UN Envoy describes ‘sense of self-confidence’ among those battling Ebola outbreak

15 January - The United Nations Special Envoy on Ebola has today described a growing feeling of confidence among those responding to the outbreak in West Africa, but he warned that there is an absolute need to maintain focus, vigilance and discipline to ensure that the disease is wiped out.

“In the last few weeks, we’ve seen a big shift, a sense of self-confidence a sense that it can be beaten,” David Nabarro said in an interview with the UN News Centre this afternoon. “[The shift] started in early December in Liberia, with some parts of the country that had been so badly affected beforehand reporting near zero or zero cases; other parts of the country at least beginning to feel better.”

This, Dr. Nabarro said, was a major change from when he took up his position in August last year. He describes the situation then as “frightening” and filled with unknowns.

“We were bracing ourselves for some very bad news,” he said “And there was bad news. September was worse, and October was difficult.”

In September, cases in the region were rising by 150 per day and the daily tally was increasing exponentially, with the outbreak accelerating ahead of the response. Since then, the daily figure for new cases has reduced to about 50 per day, with the number of cases week-by-week gradually reducing.

The Governments of the affected countries have been leading the Ebola response, supported by the UN Mission for Emergency Ebola Response (UNMEER), operating in an area the size of France.

In recent weeks, Dr. Nabarro said the response has taken on a much more local feel, shifting from treatment, safe burials and community mobilization to focusing on identifying those most at risk and those who have the disease, isolating them, and...
tracking down everybody with whom they have had contact.

“The phase that we’re involved in right now is called ‘case finding and contact tracing,’” he said. “It’s like detective work. And that’s where we are right now, with the absolute goal of reaching the point where there is no more Ebola infection in the region, and at the same time where we’re seeing a recovery of the normal aspects of life, like schooling, like healthcare, like agriculture and like markets, all the things that represent normal life coming back.”

That ‘detective work’ is part of what helps drive numbers of new cases down towards zero. Once new cases are emanating only from lists of people cited as having been in contact with someone who has Ebola, progress is being made towards zero cases. If surprises and flare-ups are still occurring, there is still much to be done.

“In some parts of the region, I’m happy to tell you, that we really do understand the chains of transmission and the contact tracing is very good,” he said. “In other parts, we’re still getting surprises. Flare-ups suddenly occur.”

To maintain the vigilance and rapid response times that are vital to eradicating Ebola, Dr. Nabarro underlined the need for experienced epidemiologists and anthropologists, who together can keep a close watch on the levels of disease and what’s happening in the population to respond to it.

“We need them everywhere. We need hundreds of them,” he said, “because we need to be able to find every single person who has Ebola and keep them under surveillance and get them under treatment if they get sick and when they get sick.”

The experts need the support of supervisors; need the most effective IT for communication; and need transport systems so they can be supplied with everything they need in places without roads or access of any kind. People, materials and money will be vital going forward, and Dr. Nabarro said he would ask Governments and foundations to contribute on his upcoming trip to Europe.

He was also enthusiastic about news of success in efforts to develop a vaccine for Ebola, and stressed that once approved, at-risk health workers should be the first immunized.

“In the last few months, hundreds of health workers have got sick with the disease and too many of them have made the ultimate sacrifice,” he said. “I would like to be sure that the moment the vaccines becomes available, it’ll be the health workers who are most at risk who are protected.”

**UN ‘barbershop’ event aims to dispel stereotypes, promote gender equality**

*15 January* - Looking to promote change in how men and boys think and talk about women’s empowerment and gender equality, the United Nations is hosting at its New York Headquarters a two-day high-level “Barbershop” event, which this afternoon focused on initiatives that aim to support non-sexist male attitudes and behaviours between men.

The Barbershop Conference aimed at reflecting the casual setting in which men get their hair cut, while delving deeper into gender stereotypes perpetuated by social norms, and helping dispel the fallacy that women and girls cannot be equals in the economic, social or political life.

The event also highlighted that while historically women and girls have led the fight against gender inequality, discrimination and violence against women and girls, the recent UN HeForShe initiative encourages men and boys to stand at forefront of the global discourse.

“Today’s Conference is a creative way of moving the dialogue into uncharted territory,” said Sam Kutesa, President of the UN General Assembly, who was joined at the event by UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson, Executive-Director of UN Women Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, several UN Ambassadors, Ministers, civil society representatives, journalists, and activists, as well as entertainers.
“Increasingly the world has come to recognize that achieving gender equality will require the active participation of all segments of society and that men and boys have a critical role to play,” added Mr. Kutesa, adding that he was happy to add his voice to the Barbershop initiative and also make the empowerment of women and girls a key priority of his General Assembly session.

