UN agency, African Cup tournament kick off anti-hunger initiative

16 January - A United Nations-supported video campaign to fight hunger will feature at the matches throughout the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations, starting 17 January, UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) announced today.

In the video, a footballer dressed in white garb dribbles a ball across an abandoned underground construction site, laser focused, dust stirring up around him as he angles for the winning kick – he takes it and scores – which represents for overcoming hunger in Africa by 2025.

“Eradicating hunger requires teamwork and perseverance – the same qualities that players in the Nations Cup show us on the field,” said José Graziano da Silva, FAO Director-General.

The campaign, ‘African Football against Hunger,’ is a partnership between FAO and the Confederation of African Football (CAF), and it will spotlight the breakthrough commitment by African leaders to end hunger in the next decade.

The initiative leverages the global popularity of “footie” to spread a message of solidarity: African nations can overcome hunger in our lifetime, but they need collective action and popular support to reach their goal.

Of particular significance, Mr. Graziano da Silva stressed, is adequate nutrition to reach one's goals, athletic or otherwise.

Hunger, unlike the invisible opponent in the video, is tangible across the African continent, says FAO. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, 223 million people – or one fourth – are undernourished. This hampers their ability to lead healthy, productive
lives and holds Africa as a whole back from reaching its full potential.

“Football brings together people from all over the continent and that makes it the ideal platform to call for solidarity,” said Mario Lubetkin, FAO’s Director of Communications, during a press conference in Bata, Equatorial Guinea, on the eve of the opening of the African Cup of Nations.

He also added that “bring people across Africa on board with our joint effort to raise the bar in the fight against hunger.”

Home to seven out of 10 of the planet's fastest growing economies, Africa also has the youngest population in the world. However, regional markets are still dominated by foreign food imports and youth unemployment runs high.

Therefore, investing in agricultural development now could improve inclusive growth that boosts youth employment, strengthens rural livelihoods and meets the food challenges of a growing world population.

In this regard, the FAO-administered Africa Solidarity Trust Fund, also featured in the video, was established in 2013. As the first Africa-for-Africa fund, it has so far leveraged some $40 million from African States (primarily Equatorial Guinea and Angola) for projects that improved agriculture and fight hunger.

FAO and the Fund complements the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP), a home-grown, region-wide cooperative effort to boost agricultural productivity that was launched by governments ten years ago.

Investments in agricultural development, strong social safety nets and rights to access resources are of great importance to fulfil a food-secure Africa, according to the UN agency. It also highlights the need to support small-scale farmers, who work more than 60 percent of the agricultural land.

The African Cup of Nations takes place in a pivotal year for international development, with the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) coming to an end and the international community finalizing a set of sustainable development goals to take their place.

Sustainable livelihoods and food security are likely to be cornerstones of the post-2015 development agenda.

“This is the time for governments, institutions and civil society on the continent to come together and double down on efforts to make hunger history,” Mr. Lubetkin underscored.

Sixteen teams will compete in the Africa Cup of Nations from 17 January to 8 February in venues across Equatorial Guinea.

Reconciliation, dialogue, human rights vital to spirit of peace in El Salvador – UN chief

16 January - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today called on Salvadorans to keep the spirit of peace alive, as he attended at a ceremony commemorating the 23rd anniversary of El Salvador’s 1991 Peace Accords.

“Heart [the spirit] alive by deepening reconciliation and dialogue within Salvadoran society,” he said at the event in the capital, San Salvador. “Keep it alive by fully upholding international human rights obligations. Keep it alive by intensifying efforts to safeguard the rights of victims, building on the 2010 official apology.”

Mr. Ban became the first UN Secretary-General to attend the annual commemoration of the peace agreement, as he visited the Central American nation as part of his recent tour of the region.

He spoke of a ‘lasting bond’ formed between the UN and El Salvador, and said his attendance was ‘deeply meaningful’ to
the UN and ‘deeply moving’ on a personal level. That was at least in part because of the conflict, discord and bloodshed currently prevalent elsewhere in the world and the pessimism with which people greeted such situations.

“In many trouble spots, people say: Our differences are too wide. The wounds are too deep. Peace is not possible,” he said. “To all of them, I say: Look to the people of El Salvador. Peace is precious and peace is possible. That is El Salvador’s message to the world. That is your gift to humanity.”

