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‘Essential shifts’ needed for UN to tackle new peacekeeping challenges, report reveals

16 June - Focus on political solutions, responsive and flexible operations, stronger partnerships and field-focused and people-centered mandates; these are the essential shifts the United Nations must urgently address as it faces challenging new peacekeeping and conflict prevention landscapes, the chair of a high-level expert panel said today, introducing a long-awaited report at the world body’s New York Headquarters.

“Primacy of politics means that lasting peace is achieved through political solutions and not through military and technical engagements alone. Political solutions must guide all UN peace operations,” said José Ramos Horta, former President of Timor-Leste and Nobel Laureate at a press briefing where he presented on behalf of the 16-member panel key recommendations and areas where the group agreed reforms should be implemented.

On 31 October 2014, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the establishment of a High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, chaired by Mr. Ramos-Horta. Responsible for making a comprehensive assessment of the state of UN peace operations today and the emerging needs of the future, the panel was also tasked with examining special political missions.

The new survey is being made public 15 years after the release of the groundbreaking Brahimi Report, named after long-time UN adviser and renowned Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi who chaired a similar high-level panel convened by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Earlier today, the new report was handed over to Mr. Ban, who said he would study its findings “carefully” before transmitting it to the UN General Assembly and the Security Council.

For information media - not an official record
“We will be leading the implementation phase from my Office, with the close participation of all the key departments”, the UN chief stated. “My instruction to them will be to carry on the spirit the Panel employed; to be bold; and to see the task as nothing less than preparing the United Nations to rise to the challenges of the future.”

Speaking on behalf of the Panel with the Vice-Chair, Ameerah Haq, former UN Under-Secretary-General for the Department of Field Support, Mr. Ramos-Horta emphasized the need for UN missions to be “tailed to context,” the UN being encouraged to should embrace the term ‘peace operations’ to denote the full spectrum of responses in one articulated sequence, without isolating military components from police and civilian ones.

In addition, a “more resilient global and regional architecture for international peace and security” is required for the future; he said, convinced that the UN Headquarters must lay out a “vision” and focus more on enabling field missions, while personnel should renew “their resolve to serve and protect the people,” with one goal in mind: the well-being of civilians on the ground.

The Panel worked primarily through consultations, thematic workshops, review of submissions and relevant literature, capital visits, and targeted interviews, Mr. Ramos-Horta. Consultations with Member States, civil society and academia were held and the Panel received more than 80 written submissions from more than 50 Member States, regional and other organizations – such as the African Union – UN partner entities, civil society, academia and research outfits.

Calling for a stronger push for prevention, the Panel recommends the establishment of an “international forum on prevention drawing on external resources and knowledge,” as well as an “earlier engagement” by the Security Council to address “emerging threats”.

On rapid deployment, the group was unanimous in recommending the UN to lay out a “vision” and “roadmap for a stronger network of national and regional standby capabilities.”

Taking note of complaints expressed by a number of troop and police contributing countries about the lack of consultations, the Panel has concluded that such consultations should be institutionalized “to forge a common purpose for missions from the outset,” the Chair continued.

Among other recommendations, the report says the UN Secretariat should consider the establishment of a position of an “additional Deputy Secretary-General responsible for peace and security”, as well as a proposal for a single ‘peace operations account’ to finance all missions and related back-stopping activities in future.

UN and NASA astronaut Scott Kelly launch #whyspacematters photo contest

16 June - The United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs and United States astronaut Scott Kelly, currently on board the International Space Station, today launched a global photography competition to highlight the importance of outer space for sustainable development on Earth.

To highlight the role of space-based science and technologies and their applications for sustainable development, the UN Office, known by the acronym UNOOSA, with cooperation of NASA with Mr. Kelly, is asking the public to submit photos depicting just why space matters to us in our daily lives.

“[It is] an honour to have Scott Kelly share his experience in space with the United Nations,” said UNOOSA Director Simonetta Di Pippo. “This campaign will help to promote the use of space science and technologies in such areas as disaster risk reduction, tracking the effects of climate change and in the equality of access to education and telemedicine.”

Mr. Kelly is currently on board the International Space Station on a unique one-year mission, together with Russian
cosmonaut Mikhail Kornienko, where he will be setting a single-mission record for a US astronaut.

