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In Washington, UN chief meets key US Government officials to discuss global challenges

16 April - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is in Washington, D.C. today where he is meeting with members of Congress and other United States officials to discuss the crises in Yemen and Syria and other pressing global issues, including Ebola and climate change.

Mr. Ban’s spokesperson in New York announced that the UN chief has met with members of the US House Foreign Affair Committee and discussed the Organization’s work on many issues of mutual concern, including Ebola, climate change, Syria and Yemen.

The Secretary-General is expected to raise those and other issues this afternoon when he meets with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Thus far, Mr. Ban has had a working lunch with the United States Defense Secretary, Ashton Carter.

The two officials discussed the preparations for the 2015 summit on peacekeeping reform. They also talked about UN peacekeeping missions around the world, including those in Haiti, Mali and South Sudan. They also discussed the situation in Yemen.

This evening, the Secretary-General will speak and take questions at the National Press Club, which is expected to be broadcast live on C-Span and UN WebTV.
Syria: UN agency continues to seek unhindered access to besieged Yarmouk camp

16 April - While ramping up assistance to Palestinian refugees and Syrian civilians that have fled a besieged camp on the southern edge of Damascus, the United Nations agency tasked with aiding Palestinians throughout the region said today that it is still seeking unhindered access to Yarmouk camp itself where thousands remain trapped by fighting among armed groups.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) said that it carried out a fourth mission to Yalda, an area to the east of Yarmouk hosting displaced people from Yarmouk. Humanitarian activities also continued in Tadamoun, to the north-east.

An update on the situation report the agency is providing humanitarian assistance to 1,000 families affected by the crisis. UNRWA medical personnel established a mobile health point, treating 153 patients over the course of the day, a sustained increase from 15 April. The UNRWA distribution team will return to Yalda tomorrow.

In addition, the UNRWA team travelled to Babila and Beit Saham, areas adjacent to Yalda to conduct rapid needs assessments and meet with local leaders. UNRWA plans to establish operations in these areas on Saturday, 18 April, substantially expanding the overall response.

UNRWA continues to provide humanitarian assistance to the civilians from Yarmouk who remain displaced in Tadamoun and is also providing daily hot lunches for all civilians, complemented by regular distributions of canned food.

“This continued distribution in Yalda, and planned expansion to other areas represents a sustained demonstration of UNRWA’s commitment to providing essential assistance to all civilians affected by the intensive armed clashes that have recently affected in Yarmouk,” the agency says in a press release.

Meanwhile, UNRWA says its priority remains the delivery of humanitarian aid to civilians within Yarmouk itself and the agency reiterated its strong demand for all parties to respect and comply with their obligations to protect civilians and to establish of secure conditions under which it can deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance.

UN urges ‘clear commitment’ by States to save lives following latest Mediterranean tragedy

16 April - The European Union must intensify its efforts in placing the rights of migrants at the centre of its migration policies, a United Nations human rights committee affirmed today following the latest maritime tragedy in the Mediterranean Sea which may have claimed hundreds of lives.

“States of origin, destination and transit must also address the root causes that lead to smuggling and trafficking in persons,” the UN Committee on the Rights of Migrant Workers (CMW) said in a press release issued earlier this afternoon which added that the continual loss of life in the Mediterranean’s waters transcended the limits of natural calamity and was, in fact, “a human rights tragedy.”

The 13 April capsizing of a double-deck boat in waters 120 kilometres south of Italy’s Lampedusa Island has prompted widespread concern throughout the UN system amid reports that over 400 migrants may have lost their lives.
In fact, 2015 has already seen some 31,500 people make crossings to Italy and Greece – the first and second largest countries of arrival respectively. The UN refugee agency has reported that numbers have also been recently picking up as weather conditions in the Mediterranean improve.

The uptick in migrant flows into Europe and the severity and repetition of such tragedies has fed the CMW’s call for Member States in the region, and other States that serve as migrant destination points around the world, to make “a clear commitment to ensure a comprehensive rights-based approach to migration,” including applying a focus on its roots causes.

The UN Committee is also reiterating its call for all states to ratify the International Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families which, to date, has only been ratified by 47 States since it was adopted 25 years ago.

