualties.

“We call on Government security forces to ensure that counter-terrorism operations are conducted in line with international human rights standards, and to avoid the excessive use of force, so as not to stoke further tensions and resentment among local inhabitants,” Ms. Shamdasani said.

The High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein will continue following up closely with the Malian authorities on allegations of human rights violations and abuses which may have been committed during such operation.

“It is particularly important during the ongoing peace process for action to be taken to ensure that any human rights violations or abuses are promptly investigated and perpetrators brought to justice,’ Ms. Shamdasani said, emphasizing that for peace to be secured and sustainable, there must be no impunity for any acts of violence, regardless of the perpetrators.
At Security Council, UN official says Central African Republic transition at ‘critical stage’

14 April - Amidst a tentative political transition, the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) remains tenuous as sectarian tensions continue to simmer and the severity of the country’s humanitarian crisis increases, the top United Nations official in the African country warned today.

In a briefing to the Security Council, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative, Babacar Gaye, told the 15-member body that swathes of the CAR’s population remain at risk from attacks by the Muslim Séléka alliance and the Christian anti-Balaka militia as the two groups continue to wage hostilities in the country’s ongoing civil conflict.

In addition, he said, the country had witnessed an uptick in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) with 50,000 new IDPs registered since the beginning of the year.

Nevertheless, Mr. Gaye pointed to the holding of “historic local consultations,” completed in March, which had offered CAR citizens “an opportunity to express their views on issues at the heart of the crisis, including justice and reconciliation, peace and security, governance, and socio-economic development priorities.”

He explained that despite disagreements between the country’s Government and the National Transition Council over plans to hold later in the month the so-called Bangui Forum on reconciliation, the UN Mission in the CAR, known by its French acronym MINUSCA, had managed to defuse tensions and promote “an approach based on consensus.”

The completion of the Forum would ultimately be “another milestone” in the CAR’s transition, the UN official added.

“Commitments on the part of all national stakeholders, including political and military leaders of armed groups, are critical to keep the transition on track and open the way toward next steps in the transition process, including the organization of elections and the launch of longer term national reconciliation efforts,” he said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Gaye also observed that the country’s political transition had reached a “critical stage” as national stakeholders scramble to organize credible elections which, he said, would mark the end of the country’s transition. A number of challenges – ranging from the registration of IDPs and refugees outside the country to security and financial challenges – continued to plague the process and he urged Member States to promptly respond to funding shortfalls which were affecting the “timely completion of the electoral process.”

More than two years of civil war and sectarian violence have displaced thousands of people in 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 remain trapped within the landlocked country in enclaves from which they hope to find asylum in neighbouring States.

Moreover, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) recently reported that some 1.5 million people in CAR remain food insecure amid ongoing hostilities throughout the country and cautioned that the figure was likely to rise should immediate support not be provided.

“Restoring security, promoting an inclusive political dialogue and completing the transition is just the beginning of the CAR’s long journey towards stability and sustainable development,” Mr. Gaye told the Council.

“The international community has a moral obligation to help the CAR and its people stay the course towards peace and reconciliation. It is our collective responsibility.”