Speaking from the space station, Mr. Scott said: “We learn something every time we go to space. And the International Space Station is one of the world’s greatest laboratories – where we are helping with advances in medicine, biology, chemistry and materials sciences. It is the pursuit of these advances off the Earth that help improve lives on Earth.”

“And that is why I am so committed to space exploration and embarking on this year-long mission,” he said “I look forward to seeing the images from people around the world on how space technology has impacted them where they live.”

The deadline for submission of photos under a monthly theme is the 10th of each month, and each month a winner will be chosen and announced by Scott Kelly from the space station.

Participants are asked to submit pictures through Instagram using #whyspacematters and tagging @UNOOSA. Kelly will announce the winning photo each month by posting it from his Instagram account @StationCDRKelly.

The UN office has given examples of themes that can be used in photographs, such as “space for developing economies,” “environment and climate change,” “disaster risk reduction.”

UNOOSA, which is based in Vienna, Austria, is responsible for promoting international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space, and serves as the secretariat for the UN General Assembly’s only body dealing exclusively with international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space, the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), which is currently holding its fifty-eighth session, in Vienna, through the end of the end of the week.

**South Sudan: amid ‘intensifying’ crisis, UN and European Union mobilize $275 million in aid**

16 June - To tackle the humanitarian impact of the “relentlessly deteriorating” crisis in South Sudan, the European Union and the United Nations today announced that more than $275 million has been pledged in support of the victims in the country and the wider region.

The pledges were made during a high-level conference in Geneva organised by the European Union (EU) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on the humanitarian situation in the world’s youngest country.

According to OCHA, the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan has deteriorated relentlessly since violence broke out at the end of 2013. More than 2 million people have been internally displaced and are vulnerable to attack, gender-based violence and forced recruitment to armed groups. An estimated 4.6 million people are facing severe food insecurity and the start of the rainy season is increasing people’s risk of water-borne diseases and malaria.

“We must fund the aid effort adequately and enable humanitarian workers to provide basic services – food, water, shelter and healthcare – to people in the most difficult-to-reach locations,” said UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O’Brien. “It is vital to send a message of solidarity and hope to South Sudan.”

The conflict has triggered the flight of more than half a million refugees into neighbouring Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda. More than 17,000 children have crossed borders, being separated from their families.

In remarks ahead of the event, Mr. O’Brien, who is also the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, said that over the past month, the fighting has intensified [in the country] and there have been “completely unacceptable” attacks on UN bases where more than 140,000 people are sheltering.

Moreover, he said that eyewitness accounts and satellite images show that the parties to the conflict are “destroying” communities in parts of Greater Upper Nile state, he reported. Civilians have been terrorized and forced to flee for their lives. Villages have been razed; health facilities have been destroyed; livestock has been stolen; food has been taken and...
burned.

“We now have more new South Sudanese refugees than when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed after decades of civil war,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres.

“The neighbouring countries are severely impacted by this massive outflow, and humanitarian agencies lack the resources to address the enormous and growing needs. With a refugee population that is comprised of 70 per cent children, there is an even more urgent need to step up funding and address the most basic requirements for their protection,” he explained.

For his part, EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Christos Stylianides said the pledges at today’s conference show that the world has not forgotten the people of South Sudan. We are committed to alleviating their suffering.

“I witnessed this unfolding disaster first-hand just a few weeks ago. I also saw the admirable work done by humanitarian workers,” he said, adding: “Our first priority is to save lives; but this is a man-made crisis which cannot be solved by humanitarian aid alone. A political solution is urgently needed. I call on those fighting to stop the plight imposed on their people and give full protection and access to humanitarian workers.”

**Latest UN humanitarian report reveals surge in financing needs for relief efforts**

*16 June* - Amid a widespread diffusion of conflicts and crises across the globe, an increasing amount of funding is now required to respond to the world’s growing humanitarian calamities, according to the latest report released today by the United Nations’ relief arm.

Marking a $2.4 billion uptick in financing needs from the last appeal dated December 2014, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ (OCHA) *global humanitarian overview status report* warns that the Organization and its humanitarian partners will now require a record $18.8 billion to meet the needs of some 79 million vulnerable people across 37 countries.

“While donors give more generously every year, the gap between funds needed and funds provided continues to widen,” Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O’Brien, confirmed in a press release.