Despite a war lasting over a decade, accounting for the deaths of more than 75,000 Salvadorans and the displacement of a million more, El Salvador had proven the possibility of overcoming differences through dialogue and the transformation of society through mutual respect and tolerance.

Mr. Ban described the lasting impression that the peace-making and peace-building process in El Salvador left on the UN, with the Organization’s Mission in the country, ONUSAL, leading the way on post-conflict peace-building.

“The peace process pioneered a new generation of peace operations and profoundly shaped how the United Nations faces global challenges to this very day,” the Secretary-General said. “Your efforts have helped advance peace in virtually every corner of the world.”

Challenges still remained, including citizen insecurity, social exclusion and lack of opportunities, as well as sexual violence against women and the fact that 40 per cent of murders in the country were against children and youth. Peace would be consolidated when structural challenges such as inequality and exclusion were addressed, and social cohesion would come when all communities became part of the conversation.

Mr. Ban also took part today in a press conference with President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, welcoming ongoing efforts made by El Salvador’s Government to improve the situation in the country.

Its recent election to the UN Human Rights Council demonstrated as much and recognized its engagement with and commitment to UN principles, while the establishment of bodies like the National Council on Citizen Security and Coexistence were also positive steps. The UN was also “fully ready” to support recent recommendations made by the National Security Commission.

“I am also pleased that the [recently launched five-year Development] Plan places human rights at the centre of policy making. I have encouraged President Sánchez Cerén to continue working to strengthen the human rights of women, children, the LGBT community and indigenous peoples and to beef up institutions to end impunity,” he said.

**DR Congo: UN mission chief voices ‘full solidarity’ as Government battles armed groups**

16 January - The top United Nations official in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has expressed ‘full solidarity’ and support for the country’s Government as it continues in its fight against armed groups operating in the eastern part of its territory.

“The current fight against the Front de Résistance Patriotique de l’Ituri (FRPI) shows our determination to neutralize all the groups that have inflicted untold suffering on the Congolese population,” Martin Kobler, head of the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), declared in a press release issued earlier today.

“All the armed groups must now understand that any further attempt to use civilians as human shields shall not be tolerated,” he declared, echoing media reports that armed groups wreaking havoc in the vast country’s restive eastern provinces have a reputation for using civilians as human shields when attacks threaten.

Mr. Kobler’s comments follow a series of operations conducted against numerous armed groups operating in the DRC.
including the FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda), which missed a deadline for the unconditional surrender of its forces on 2 January. The UN Security Council subsequently appealed to Congolese President Joseph Kabila to authorize UN-backed action against that group.

They also come after a recent joint Congolese army (FARDC)-MONUSCO attack against the Ugandan-based rebels, Allied Democratic Forces, in the DRC’s North Kivu region and the arrest of Cobra Matata, the leader of the FRPI.

Meanwhile, the MONUSCO press release added, the fight against the remnants of the FRPI remains ongoing, with the group, which boasts a contingent of some 300 child combatants among its ranks, standing accused of gross human rights violations and illegal traffic of natural resources.

“I am more particularly shocked by the use of children by FRPI; it is a war crime,” continued Mr. Kobler.

“I fully support Government’s in firmly standing against all form of impunity for such a crime. These children have the right to a future."

Speaking in South Africa today where he was holding extensive consultations with senior local officials regarding the urgent security and political issues facing the DRC and surrounding region, Said Djinnit, the UN’s Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, echoed Mr. Kobler’s appeal for decisive action against the armed groups active in the DRC.

“We continue to witness horrific acts of violence perpetrated by illegal armed groups in eastern DRC, many of which directed at women and children,” Mr. Djinnit declared in a press release.

“The six-month deadline given to the FDLR to voluntarily disarm by the International Conference on the Great Lakes region (ICGLR) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) expired on 2 January, and in the absence of progress, military action by the Government of DRC and MONUSCO should now commence without delay.”

The UN Special Envoy commended the South African Government’s “firm support” for the UN Force Intervention Brigade’s mandate and said he looked “forward to prompt and decisive military action” against the FDLR, with “every effort made to protect the civilian population.”