“The Convention sets out the best strategy to prevent abuses and address the challenges that migrant workers face,” CMW Chairperson Francisco Carrion Mena added. “It also provides guidance on the elaboration of national migration policies for international co-operation based on respect for human rights and rule of law.”

Just last October, Mr. Carrion Mena lamented the growing number of lives lost at sea and on land as a result of insufficient channels of migration, suggesting that States could better their efforts in ensuring migrants a safer avenue of passage.

In their press release, the Committee today urged States to adopt the suggested guidelines “to ensure that all migrants, regardless of their legal status, how they arrive at the border, where they come from or what they look like, are able to enjoy their human rights.”

DOHA: At Crime Congress, UN spotlights ‘epidemic’ of prison overcrowding

16 April - With over 10 million people in prisons worldwide, prison overcrowding has reached epidemic proportions in many countries, a senior official from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said today at the 13th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

“Prison overcrowding can also be considered as a symptom of a malfunctioning justice system, and the problems of overcrowding have to be dealt with by the prison administration, although the solutions are seldom within their reach,” Piera Barzano, Senior Regional Advisor of the Justice Section at UNODC, said during a side event at the UN Crime Congress currently under way in Doha.

There are usually several reinforcing reasons that may lead to prison overcrowding, she continued, and such causes are not confined to the limits of criminal justice but extend to other spheres of State responsibility such as welfare policy, access to health services, education, and employment.

Running until the 19 April, the Crime Congress, held every five years, brings together governments, policy-makers and experts to consider how best to integrate crime prevention and criminal justice into the wider UN agenda. It also focuses on links between security and justice, and sustainable development.

Prison overcrowding refers to the occupancy rate and the official capacity of prisons. It refers to situations where the number of prisoners exceeds such official prison capacity. More specifically, the rate of overcrowding is defined as that part of occupancy rate above one hundred per cent and is usually understood that occupancy above 120 per cent can be considered as serious overcrowding.

Last year, 77 countries worldwide were reported having a prisoner occupancy rate higher than 120 per cent, with some as high as almost 400 per cent. The problem is very localized and extremely challenging, according to UNODC. Overcrowding also increases the risk of transmission of communicable diseases and poses an immense management challenge to prison administrations.
“Prison overcrowding impacts the quality of nutrition, sanitation, prisoner-activities, health care services and the care of vulnerable groups. It affects the physical, mental health and well-being of all prisoners. It generates prisoner tension, violence, exacerbates existing mental and physical health problems,” said Ms. Barzano.

Five years ago at the 12th UN Crime Congress, in Brazil, a workshop was held on the ‘Strategies and Best Practices against Overcrowding in Correctional Facilities.’

“So here we are five years down the line,” continued Ms. Barzano, but there is still a growing recognition that one of the key obstacles to implementing the provisions of the standard minimum rules of the treatment of prisoners is overcrowding in prisons,

She also highlighted UNODC’s work with the Red Cross to publish a handbook on strategies to reduce overcrowding in prison. Calling it a practical tool for practitioners and policy-makers, she said the handbook is available on UNODC’s website in several languages.

“Overcrowding is a very serious humanitarian concern as it generates substandard and inhumane conditions. Tens of thousands of people are forced to live in congested accommodations with insufficient space to move, sit or sleep,” said Miroslawa Czerna of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who was also at the event.

“Being squeezed into cramped living quarters in appalling hygiene conditions and with no privacy makes the experience of being deprived of freedom distressful in normal circumstances exponentially worse. It erodes human dignity,” she added.

It also exacerbates tensions and endangers detainees, supervisors and security, Ms. Czerna emphasized.

As Yemen crisis deepens, UN food relief agency calls on warring factions to allow supply restock

16 April - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) announced today that it will, along with partners, reach some 105,000 displaced people in Yemen’s main southern city of Aden over the next few days, while warning that with millions in need amid the deepening crisis, its supplies are now running low.

“We appeal to all warring parties to the conflict to allow us to replenish our food and fuel stocks to save lives,” said Purnima Kashyap, WFP Representative and Yemen Country Director in a statement to the press.