Among other things, the initiative aims to support non-discriminatory and non-sexist male attitudes between men, commit to discussing the role of men in realizing gender equality within the UN, and further engage men to end violence against women and girls.

“This must be the biggest birthday shop conversation ever,” Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson said, emphasizing that today’s discourse came at an opportune time to “jolt our thinking” as the world prepares to mark the 20th anniversary of the Beijing World Conference on Women, held in 1995.

“The Secretary General and I are convinced that this has to be the century of women and girls,” he added.

And while there is ample evidence that society gains and grows socially, economically, politically and even psychologically as a result of gender equality, women’s participation in politics and the labour force continues to remain “too low”. When women lack economic autonomy, their rights are undermined.

“Until we have a better balance among lawmakers, it will be difficult to achieve that balance in real life,” Mr. Eliasson said, urging men to bring forth transformative change, end sexist behaviour and eradicate violence against women.

The emancipation of women is the emancipation of mankind as a whole, he said. “We all benefit, we are all empowered. This is potentially a liberating moment for all of us so let’s seize it.”

Delivering today’s welcoming remarks were Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland, and Ismanto Adna, Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs of Suriname – both co-conveners of the event. Introductions were made by UN Permanent Representatives of Romania and the State of Palestine.

“All the male ministers in Iceland have signed up for HeforShe initiative,” said Mr. Sveinsson, Iceland’s Foreign Minister.

On a more personal note, he added: “As a father of five boys, I’m conscious of making them useful and productive in society…that means [showing that] being a real man does not mean being a wild man…it is about establishing healthy relationship with women and even other men.”

“You may wonder why two such different countries have joined forces to combat violence and gender inequality. We say: why not? It is a testament to the fundamental issue at hand. We see the common cause and are prepared to work for it,” said Mr. Adna, the Minister of Suriname.

Closing the first day of the conference, the head of UN Women, Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka, said today’s Barbershop is about breaking social norms that oppress women and restrict men and boys. And the HeforShe campaign is about both men and women getting outside of their comfort zone.

“It is not enough to be a good boy and a good man in a bad system. Our challenge is to change the system because a bad system will always bring a good man down,” she said.

“We’re in this for the long-haul.” Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka said, underscoring that the post 2015-framework must create a world that will be totally different by 2030.

“We are asking you to stand up and speak out so that you can create more Barbershop conversations of this nature.”
International experts, led by UN, kick off Ebola recovery assessment in Sierra Leone

15 January - Spearheaded by the United Nations, a team of international experts has begun an Ebola Recovery Assessment (ERA) mission in Sierra Leone as part of an effort to partner with Governments to address the impact of the virus on affected countries.

The ERA mission is made up of experts from the European Union, World Bank and the African Development Bank. They are expected to finish their work this weekend in Accra, Ghana after a one-day stop in Guinea tomorrow.

The mission’s aim is to work with the Governments of the countries hardest hit by the virus – Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea – to assess critical areas that will spearhead economic and social recovery in the post-Ebola era.

According to a statement released by Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone, David McLachlan-Karr, the ERA is anchored in national ownership.

“Readjustment of some aspects of UN and development partner programmes will be needed to ensure that efforts to contain Ebola are not interrupted, while at the same time, preparing the ground work for future recovery programming,” McLachlan-Karr said in a statement today.

The UN Country Team has been working on adjusting the results of the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), an anchoring development work plan, to ensure that all country plans are in line with supporting the Government eradicate Ebola and set the country back on the path to development.

Yesterday, members of the team met with Sierra Leone’s Minister of Finance and Economic Development, Dr. Kaifala Marah, who underscored the need to include all stakeholders in the ERA process to avoid duplication of assessments and resource mobilization efforts.

Dr. Marah also pointed to the need to develop a recovery programme that was specific to the context of Sierra Leone. Key interventions are need in health and education sectors, as is support to the private sector and debt relief.

The leader of the inter-agency mission, Stan Nkwain, who is Deputy Director of the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support at UN Development Programme (UNDP) said that the ERA’s four areas of focus – Health and Water and Sanitation, Infrastructure and Basic Services, Socio-economic Recovery and Peacebuilding – are closely aligned with the Government’s Agenda for Prosperity.