In addition, he voiced satisfaction over the ongoing preparations for a Great Lakes Private Sector Conference in 2015 which, he said, would help boost regional investment and growth and bring concrete opportunities to the Great Lakes region at large.

“It is time for the region to turn the page, tackle decisively the root causes of the recurring cycles of violence, remove obstacles to progress, and take full advantage of the enormous opportunities for business and economic development through cooperation.”

**International Criminal Court opens initial probe into recent Gaza conflict**

16 January - The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) today announced that she has opened a preliminary examination into the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, following the accession earlier this month by the Palestinian Authority to the Court’s founding Rome Statute.

A news release from the ICC, notes that Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda opened an initial examination of the situation following the Palestinian Government accession to the Rome Statute on 2 January 2015 and its declaration of 1 January 2015, accepting the jurisdiction of the ICC ‘over alleged crimes committed in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, since June 13, 2014.’

The Palestinian Government had earlier confirmed that it would seek retroactive action against Israel at The Hague-based
ICC for alleged crimes committed by Israel in Gaza last summer. Nearly 2,200 Palestinians and 70 Israelis died during the 50-day conflict that ended in August. The ICC probe will examine the actions of all parties.

Today, Ms. Bensouda said that her Office will conduct its analysis of the situation ‘in full independence and impartiality.’ The Office also notes that a ‘preliminary examination’ is not an investigation but a process of examining the information available in order to reach a fully informed determination on whether there is a reasonable basis to proceed with an investigation pursuant to the criteria established by the Rome Statute.

According to the news release, specifically, under the Rome Statute, the Prosecutor must consider issues of jurisdiction, admissibility and the interests of justice in making this determination. The Office gives due consideration to all submissions and views conveyed to the Office during the course of a preliminary examination, strictly guided by the requirements of the Rome Statute in the independent and impartial exercise of its mandate.

“There are no timelines provided in the Rome Statute for a decision on a preliminary examination,” says the news releases, adding that depending on the facts and circumstances of each situation, the Prosecutor’s Office will decide whether to continue to collect information to establish a sufficient factual and legal basis to render a determination; initiate an investigation, subject to judicial review as appropriate; or decline to initiate an investigation.

**Major floods in Malawi, Mozambique force thousands to flee their homes – UN**

16 January - United Nations agencies are gearing up relief efforts in Malawi and neighbouring Mozambique, where heavy rains have caused severe flooding, displacing thousands of people and left scores dead.

In Malawi, severe flooding has displaced more than 100,000 people and reportedly killed some 48 others, OCHA’s Jens Laerke the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) told reporters in Geneva.

“The floods have caused extensive damage to crops and livestock; people’s homes have been flooded and roads and other infrastructure have been affected,” he elaborated.

According to OCHA, Malawian Government declared a State of Emergency on 13 January. At the request of the Government and the UN system in Malawi, OCHA has deployed an eight-member strong UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team of specially trained emergency managers to support the national response.

The UNDAC team in Malawi, made available free of charge by governments and various organizations, is being led by OCHA staff from South Africa for an expected in-country three-week stay.

Although the Government, the UN and its humanitarian partners have been providing assistance to flood-affected communities, some life-saving efforts have been hampered with flooding rendering access impassable. Preparing for a rain forecast, the Government has begun establishing emergency operations centres in various locations in the country’s south and increasing preparedness in the north.

Noting that food stocks would be replenished once the crisis was over, Elisabeth Byrs of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) said that the agency is gearing up its response to the flood-affected districts, “WFP is moving stocks of food from its regular programmes to the flooded areas.”

She announced that WFP was planning to airlift more than 100 metric tonnes of high-energy biscuits from the UN Humanitarian Response Depot in Dubai – enough to meet the immediate food needs of some 77,000 people.

“Ready-to-eat food will be prioritized for the most vulnerable people, particularly children, who have been displaced from their homes and have no access to food or cooking facilities,” she added.
Among the poorest countries on earth, Malawi has one of the highest rates of stunting among children worldwide. Ms. Byrs recalled that more than 40 per cent of the children in Malawi have low growth for their age as a result of under-nutrition, and added: “WFP is working together with UNICEF and other UN agencies to assist the vulnerable children.”