“We have prepositioned food in the last few days before the fighting flared up but we are struggling to reach people due to the deteriorating security situation,” Ms. Kashyap added.

Two weeks of escalating violence have left many Yemenis hungry, trapped inside their cities and villages with food stocks running low. There are also severe fuel shortages, especially in Aden and areas of the capital, Sana’a. The situation is of particular concern because almost half of the population of Yemen is food-insecure, struggling to grow or buy food.

WFP in 2014 found that 10.6 million people, or 41 per cent of the population in Yemen, were food insecure. Of these, 5 million people were found to be severely food insecure and in need of food assistance. It is estimated today, following the escalation of violence, that more than 12 million Yemenis are food insecure.

Yemen imports almost 90 per cent of its basic food from abroad. Hence, WFP is extremely concerned that the impact of traders being unable to import food and move it inside the country will affect people’s ability to feed their families, especially the poor and most vulnerable. In most of the areas worst hit by the conflict, shops and food markets are closed and the supply of food and other essentials has been seriously disrupted.

An interagency rapid assessment of the humanitarian situation in Aden showed that access to food is one of the most serious problems in all locations, with shops closed or people unable to leave homes to go to markets. Lack of cooking gas and
increasing food prices have been also reported in many parts of the governorate.

WFP provided food assistance in the last few days to cover April and May needs to 16,000 refugees, mainly Somalis, in Kharaz camp outside of Aden. WFP has also provided a two-month food ration to over 13,000 people in Mazraq I and III camps, mostly displaced by the earlier conflict in the northern Sa’ada region.

The agency also provides cash transfers to severely food-insecure households in addition to the monthly cash assistance they already receive from the government. In Lahj, Marib, and Sana’a, WFP distributed nearly $1 million in this way to more than 76,000 people.

In related news, the United Nations has announced that Jamal Benomar, the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Yemen, has expressed an interest in moving on to another assignment. A successor shall be named in due course. Until that time and beyond, the UN will continue to spare no efforts to re-launch the peace process in order to get the political transition back on track.

Mr. Benomar has spent the past four years working closely with the Yemenis to realise their legitimate aspirations for democratic change fulfilled. On behalf of the Secretary-General, Mr. Benomar brokered the Transition Agreement in November 2011, facilitated the successful conclusion of the National Dialogue Conference in January 2014 that took 10 months of deliberations, and mediated the Peace and National Partnership Agreement in September 2014.

More recently, Mr. Benomar chaired and facilitated all-inclusive negotiations for over two months to get the transition back on track. Unfortunately, this process was interrupted with the dramatic escalation of violence.

‘Dramatic’ progress in fighting Ebola must be followed by long-term recovery efforts

16 April - Intense efforts to control the Ebola outbreak in the three most-affected West African countries will continue, the United Nations health chief said in Washington, DC today, adding that the international community is also looking for ways to build on dramatic recent progress by aiding with efforts aimed at recovery from the outbreak.

“The goal is to help people and their communities to return to a normal life again,” said Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO). “It means that children are going back to school, women can once again shop in their local markets, and livelihoods are restored.”

She placed particular importance on rebuilding health systems and services to reduce risks that were inherent within weak systems. Such rebuilt systems should cover basic, essential, primary healthcare with sensitive surveillance to give early warnings of any dangerous outbreaks.

“The health systems in the three countries were fragile to begin with,” Dr. Chan acknowledged. “They collapsed during the Ebola outbreak.”

She said trust and confidence must be restored to ensure that parents immunize their children, pregnant women have confidence in giving birth safely and so malaria and other infectious diseases can be prevented.

Bruce Aylward, Assistant Director-General of the WHO provided some impressions of the outbreak response from the front-lines. He underlined the importance of building resilient systems and helping the most-affected States – Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone – to recover. Yet, he stressed that it would be impossible to fully recover if the main task – eradicating Ebola – was not completed.

“Success is not assured,” he said. “There is a terrible, terrible and growing sense that this is done. This is not done. It started with one case. There were 37 cases last week. It is not done.”
While pointing to “stunning” progress in reining in the outbreak and meeting ambitious targets on reducing prevalence of Ebola, including the effort to limit new cases to coastal areas that would be easier to control as the rainy season looms, Dr. Aylward stressed the difficulty associated with those efforts.