“As EVD [Ebola Virus Disease] is raging the region, and particularly in Sierra Leone, the ERA should go hand in hand with the EVD response, and especially enhance rather than distract from the response effort,” Nkwain said.

The ERA mission is a result of consultations between the UN and the Governments of the Mano River Union following the December visit of the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon.
Israeli-Palestinian conflict heads into uncharted territory as mistrust deepens, UN official warns

15 January - The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is now entering uncharted territory as tensions between the two sides escalate and an “ever-widening trust deficit” risks hampering future peace talks, a senior United Nations political official told the Security Council today as he urged Palestinians and Israelis to “plot a course” and work towards a negotiated resolution.

Briefing the Council on the situation in the Middle East, Jens Anders Toyberg-Frandzen, Assistant Secretary-General ad interim for UN Political Affairs, warned that neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis had taken the “challenging steps or made the bold decisions” required to rebuild trust, further reducing the likelihood of a resumption of talks.

In recent weeks, both sides have experienced a worsening of relations amid a series of unilateral moves which have only served to deepen tensions. On 30 December, a draft resolution was submitted to the Security Council aimed at reaching a final status agreement and an end to the occupation of the Palestinian Territories.

When the resolution failed to pass, the Palestinian delegation signed instruments of accession to 18 international treaties, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The following day, Israeli authorities froze some $127 million in tax revenues collected on behalf of the Palestinian authority for the month of December in violation of their Oslo Accord obligations.

“The Secretary-General is alarmed that the parties are now engaged in a downward spiral of actions and counter-actions and calls on both sides to refrain from any actions that would exacerbate existing divisions,” Mr. Toyberg-Frandzen declared, as he called on the international community to “uphold its responsibility” in shepherding a way forward on a two-State solution.

“We should be under no illusions about the perils that this new chapter may entail,” he continued. “The increasingly antagonistic and virulent nature of the discourse between the two sides should be cause for serious concern among those seeking to foster an environment conducive to a return to constructive dialogue.”

Pointing to the situation in the Gaza Strip, where Palestinians and Israelis recently fought a 50-day conflict resulting in the deaths of more than 2,100 Palestinians and more than 70 Israelis, Mr. Toyberg-Frandzen warned that the security situation was once again showing signs of “serious deterioration.” Most recently, he added, a 24 December exchange of fire across the border resulted in one Hamas militant killed, and the injuries of three Palestinian civilians and one Israel Defense Force personnel.

“The Strip is balancing on a tightrope that will continue to fray unless a number of critical issues, many of which are political, are tackled with both determination and a heightened sense of urgency,” he explained.

In particular, he noted, the payment of salaries to Gaza employees remained outstanding and reconstruction in the war-devastated Strip – assisted by the UN-backed Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism – was not being implemented at the required scale.

According to UN estimates, in fact, up to 100,000 families continue to live in houses that have sustained varying degrees of damage while 18 UN-supported school buildings continue to serve as collective centres for some 15,500 internally displaced persons.

“Obtaining the necessary financial resources to allow Palestinians in Gaza to procure [construction] materials continues to be a monumental challenge for the majority of those in need. Most pressingly, donors have largely failed to fulfil their pledges,” the UN official said.
With Gaza immersed in a “stark reality” of challenges, Mr. Toyberg-Frandzen also warned that violence continued to affect the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, with some of the worst hostilities between the two sides seen in over five years exacerbated, in part, by the continued construction of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land. Nonetheless, he voiced encouragement at the recent Israeli Supreme Court decision of 25 December ordering the evacuation and demolition of the largest settlement outpost in the West Bank within two years.

Against that backdrop, said Mr. Toyberg-Frandzen, the climate in other hotspots around the region remained equally fragile. In Syria, where the country’s brutal civil conflict is heading into its fifth year, UN-backed consultations aimed at freezing the fighting in Aleppo are continuing while, in Lebanon, talks between national stakeholders are making headway in an effort to ease the country’s sectarian tensions and spur the election of a new President.

Returning to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the UN official warned that unless all efforts to resume peace talks were made, the international community should remain “under no illusions about the perils that this new chapter may entail.”

“I urge Palestinians and Israelis to plot a course that ultimately leads to a negotiated resolution of the conflict on the basis of a two-State solution in which Israel and Palestine live side by side in peace and security,” concluded Mr. Toyberg-Frandzen. “The alternative is fraught with unknown hazards that may be irreversible.”