Assessing the hardest-hit areas has been arduous as the floods have washed away many roads and bridges, with the worst affected areas in the south, namely the Chikwawa and Nsanje districts.

A Government-led agriculture and food security humanitarian cluster has also been activated to help coordinate the response. Initial estimates suggest that as many as 20,000 households, or 110,000 people, have been displaced with many more likely to require assistance. Additional rain forecasts elevated concerns that those numbers may rise.

Responding to questions, Mr. Laerke said that more than 100,000 displaced people are located mainly in the south of the country.” While the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights had received reports that some 48 people lost their lives, and media put the death toll at 57, he attested, “it is difficult to verify assessments in such a precarious situation.”

As the UNDAC team is being deployed today, Mr. Laerke affirmed, “OCHA hopes to get more information in the coming days and during the course of the UNDAC deployment.”

Turning to Mozambique, located south of Malawi, OCHA reports that thousands of people have been affected by related flooding.

Mr. Laerke emphasized that parts of the Zambezi River are above alert level and the bridge over the Licungo River has been impassable – effectively cutting off the north of the country.

The Mozambique Government has issued a ‘red alert’ for the central and northern regions, activating national response partners. Mr. Laerke said, “The Government and national partners are providing assistance to affected communities and the UN stands ready to provide support should it be requested.”

In response to a question, Mr. Laerke said he had an “as-yet unverified figure that the floods had affected 50,000 people.”

**Nigeria: UN rights envoy urges action to protect children in country’s war-torn northeast**

16 January - Children growing up in Nigeria’s crisis-riven northeast are in desperate need of protection from relentless violence, said Leila Zerrougui, the United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, today as she wrapped up a weeklong visit in the country.

On a day when the UN refugee agency has reported a steady stream of people fleeing violence in the region with ‘harrowing tales of killings and destruction,’ a news release from Ms. Zerrougui’s Office notes that throughout 2014, the armed conflict in north-eastern Nigeria was one of the world’s deadliest for children.

There was a dramatic rise in violence, growing recruitment and use of children, sometimes very young, as well as countless abductions and attacks on schools, said the release, underscoring the Ms. Zerrougui’s concern at reports of sexual violence against girls, including forced marriages and rapes.

The beginning of 2015 brought relentless violence with the appalling suicide bombing committed by a girl allegedly as young as 10, killing several people in a market in Maiduguri, as well as what some organizations have termed as Boko Haram’s deadliest attack in Baga.

During her week-long visit to Nigeria, Ms. Zerrougui travelled to Nigeria to assess the conflict’s impact on children. She met the country’s federal authorities, the authorities of Adamawa State, the UN, the diplomatic community, civil society and
other partners to galvanize efforts to gather and verify information on grave violations committed against children.

This will help the Government and its partners provide better protection for children and promote accountability.

In Yola, the Special Representative met with displaced people from the conflict-affected areas, including children and women.

“I witnessed people’s shock and disbelief at the devastation suffered by their communities. I saw trauma in children’s eyes. The scale of the suffering is beyond what I anticipated to find. The people I met demand and deserve urgent protection” said Ms. Zerrougui.

In northern Nigeria, over 900,000 people, many of them women and children, have fled their homes. More than 300 schools have been severely damaged or destroyed, hundreds of children have been killed, injured or abducted from their homes and schools, said the release.

The Special Representative was encouraged by her open dialogue with Nigerian authorities and their commitment to collaborate with the United Nations, investigate allegations of violations committed against children and take the necessary actions to hold perpetrators accountable.

“I commend the Minister of Justice and Attorney General for his willingness to respond to reports of recruitment and use of children by government-affiliated self-defense groups in the three north-eastern states. He has agreed to issue an advisory recalling the prohibition of such a practice,” said Ms. Zerrougui.

The Special Representative also met with the representatives of the movement ‘Bring Back our Girls’ and remains deeply concerned by the fate of the more than 200 school girls abducted in Chibok in April 2014. She is equally concerned by the fate of all children abducted by Boko Haram.

The UN continues its advocacy with Nigerian authorities and supports all efforts that could lead to the children’s release, said the release.