“This raises questions about our ability to continue to meet affected people’s needs, especially in protracted situations where 80 per cent of our work now takes place, and where we are asked to stay longer and to do more.”

From the ongoing crises in South Sudan, Yemen and Ukraine, to the relief and recovery efforts in earthquake-stricken Nepal, the humanitarian community is facing a series of challenges vast in scope and magnitude, including the dramatic global rise of internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to conflict. According to UN data, in fact, the number of IDPs in 2014 grew to 38 million people compared with 3.3 million the previous year.

“Despite these challenges, the UN and its humanitarian partners are reaching more people than ever and humanitarian workers are still bravely delivering aid to those most in need, often in settings beset by insecurity,” Mr. O’Brien added.

Nevertheless, the current financing outlook for OCHA’s most recent appeal remains worryingly disappointing: only $4.8 billion has been committed, leaving a funding gap of $14 billion.
Greek islands under ‘tremendous strain’ as hundreds of refugees arrive daily – UN

16 June - More than 55,000 refugees have arrived in the Greek islands so far this year, with hundreds arriving every day in inflatable dinghies and wooden boats, putting a “tremendous strain” on the communities that receive them and worsening conditions for the new arrivals, the United Nations refugee agency said today.

“The number of arrivals is expected to increase further during the summer, when weather conditions make the sea crossing from the Turkish mainland less hazardous,” William Spindler, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told a press briefing in Geneva.

“UNHCR is ready to continue working with the Greek authorities and civil society in order to address some of these challenges, but greater support from European Union Member states and institutions is urgently needed to avoid a humanitarian crisis,” Mr. Spindler said.

The spokesperson said initial reception conditions for refugees arriving in Greece's North Aegean and Dodecanese islands are worsening, despite the considerable efforts of local authorities and civil society.

According to UNHCR, since the beginning of this year, more than 55,000 refugees have arrived in Greece by sea from Turkey. More than 90 per cent are from countries experiencing war and conflict, principally Syria, with over 60 per cent of arrivals this year followed by Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia.

The main islands receiving them are Lesvos (some 21,600 arrivals), Chios (9,400), Kos (8,900), Leros (3,900) and Samos (3,500), the agency said.

Police, coast guard and local authorities have allocated additional personnel and resources but the response continues to fall short of needs and private citizens, local volunteers and non-governmental groups have all been distributing food, water, shoes and clothes to the refugees, Mr. Spindler said.

But UNHCR is particularly concerned that refugees with specific needs, such as unaccompanied children, the elderly, pregnant women, people with disabilities and victims of torture, may not be receiving appropriate care, he said.

For example on Lesvos, where most of the arrivals are being reported, the refugee agency said hundreds of men, women and children landing on the island’s northern coast are having to walk up to 70 kilometres to the island capital, Mytilini, to be identified and registered.
Thousands flee Syria for Turkey, escaping aggression between rival military forces – UN refugee agency

16 June - New fighting in northern Syria has forced 23,135 refugees – some 70 per cent of whom are women and children – to flee across the border into Turkey’s Sanliurfa province, the United Nations refugee agency reported today.

According to information received from the Turkish authorities this morning, William Spindler, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told reporters in Geneva that most of the new arrivals are Syrians escaping fighting between rival military forces in and around the key border town of Tel Abyad, which was controlled by militants and faces Akcakale across the border.

He added that also included were 2,183 Iraqis from Mosul, Ramadi and Falujjah.

People have been allowed to transverse at the Akcakale crossing and several points between Sanliurfa and Syria’s Raqqa province since 3 June, when fighting erupted.

At the same time, UNHCR field staff said most refugees arrived exhausted, carrying just a few belongings. Some had walked for days.

“UNHCR staff have visited several areas where people were crossing or waiting to cross since the arrivals began. This week, people have been fleeing directly to Akcakale to escape fighting in Tel Abyad,” Mr. Spindler elaborated.

He said he was unable to confirm international media reports claiming that the attacking forces captured the town, but did say that the Akcakale border was calm this morning.

At Akcakale, which lies some 80 kilometres north of the Syrian city of Raqqa, the Turkish authorities set up facilities to register and provide new arrivals with food and water, and vaccinate children.

Mr. Spindler noted that most of the refugees are staying with friends or relatives in and around Akcakale, but some with special needs or no alternative have moved to the refugee camps of Derik and Suruc where they can be cared for.