**UN envoy says Syria set back 40 years by war, calls for renewed push towards solution**

15 January - With the “devastating conflict” in Syria entering its fourth year, the United Nations Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for Syria said today that continued fighting in the country is a “disgrace” that has set the country back 40 years.

“It is a true tragedy that people all over Syria continue to be living under constant fear of barrel bombs, mortar attacks, rockets, aerial bombing, car bombs, kidnappings, extrajudicial killings,” said Staffan de Mistura.

“We are starting 2015 with the Syrian conflict being the largest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War.”

He noted that Syrians had replaced Afghans as the world’s largest population of refugees, pointing to the 7.6 million displaced people and 3.3 million refugees created by the conflict, as well as a further 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Diseases like polio, typhoid and measles had returned to the country, he said, and 4,000 schools were unusable, meaning 3 million children were out of school.

“In 2015, this year, Syria had been expected to be one of the five top performers on the economic side in the Arab world, now it is the second before the last, just before Somalia,” he said, noting that the year had started with a renewed push for a solution to the crisis, and meetings with the Foreign Ministers of Iran and Russia, as well as the Secretary of State of the United States.

“They all agree that we need to do something to avoid that the Syrian conflict goes on a backburner and that movement towards some type of political solution should take place this year,” he said. “This is certainly good news in the sense that I am hearing the same in Damascus, I am hearing the same in the region. What we need to make sure is that this does not become like 2014, when we heard similar appeals from all of us, including the UN, and then nothing really happened.”

Recent developments underlined the need for action, he said, pointing to the pressures faced by Syria’s neighbours as a result of flooding by refugees, to the recent terrorist attack in Paris, which connected to the origins and consequences of the Syria conflict, and to the presence of ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) in large parts of Syria and Iraq.

“The rest of the world is not immune,” he said. “This is why we cannot avoid raising a flag today of an urgent concern. This is why we are using in the beginning of the year to start saying let’s make this year, as I am hearing from many political leaders, an opportunity.”
He urged implementation of UN Security Council resolutions on humanitarian access, foreign fighters and terrorist groups and he urged support for the proposal of a freeze to heavy fighting in Aleppo “because [the city] is a symbolic microcosm of all of Syria, because it has the highest number of displaced people, because it has seen two years of suffering, because while the Government and the opposition continue being involved in heavy fighting between them, [with ISIL] only 20 miles away from Aleppo.”

The Government was the focus of intense negotiations to achieve the freeze, along with opposition forces, and Mr. de Mistura said his deputy, Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy would follow-up with further discussions. The freeze needed to be a simple reduction in violence to start with, he said, and possibly a freeze on all military activities to enable delivery of humanitarian aid.

“Our hope is that Aleppo could be a signal of goodwill, a confidence-building measure which could and can facilitate the restarting of a political process with a clear political horizon,” he said, stressing that parties needed to bear in mind the (2012) Geneva communique while also unconditionally adjusting their aspirations in line with new factors in the reality of the area, such as the presence of ISIL forces.

The Special Envoy told journalists that he supported any initiative bringing together the Syrian people, including the potential meetings in Cairo and the Moscow initiative.

“Any initiative that brings together Syrian people can facilitate a dialogue and if it is among Syrians, it can also be a starting point for a political dialogue,” he said. “We need to show that this year we are serious.”

**Previewing work ahead, UN Assembly President says Member States must agree a bold post-2015 agenda**

15 January - As the New Year begins, the 193-Member States of the United Nations are squarely focused on agreeing on a bold, ambitious and transformative post-2015 development agenda that leaves no-one behind and provides a new framework for development and international cooperation for the next fifteen years, General Assembly President Sam Kutesa told reporters today.

“Seventy years after the founding of the United Nations, we have a truly historic opportunity to agree on an inspiring agenda that can energize the international community, governments everywhere and the citizens of the world,” he said, briefing the press at UN Headquarters.

“We must be ready to seize this challenge,” he said, referring to the opportunity provided as the Assembly begins work on crafting a sustainability agenda that will succeed the landmark, anti-poverty focused UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are to wrap up by the end of 2015.

Mr. Kutesa opened his remarks on sombre note, condemning the “heinous and brutal” terrorist attacks that have affected several Member States over the past weeks by groups such as The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram.