Syria: UN relief agencies appeal for more funding as winter freeze sweeps region

16 January - As winter conditions worsen across the Middle East, additional funding is ‘urgently needed’ to enable the United Nations and other humanitarian actors to reach millions of distressed Syrians before it is too late, a senior UN relief official urged today.

“Winter has brought more hardship to Syrians already struggling to find safe shelter and ways to feed, clothe, and protect their families from illness and exposure to risk,” Yacoub El Hillo, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria, said in a press release.

The official’s comments come as many Syrians continue to reel from the brutal winter storm that has battered large swathes of the Middle East, dumping snow and rain on the region and lowering temperatures below freezing.

In preparation for the cold season, the UN and its partners had launched a $206 million winterization plan in October 2014, targeting some 3.3 million people inside Syria with blankets and warm clothing, fuel, winter kits, and cash assistance.

Nevertheless, the winter plan remains underfunded by $70 million, according to the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

“At four years of crisis, people’s ability to cope is extremely stretched, and the needs continue to grow,” Mr. El Hillo continued. “Though the international community has been generous, funding has not kept pace in the face of growing...
needs.”

Against that backdrop, efforts to provide tens of thousands of Syrian families trapped in the besieged neighbourhood of Al-Wa’er in Homs are making headway as UN convoys carrying food for 75,000 people approach the heavily shelled city.

Speaking to reporters in Geneva, UN World Food Programme (WFP) spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs explained that, following extensive negotiations, a first convoy carrying 8,500 family food rations was delivered on 15 January to support some 42,500 civilians. The remaining 6,500 family rations, which would support 32,500 people, would be delivered in two additional convoys over the coming days, she said.

The WFP spokesperson added that conditions in Al-Wa’er had deteriorated over the past month amid an intensification of shelling and fighting which prevented all access for humanitarian deliveries. In addition, she noted, the heavy snowstorms which hit the region fuelled concerns over worsening humanitarian conditions for the estimated 250,000 residents trapped inside the neighbourhood.

Ms. Byrs echoed Mr. El Hillo’s appeal for additional funding, stating that the WFP alone urgently required $214.5 million for its operations in Syria and the region out of which $112.6 million was needed to meet food assistance needs for the next four months.

UN agency urges halt in Nigerian refugee repatriation amid mounting violence in country

16 January - The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) today called on the Governments of Niger and Nigeria to suspend the repatriation of hundreds of refugees who have fled escalating hostilities in Nigeria’s north-eastern Borno state, warning that their return would once again plunge them into the heart of the country’s brutal and ongoing conflict.

“Given the volatile security situation in Borno state and the recent attacks by insurgents, UNHCR is concerned about the nature of these returns and has asked the authorities to stop this operation until there are proper safeguards and a legal framework between Nigeria, Niger and UNHCR,” the UN agency’s spokesperson, William Spindler, said in a Geneva briefing.

The repatriations – which reportedly began on 14 January – have seen hundreds of refugees bussed over the border from Niger to Maiduguri, the capital of Nigeria’s Borno state, while another 11 buses are currently prepared to return more refugees in the coming days, the UN agency explained.

According to UNHCR, refugees fleeing the violence in Nigeria continue to arrive in neighbouring Niger with ‘harrowing tales of killing and destruction,’ including the ‘extreme violence’ inflicted on the lakeside town of Baga where hundreds of people were allegedly killed earlier this month by the Islamist extremist group, Boko Haram.

“A woman, who ran away from Baga with her five children and her husband, said she saw insurgents run over women and children with their cars, shoot at people and use knives to cut their throats in the street,” continued Mr. Spindler. “The terrified family managed to escape at night before reaching Maiduguri, from where they took a bus to Niger.”

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

In addition, another 13,000 Nigerian refugees have arrived in western Chad since the attacks on Baga began. Mr. Spindler said UNHCR was concerned that refugees from Baga and surrounding areas were choosing to flee by water into Chad, indicating that overland routes into Niger were blocked by insurgents.
The UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that, overall, some 200,000 people have fled Nigeria to neighbouring countries, including Chad, Cameroon and Niger.

**UN Assembly President says post-2015 agenda will need partnership across full spectrum of stakeholders**

16 January - Today, during an interactive dialogue with representatives from civil society, Sam Kutesa, President of the General Assembly, urged the participants to harness resources for an inclusive, transformative post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

“Together, we must go beyond business as usual,” he said, calling for a partnership of development cooperation that promotes global governance and national accountability through existing country-level mechanisms, as well as regional and international frameworks for action.