“It’s been 12 grinding months to get here but that’s where we’ve arrived right now,” he said. “It’s a bumpy road but it is going in the right direction.”

David Nabarro, the UN’s Special Envoy on Ebola, stressed how tough the global response to the “frightening devastation” wrought by Ebola has been throughout the process so far.

“It’s a cause of insecurity that needs to be taken as seriously as terrorism,” he said. “It needs defences as well financed and organised as terrorism.”

DOHA: UN anti-crime meeting highlights measures to curb illicit trade in cultural property

16 April - Weighing in on the vital importance of the world’s cultural artifacts and the illegal trade that endangers them, experts at an event held at the United Nations Crime Congress, under way in Doha, Qatar, urged Member States to use the existing legal instruments to fight this crime and stressed the importance of raising awareness.

“We are pushing and we are encouraging all Member States to implement the existing Conventions and guidelines that are available. I think there are enough legal instruments to be able to counter illicit trafficking of cultural heritage,” said Anna Paolini, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for the countries of the Gulf region and Yemen.

“We encourage Member States to establish a national registry and inventory of cultural heritage because this is a very important tool for risk management and prevention, as well as to introduce risk-management planning and to align and enforce local legislation,” she added.

The workshop, a highlight of today’s work at the 13th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, was organized by the National Institute of Justice of the United States, the Korean Institute of Criminology, the International Scientific and Professional Advisory Council and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

In a separate interview with UN Radio, Duncan Chappell, Professor of Law at the University of Sydney said the current turmoil in the Middle East, “the cradle of civilization,” spotlighted the need to address this issue head on.

According to UNESCO, pillage of cultural heritage and antiquities in both Iraq and Syria has reached an unprecedented scale, fueling the respective conflicts by providing revenues for armed groups and terrorists.

Just two months ago, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution urging global cooperation “to impair, isolate and incapacitate” terrorist threats, approving measures targeting sources of funding for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Al-Nusrah Front (ANF), and condemning those buying oil from the groups, banning all trade in looted antiquities from Iraq and Syria, and calling on States to end ransom payments.

The resolution called on both UNESCO and Interpol to help step up protection of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq, and subsequently, last month, UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova, launched in Baghdad a social media campaign – #Unite4Heritage, to raise awareness and to build support for the protection of heritage where it is threatened by extreme violence.

While, participants at today’s event underscored the difficulties in quantifying the phenomenon, the illegal trade in cultural property is thought to be worth between $2 billion and $6 billion per year.
“Objects that are dug up illegally, generally, nobody is going to report that. And it is only when [those objects] appear on the open market that we know they have been stolen,” Mr. Chappell said, explaining why the job of identifying and tracking what has been stolen, destroyed or smuggled.

“[Further], Interpol, which has some pretty good databases, doesn’t necessarily get any information about this sort of illicit excavations either. And the third reason is that there are no good inventories in many of the countries where these objects are taken,” he said.

Mariya Polner, policy advisor at the World Customs Organization, said the job of customs agencies could be compared to “looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“The chain is as strong as its weakest link…with common effort and goodwill, we can work together to preserve the cultural heritage for the future generations,” she said.

To reduce the demand of cultural heritage, Ms. Paolini said that raising awareness, and strengthening education and advocacy at global and local levels are important “to provide a counter narrative to sectarian propaganda in this region.”

“Rather than rely on a great deal of criminal law which generally has been the response to punish through the use of severe penalties people who are engaged in this sort of activities, we should be doing more to stop the demand for this type of crime,” suggested Mr. Chappell.

“It can only really operate with people who are prepared to buy these looted objects. People turn a blind eye to the provenance of [these artifacts] in many cases and are quite prepared to buy them if they have got enough money and interest. That sort of attitude should change,” he concluded.

‘Clear and critical’ need for sustainable energy in new development agenda, UN deputy chief says

16 April - The centrality of energy in a new global development agenda is clear and critical, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson said today as he delivered the opening remarks to a briefing for Member States on Sustainable Energy for All (SE4All).