“[They] have put in sharp focus the rising threat of terrorism and extremism. There is no justification for such attacks and we must continue to condemn them. Terrorism in all its forms and manifestations is criminal and unjustifiable,” he declared urging the international community must re-double its efforts to combat extremism and terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

“We also need to promote peaceful dialogue and mutual understanding amongst peoples to avoid extremism and polarization,” he said, also conveying, on behalf of the General Assembly, deepest sympathy and condolences to the victims of those deplorable acts and to their families, and to the peoples and the Governments of the respective Member States.

Mr. Kutesa also underlined the importance of ensuring the rights of children, and the right of every child to have access to
education in a safe learning environment. He also expressed strong support for freedom of the press, free speech and the protection of journalists.

Looking back at the world body’s achievements during the last half 2014, he spotlighted, 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.

“Member States, co-facilitators, and other stakeholders can count on my full and continued engagement leading up to the Summit on the post-2015 development agenda in late September 2015,” he said, adding that agreement on the modalities for that event has set the stage for the first session of intergovernmental negotiations, would take place next week, from 19 to 21 January.

In a related event, he announced that tomorrow, 16 January, he would hold an interactive dialogue providing the opportunity to encourage the contributions of civil society and other relevant stakeholders in formulating the post-2015 development agenda.

On the some of the Assembly’s other priorities for the year, Mr. Kutesa noted that the world was now at the 90-day mark since the establishment of UNMEER. Although progress has been made in slowing down the spread of the epidemic in the three most affected countries, the crisis is not yet over.

“Far from it. We must re-double our efforts and remain seized of the crisis as the most affected countries face the devastating, long-term implications of the epidemic. Longer term recovery will require significant and sustained commitment from the international community,” he said.

He also stressed that the contribution to the fight against the spread of the virus by the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in collaboration with the UN and other partners has demonstrated the crucial importance of enhancing cooperation between the UN and regional and sub-regional organizations.

The Assembly President went on to say that addressing climate change remains a key priority. He had participated in 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, which laid the groundwork for a universal and meaningful agreement to be finalized in Paris in December this year.

On UN reform and revitalization, he said reform of the Security Council remains a priority and the intergovernmental negotiations on that issue must move forward. “The on-going informal consultations by the Chair are critical to finding a way toward text-based negotiations, with the next round of negotiations scheduled to begin in February,” he said, adding that his spokesperson would inform the press regarding a briefing to the media by Ambassador Courtenay Rattray of Jamaica, Chair of the UN Intergovernmental Negotiations on Security Council reform.

As for revitalization of the Assembly itself, he said that while some progress has been made to improve the 193-Member body’s efficiency and effectiveness, much more work remains to be done.

As for other upcoming Assembly activities, Mr. Kutesa noted, among others, that on 6 February, he would convene a special event on the occasion of World Interfaith Harmony Week in cooperation with a Committee of religious non-governmental organizations; on 9 and 10 February, he would convene a high-level thematic debate on “means of implementation for a transformative post-2015 development agenda; and on 6 March, he would convene a high-level thematic debate on advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment in the post-2015 development agenda.

“In June, I will also convene a high-level event on “The Demographic Dividend and Youth Employment,” he said, spotlighting an event that would focus on the investments needed to reap the demographic dividend, including through employment opportunities and decent work for young people.
Afghanistan: UN-backed mine clearing project reports 34 killed during 2014

15 January - The United Nations-supported Mine Action Programme in Afghanistan (MAPA) has said today that while 2014 could prove to have been a major turning point in the country’s long and tortured history, it was also a year that had inflicted “immense and unprecedented tragedy” on the programme’s personnel.

Over the year, MAPA was directly affected by 37 security incidents that resulted in 34 deaths among its personnel and 27 injuries, with an attack on a de-mining project near to a copper mine in Logar province in June and a second in Helmand province in December accounting for 19 of the deaths and nine injuries.

“The total of 34 de-miners killed in 2014 is almost equal to the total number over the previous four years combined,” said a press statement released by the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), which is managed by the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS).

MACCA’s statement also countered reports in the Afghan media that two recent attacks on de-miners working for the Programme were carried out because they were clearing IEDs in an area of ongoing conflict.

“We refute this explanation and once again condemn these attacks,” said the statement, referring to the December attack in Helmand province and another in Logar province on 9 January. “The clearance of IEDs where fighting continues is not the responsibility of MAPA and it has never conducted such clearance.”

The statement notes that MAPA is involved in clearing explosive hazards but only in cases where fighting in an area has ended and internally displaced people have returned to their homes and requested the clearing of lands. In such instances clearance goes ahead only to improve public safety and when it avoids interference in active conflict.