At the request of Turkey’s emergency relief agency – the Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances – UNHCR has provided 27,000 items of children’s clothing, 33,000 blankets and 8,000 mattresses for distribution by the Turkish authorities.

“We are constantly assessing needs,” said Mr. Spindler.

To recognize its vital role as a host country, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres has chosen to spend World Refugee Day, commemorated this Saturday 20 June, meeting evacuees in Turkey.

According to the latest data available, Turkey is host to 1,772,535 registered Syrian refugees – more than any other in the world – with about 259,000 living in 23 camps set up and managed by the Government.

Mr. Spindler concluded with an appeal to the international community “to continue to help shoulder the burden with Turkey and other neighbouring countries.”

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Syrian children play in the alleyway between tents in Akcakale camp. Turkey.

Photo: WFP/Berna Cetin
UN environment agency urges ban of microplastics in cosmetics and personal care products

16 June - Next time you are in the shower using a refreshing exfoliating shower gel, take a moment to check what the scrubbing agents are made of. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), chances are pretty high they are made of tiny plastic beads, and by the time the container is empty, you will have used and poured down the drain as much plastic as the packaging the gel came in.

This alarming fact is contained in a UNEP report Plastic in Cosmetics: Are We Polluting the Environment Through Our Personal Care?, which is a compilation of currently available knowledge on the linkages between cosmetics and plastic pollution in the oceans.

According to the study, “for the last 50 years, microparticles of plastic, or microplastics, have been used in personal care products and cosmetics, replacing natural options in a large number of cosmetic and personal care formulations.”

“Microbeads and other plastic ingredients are present in products ranging from toothpaste and shower gel to eye shadows and nail polish,” it said. “Their proportions vary in different products, from less than 1 per cent to more than 90 per cent of the content. In a typical shower gel analyzed in laboratory, there was roughly as much plastic material in the gel itself as in its packaging.”

And “washed down the drain, those particles cannot be collected for recycling, nor do they decompose in wastewater treatment facilities, inevitably ending up in the global ocean, where it fragments and remains” and “these plastics may take hundreds of years to completely degrade,” according to UNEP’s research.

The report, which was released earlier this month on the occasion of World Oceans Day, recommends a precautionary approach toward microplastic management, with an eventual phase-out and ban of their use in personal care products and cosmetics.

Currently, in the United States, Illinois became the first state to enact legislation banning the manufacture and sale of products containing microbeads. This two-part ban will enter into effect in 2018 and 2019.

And UNEP has announced the development of an app – ‘Beat the Microbead’ – in seven languages that allow customers to check whether personal care products contain microbeads by scanning a products barcode. UNEP said the app has been very popular, convincing a number of large multinationals such as Unilever, Johnson & Johnson and the Body Shop to announce their intent to stop using microbeads.

And the Netherlands, Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium and Sweden have issued a joint call to ban the microplastics used in personal care products, saying the measure will protect marine ecosystems – and seafood such as mussels – from contamination.

The UNEP study reports that “a typical exfoliating shower gel can contain roughly as much microplastic in the cosmetic formulation as is used to make the plastic packaging it comes in,” which translates into more than 4,300 tonnes of microplastic beads used in 2012 across all European Union countries.

It goes to say that plastic ingredients in these products are poured down the drain after use, cannot be collected for recycling, and do not decompose in wastewater treatment systems.

“More than 299 million tonnes of plastic was produced worldwide in 2013 some of which made its way to our oceans, costing approximately $13 billion per year in environmental damage to marine ecosystems,” according to UNEP. “Once in the ocean, plastic does not go away: it fragments, eventually breaking down into smaller pieces known as secondary...
microplastics.”

The UNEP report makes several recommendations for producers and consumers, as well as for researchers and policymakers.

It asks producers to take the potential impact of product ingredients on the natural environment into account during the design phase, consumers to “look in your bathroom – what contains microbeads – download the Beat the microbead app and avoid buying products that contain these plastics,” governments to promote phase out of microplastics in personal care and cosmetic products and researchers to look more into the implications of nano- and micro-sized plastics on human and marine ecosystem health, especially through ingestion and chemical transfer through the food chain.