Launched by the UN Secretary-General in 2011, the Sustainable Energy for All Initiative, a multi-stakeholder partnership, aims to achieve three inter-linked global targets namely to ensure universal access to modern energy services, to double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency and to double the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix, all by 2030.

“The adoption of a post-2015 agenda later this year is a landmark moment for this initiative. Many opportunities lie ahead for SE4All to help implement the proposed [sustainable development goals] on energy and climate change,” Mr. Eliasson declared, referring to the sustainability agenda being crafted by UN Member States to succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at the end of this year.

“In the post-2015 era, the Sustainable Energy Initiative can be at the forefront of efforts to implement these SDGs at country and regional levels, demonstrating how we can turn these goals into reality for people around the world.”

Currently, one out of five people lives without access to electricity, and nearly 40 per cent of the world’s population rely on wood, coal, charcoal or animal waste to cook and heat their homes, leading to over four million deaths each year from the effects of indoor smoke. Addressing this while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions and tackling climate change is a crucial challenge.

At the UN, meanwhile, governments have already identified sustainable energy as one of the new generation of development goals that are expected to be adopted in September.
The key role of the SE4All Initiative, Mr. Eliasson continued, would largely include helping translate concrete goals and targets at the national level; mobilizing finance and investment from both the private and public sectors; and helping to track and monitor progress.

However, he added, for the Initiative be successful in a post-2015 landscape, a “solid and clear institutional arrangement” would be needed, particularly through the involvement of a non-profit organization, as the UN did not currently have a mandate from the General Assembly to establish a full-fledged entity on energy. Yet, establishing such an international non-profit organization “is the best way to continue to drive forward the sustainable energy agenda.”

Mr. Eliasson nonetheless underscored the Organization’s strong commitment to SE4All, adding that the UN system would continue to invest in sustainable energy at global, regional and country levels beginning with the upcoming Sustainable Energy for All Forum scheduled for next month.

“There is a lot to do in a short space of time,” the Deputy Secretary-General concluded.

Human rights and counter-terrorism must go hand-in-hand, say UN experts

16 April - Only through a strict adherence to international human rights standards can the world’s counter-terrorism strategies ultimately succeed, two United Nations human rights experts have declared.

“Just as much as we condemn terrorism, particularly at a time when the international community reaffirms its unreserved commitment to combat it, we must demand that human rights be respected in the context of such a challenge,” said Ben Emmerson, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, and the UN Special Rapporteur on religious freedom, Heiner Bielefeldt, in a press release issued today.

Pointing to the recent terrorist attack against Kenya’s Garissa University College in which at least 147 students and lecturers were killed, the two experts said the incident once again showed the “urgent need to rethink counter-terrorism responses based on law enforcement and military force,” adding that Member States needed to confront the non-religious driving forces of terrorism “more seriously.”

“This is particularly true when confronting challenges such as armed conflict, poor governance, environmental degradation, endemic corruptions, intricate historic legacies of a country, extreme poverty, social, cultural, economic and political discrimination, as well as marginalization of large sections of the population, or prolonged periods of State collapse.”

These circumstances, the experts continued, provide “a fertile soil for recruitment” for extremist movements that promise a prospect for change from the status quo but then resort to “unacceptable means” of acts of terrorism to achieve their goals.

“By actively promoting and protecting human rights, States contribute to preventing terrorism in an effort to address its root causes and risk factors,” Mr. Emmerson and Mr. Bielefeldt added. “This is not solely a question of legitimacy; it is also a question of effective prevention.”

In the press release, the UN experts also suggested that Member States recognize the suffering of victims of terrorist acts and accept “a special obligation” to victims of terrorism occurring on their territory. However, they warned, the suffering of victims should never be misused as a pretext to deny the human rights of those suspected of terrorism.

“This adds to the vicious circle of terrorism by contributing to the dehumanization of victims of terrorism,” the independent experts concluded. “Genuine respect for the humanity of the victims requires that the protection of human rights is not invoked to curtail human rights.”

To that point, they said, Member States should move towards the adoption of a specific international instrument setting out
the rights of victims of terrorism and the corresponding obligations on States.