“The preservation of MAPA’s neutrality is key to its continued services to communities in Afghanistan,” said the statement, stressing that support from the people was “paramount” to the Programme’s enduring success and resilience. “MAPA has never and will never implement any operations that go against that policy.”

One of the largest mine action programmes in the world and the first ever humanitarian, non-military programme, MAPA comprises 50 national and international partners from commercial and non-profit spheres, with a 26 year history of cooperation that has seen over 23,000 hazardous areas cleared and a resulting decline in civilian casualties by almost 80 per cent.

MAPA has maintained its humanitarian neutrality throughout its history, working with all Governments and operating to ensure the safety of Afghan civilians.
Libya: UN-mediated peace talks resume in Geneva as parties seek political settlement


“Discussions during the first session on Wednesday [13 January] were constructive and were conducted in a positive atmosphere,” UNSMIL stated in a press release issued earlier this morning. “There was a clear sense of determination among the participants to ensure that this dialogue succeeds, and they look forward for more discussions today.”

The agreement to hold the new round of dialogue comes after wide-ranging and intensive consultations with the parties by UNSMIL chief Bernardino León over the past several weeks, after the first round of peace talks stalled in October last year. In order to create a conducive environment for the dialogue, Mr. León has proposed to the parties to the conflict a “freeze” in military operations for a few days.

As fighting between armed factions continued to rattle the war-weary North African nation, Mr. León warned just days ago that time was running out, and the longer efforts to tackle the crisis are delayed, the more difficult it would be to reach a solution to end the fighting, restore political and State institutional unity and revive the economy.

Emphasizing that the political dialogue process is Libyan-led, and that the Mission’s facilitating role is to help in the search for common ground, UNSMIL has repeatedly stressed that this new dialogue “is an important opportunity for the Libyans to restore stability and prevent the country’s slide towards deeper conflict and economic collapse that should not be missed.”

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

In addition to mounting numbers of casualties, the continuing fighting has also caused a humanitarian crisis with at least 120,000 people forced to flee their homes, resulting in consequent shortages in both food and medical supplies.

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

UNSMIL has voiced hope that the planned talks would manage to secure the necessary arrangements for bringing about a total cessation of armed hostilities while also encouraging a phased withdrawal of all armed groups from all major towns and cities, including the capital, Tripoli, in order to allow the Government to reassert its authority over institutions and strategic installations.
Saudi Arabia: public flogging of blogger ‘cruel and inhuman,’ says UN rights chief

15 January - The top United Nations human rights official has issued an appeal to the Saudi Arabia to halt the punishment of Ra’ef Badawi, an online blogger sentenced to public flogging for “peacefully exercising his right to freedom of opinion and expression,” according to the UN human rights office (OHCHR).

“Flogging is, in my view, at the very least, a form of cruel and inhuman punishment,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said in a press release issued earlier today.

“Such punishment is prohibited under international human rights law, in particular the Convention against Torture, which Saudi Arabia has ratified,” he added.

According to OHCHR, Mr. Badawi, an online blogger and activist, was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment, 1,000 lashes and a fine of $266,000. He was publicly flogged 50 times last Friday and is reportedly due to be flogged again tomorrow and every Friday until his sentence of 1,000 lashes has been fully carried out, the agency said.

Mr. Badawi’s case is one of a succession of prosecutions of civil society activists in the Gulf State. Just last Monday, an appeals court upheld the conviction of his lawyer and brother-in-law, Waleed Abu Al-Khair, who was arrested on 15 April 2014 in relation to his human rights advocacy activities.

Charged with several offences, including inciting public opinion against the State and its people, undermining the judicial authorities, inciting international organisations against the Kingdom with the intent of ruining its reputation, establishing a non-registered organisation and with gathering and publishing information, under the 2011 Law for Combatting Cyber-crimes, Abu Al-Khair’s sentence was extended from 10 to 15 years following his appeal.

“I appeal to the King of Saudi Arabia to exercise his power to halt the public flogging by pardoning Mr. Badawi, and to urgently review this type of extraordinarily harsh penalty,” continued Mr. Zeid.

The UN Committee against Torture – which oversees the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment – and the Human Rights Committee have repeatedly voiced concerns about the use of flogging as punishment by Member States and have called for its abolition. Saudi Arabia’s report on its implementation of the Convention is up for review by the Committee against Torture next year.