In that spirit, he hailed the unprecedented collaborative efforts surrounding the creation of a post-2015 development agenda, currently being crafted by UN Member States as a successor framework to the landmark Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which will culminate at the end of the year.

“Over 5 million people have taken the MyWorld Survey to voice their priorities,” he informed the participants.

He went on to announce intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda to be held from 19 to 21 January, explaining that the first session would feature an interactive dialogue with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, parliaments, local authorities and the private sector.

The Assembly President also informed the group of informal that interactive hearings with representatives of civil society and the business sector that will take place from 4 to 5 March, and he encouraged non-governmental organizations and business sector entities to participate in the Third International Conference on Financing for Development and its preparatory process. That Conference is set to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 13 to 16 July.

Spotlighting other upcoming activities, Mr. Kutesa announced that he would be convening a series of high-level events including on, mean of Implementation for the post-2015 development agenda (9 and 10 February); advancing gender equality and empowerment of women in the post-2015 development agenda (6 March); a thematic debate on Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation is being arranged for April; and on ‘The Demographic Dividend and Youth Employment’ (1 June).

“The United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service is working closely with my office to manage a self-nomination process of civil society representatives for these events,” he explained, with the aim of reaching out to major groups, regional and international civil society networks new participants with innovative ideas.

Mr. Kutesa told the participants that his office was coordinating with the Secretary-General’s post-2015 team, the UN Millennium Campaign, the MYworld team, the UN Foundation, and other stakeholders to promote partner engagement through virtual and social media networks.

“In the past, such processes have brought new voices and ideas to the forefront of discussions on a wide array of global challenges and fostered valuable and constructive inputs,” Mr. Kutesa said, “Going forward, we hope to further strengthen such engagement and partnership across the full spectrum of relevant stakeholders.”
Ban appoints climate change official ahead of December UN climate conference

16 January - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has appointed Janos Pasztor of Hungary as the first-ever UN Assistant Secretary-General on Climate Change, the Organization’s Spokesperson’s office announced today.

According to a press release, Mr. Pasztor will serve as the Senior Adviser of the Secretary-General on climate change until the critical 21st UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC) scheduled to be held in Paris in December.

“Mr. Pasztor’s tenure will focus on supporting efforts towards a universal climate agreement in 2015 and mobilising global climate action on the ground, including through a coherent United Nations System-wide action,” the press release explained.

A former Acting Executive Director at World Wildlife Fund International, Mr. Pasztor also boasts a rich experience within the UN system, having served as the Executive Secretary of the UN Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Global Sustainability from 2011 to 2012 and as the Director of the Secretary-General’s Climate Change Support Team from 2008 to 2010. From 1993 to 2006, Mr. Pasztor also held various senior positions in the UNFCCC.

UN-facilitated Libyan political dialogue to continue next week in Geneva

16 January - Two days of intensive United Nations-led political talks aimed at finding ways to end Libya’s political, security and institutional crisis came to an end in Geneva yesterday, with stakeholders agreeing to pick up the dialogue again next week, expressing their unequivocal commitment to a united and democratic Libya governed by the rule of law and respect for human rights.

The talks, hosted by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), were held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, and a press statement from the Mission said the discussions had been 'constructive and conducted in a positive atmosphere,’ reflecting the participants' sincere commitment to reach common ground.

“Dialogue is an ongoing process,” the statement said, adding that Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of UNSMIL Bernardino Leon noted he expected the process to take time and 'travel a difficult road.’ Still, there was a need for commitment to urgently solving the crisis.

“Time is of the essence and all sincere Libyans must quickly move towards finding solutions to the crisis if they are to prevent further political, security and economic deterioration in their country,” the statement said.

In this week’s talks, participants agreed an agenda aiming to reach a political agreement to form a consensual national unity government, as well as making security arrangements necessary to end fighting and ensure the withdrawal of armed groups from Libyan cities. There was also a call for confidence-building measures to safeguard Libya’s national unity and to alleviate the population’s suffering were also discussed.