**In Geneva, UN rights chief calls for ‘urgent measures’ in promoting girls’ education**

16 June - Although the empowerment of women has been among the most significant achievements of the past century, the international community must “push further” in its struggle to ensure the right to education for all girls, the top UN human rights official declared today.

“Investing in girls’ education is not only the right thing to do, it is also the smart thing to do,” Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said as he addressed a panel discussion on realizing the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl held at the UN Office at Geneva, Switzerland.

“As education expands girls’ horizons, opens up better earning opportunities, and improves women’s position in the family and society, it brings strong benefits to the entire community,” Mr. Zeid continued, noting that the benefits included “greater social stability, better health outcomes across generations, and a surge of economic growth.”

He explained that, according to a recent UN-backed Statistics on Women study of 174 Member States, the best predictor of a country’s so-called “peacefulness” is not its wealth or political structure but the well-being and education of women and girls. This finding, coupled with the considerable progress made towards achieving the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on gender equality marked “a tremendous force for social change,” according to Mr. Zeid.

At the same time, he warned, almost one-third of countries today continue to lag in achieving gender parity in primary education while less than half see as many girls as boys in lower-secondary grades.

“In several countries, education is far from being a zone of gender-sensitivity and safety; a shocking number of girls face sexual violence and harassment inside schools, and on their way to schools,” added the High Commissioner. “One-third of girls in developing countries are married before they’re 18, and millions give birth while they are still in their teens; most of these young women are prevented from continuing their education.”

Gender parity in education is also under threat from the growing spread of extremists who seek to extinguish any attempt at changing their obscurantist views. A recent paper issued by the UN human rights office (OHCHR) covering the years spanning 2009 to 2014 reported thousands of attacks against schools in at least 70 different countries, many of which were targeted for advocating girls’ education.

The violence, Mr. Zeid said, ultimately stemmed from a fear of the power of girls’ education “to spark and sustain social, cultural, economic and political change.”

“Every State should take urgent measures to ensure that all girls can effectively and safely access education of quality, including teaching about human rights,” concluded the High Commissioner. “With an education of this nature, in line with human rights standards, future generations will be equipped to build and maintain societies based on equality and justice for all.”
In interview, senior UN official says accountability key to preventing child deaths in conflict

16 June - Ensuring that Member States and their military commanders on the ground remain accountable for any violent actions targeting children is key to preventing atrocities against minors affected by armed conflict, the United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, has affirmed.

In an interview with UN Radio, scheduled just days before she is due to present the Secretary-General’s latest report on the issue to the Security Council, Ms. Zerrougui described a grim scenario for the world’s conflict-stranded children in 2014 – the period covered by her report – and warned that the situation had not improved.

While mass abductions of children and other civilians have become increasingly prevalent in many of the 23 conflict situations of 2014 that are spotlighted, throughout, the report documents unprecedented challenges regarding the protection of tens of millions of children who are growing up in conflict-affected countries.

Moreover, Children have been killed and maimed, and faced other grave violations, as a result of the targeting of schools by extremist groups that seek to impose their ideology on the wider community.

“If you are a child in an area that is under the control of armed groups, if you’re in Iraq and under the control of [the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] (ISIL), or in Syria under the control of ISIL or Al-Nusra; if you’re in a Boko Haram area, then this is a disaster,” explained Ms. Zerrougui in her interview.

“Children are killed in their schools, in their homes, in their dormitories. They are abducted – a huge number of children abducted in many places,” she continued. “It’s for us very disturbing and we try to highlight all these trends to the Security Council – the body that can make a difference in the lives of children affected by armed conflict.”

An initial glance at the headlines from 2014 does, in fact, tell a gloomy narrative regarding the safety of children around the world’s conflict zones. In December, for example, hundreds of children were gunned down in Peshawar, Pakistan, by Taliban militants as they attended school. The conflict in Syria, meanwhile, continued to rage, trapping children in rubble-filled cities and under a deadly rain of barrel bombs. Elsewhere, in Ukraine, a new conflict emerged, resulting in a current count of more than 240 child casualties.

Against this troubling backdrop, Ms. Zerrougui warned that “there are so many places where children are suffering” and urged UN Member States to “change and improve” their behaviour and policies in order to best ensure the protection of children during times of conflict.

When children are killed in conflict areas, she added, Member States generally deny intentionality. The deaths of children, like adult civilians, however, indicate “something wrong in the military response.”