The dialogue is guided by a set of principles, including commitment to the foundations of the 17 February 2011 revolution, respect for the legitimacy of State institutions, separation of powers and the peaceful transfer of power, and the rejection of violence and terrorism.

“Dialogue is an inclusive and transparent process driven by Libya's supreme national interest, including safeguarding the
country's national unity and protecting its resources and wealth,” said the statement.

The Mission and the participants expressed their hope that all the invited representatives, including those who did not attend this round, would take part in a new round of talks again scheduled for next week.

Participants also expressed concern about the growing terrorist threat, calling for concerted efforts to counter it, and condemning the recent killing and abduction of Libyan citizens and foreign nationals.

The first round of talks conclude at the same time the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) describes an upsurge in fighting since the start of the year that has sparked more displacement, with many fleeing for their fourth or fifth time.

Most displacement has occurred around Benghazi, Derna, and near the Gulf of Sidra in Ben Jawad and Ras Lanuf and although numbers are hard to estimate, the Agency points to the Benghazi local council reporting 90,000 unable to return to their homes.

“Across the country we estimate that approximately 400,000 people are displaced,” said the UNHCR in a press statement. “In addition, Libya is host to nearly 37,000 refugees and asylum-seekers of different nationalities whose humanitarian conditions are increasingly precarious.”

Most people have been displaced for over 3 to 6 months with increasing numbers being hosted in public facilities such as schools. As their cash savings dwindle they are unable to pay for housing rentals. The winter months are especially tough as temperatures in Tripoli, Benghazi and the Southern towns are below 10 degrees Celsius.

In the past 7 months, UNHCR has distributed winter- and non-food items to 27,940 people in Tripoli and other western cities, including to members of the Tawerghan community displaced since 2011.

On 5 January, in partnership with the Tomazeen non-governmental organization in Libya, UNHCR delivered non-food items such as sleeping mats, plastic sheets, and kitchen sets to 150 displaced families in the Southern towns of Ghat, Lawenat and Tahala targeting the most vulnerable families.

Bangladesh: UN rights office alarmed at 'deepening' political violence

16 January - The United Nations human rights office has expressed concern over the rising levels of political violence rippling across Bangladesh amid fears of a return to a state of destructive brinkmanship seen in the run up to the country's 2014 elections.

“The deepening political violence in Bangladesh, resulting from the failure of the two major political parties to resolve their differences peacefully, is very disturbing,” Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said today at a press briefing in Geneva.

“We are concerned about the potential for the violence, which already led to deaths, injury and disruption, to spiral,” she added.

In late 2013, as Bangladesh prepared for its imminent elections, supporters of the country's major parties clashed with each other and with security forces, leaving scores of people dead, hundreds injured, and causing extensive damage to property.

The incidents prompted former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, to urge the country's political leaders to set their differences aside, immediately halt the “destructive brinkmanship” and use their influence to ease the unrest.

According to a press release issued by OHCHR earlier this morning, the current the bout of unrest began on 5 January when
the opposition Bangladesh National Party, otherwise known as the BNP, called on its supporters to launch a transport blockade to mark the anniversary of last year’s elections which the opposition had boycotted. The Government, for its part, imposed a ban on demonstrations and prevented senior members of the BNP from attending the protest. Since then, the UN agency explained, over a dozen people have reportedly been killed and hundreds injured in ongoing clashes between supporters of the two parties, as well as with security forces. A number of opposition leaders have also been arrested.

Amid the escalating violence, OHCHR said the “rampant use” of arson attacks on vehicles was “particularly disturbing,” citing a recent incident in which a crowded public bus was set on fire, resulting in the immolation deaths of four people including one child. The same day, a senior BNP advisor was shot at and his car set on fire.

“We urge all political parties to show restraint and to bring an immediate end to the violence,” Ms. Shamdasani continued. “We also call on the authorities to ensure the prompt, impartial and effective investigation of all killings committed – irrespective of whether they were committed by State or non-State actors.”

The OHCHR spokesperson also urged the Government to ensure that all arrests and detentions of key opposition leaders were “not arbitrary,” and that all measures taken to restore law and order are “conducted in line with the parameters set by international human rights law, including respect for the freedoms of peaceful assembly, movement and speech.”