“Our recommendation is first to ask Member States to address the plight of children in these conflict areas, and to put in place the tools, the mechanisms, the resources, to protect children,” Ms. Zerrougui concluded. “Of course, one major, effective response to end violations against children is accountability, is to fight impunity. When you are a commander on the ground and you know if you go beyond what is allowed, then you will be punished, you will think twice.”

The report includes in its annexes a list of parties, including 51 armed groups, that engage in the recruitment and use of children, sexual violence against children, the killing and maiming of children, attacks on schools and/or hospitals and attacks or threats of attacks against protected personnel, in contravention of international law.

In his observations, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon says “the facts as presented in… the present report speak for themselves and should shock our collective conscience,” and cites several situations, “in particular the Central African Republic, Iraq, Israel/State of Palestine, Nigeria, South Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic, children were affected to a
degree which is an affront to our common humanity.”

As such, Mr. Ban says that he will “put all parties to conflict on notice that those that engage in military action resulting in numerous grave violations against children will, regardless of intent, find themselves under continued scrutiny by the United Nations…”

Member States, the UN chief continues, must re-examine existing policies and practices to stop and prevent grave violations against children. Member States must also be held to account and they, in turn, must hold perpetrators accountable, he adds.

**Europe should make ‘mobility’ central in migration policy, UN rights expert says**

16 June - The ability of migrants to reach European soil despite a huge investment in securing international borders shows that sealing them is impossible, and only serves to empower people traffickers in the Mediterranean, a United Nations independent expert said today.

“The European Union (EU) must recognize that irregular migration is a result of policies prohibiting immigration,” the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, François Crépeau, addressing the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. “Such policies only serve to open a new and lucrative market for smuggling rings, which could not exist without this prohibition.”

“If Europe insists on focusing most of its resources on securitization, it will fail to defeat smuggling rings,” Mr. Crépeau warned.

The Rapporteur called therefore on the EU to establish a human rights-based, coherent and comprehensive migration policy which makes mobility its central asset. “It is the only way in which it can reclaim its border, effectively combat smuggling and empower migrants,” the Special Rapporteur assured.

More than 200,000 migrants and asylum-seekers arrived in Europe by sea in 2014, compared with 80,000 in 2013, according to current estimates. So far this year, Europe has already received over 100,000 migrants and asylum-seekers who have arrived by boat. Some frontline states report daily arrivals.

“Migrants will come, no matter what,” Mr. Crépeau warned. “The EU will only be able to regain control of its borders if it banks on mobility, he insisted, noting that the overall goal would be to have most migrants using official channels to enter and stay in Europe.

“The EU must develop…create innovative regulated mobility options that will incentivize most migrants and asylum seekers to avoid having recourse to smugglers,” he noted. “Instead of forcing people into mechanisms that don’t respond to their needs, we need to understand the logic of their decisions and create policies that optimally match migrants’ skills and labour market’s needs.

Welcoming the new European Agenda on Migration, the Special Rapporteur noted that the figures for refugee resettlement are insufficient and the lack of open and regular channels for low skilled migrants coming to Europe is a huge oversight.

“The fact is that European member States rely on cheap migrant labour working in certain sectors within their economy,” he said. “They should recognize their real labour needs, including for low-wage work: to do otherwise would reduce them to being complicit with the exploitation of migrants,” he underscored.

The expert called on the EU to open up more regular migration channels and, at the same time, repress unscrupulous employers who exploit the fear of asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants to be detected, detained and deported. “Effectively implementing the employer sanction directive should be a priority,” he stressed.
“Combining such policies would lead to smaller underground labour markets, less irregular border crossings, less smuggling of migrants, less loss of life at borders, less labour exploitation, and less migrants’ rights violations,” Mr. Crépeau stated.

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

**Yemen: UN reports uptick in civilian deaths as fighting in country continues**

16 June - The civilian cost of the Yemen crisis continues to grow amid the country’s ongoing hostilities, according to the latest figures released today by the United Nations human rights office (OHCHR).

In the period spanning 11 to 15 June, a total of 50 civilians, including 18 children and 11 women, were killed, bringing the total number of civilian deaths in the Gulf state to 1,412, with another 3,423 confirmed as injured, OHCHR spokesperson Rupert Colville told reporters in Geneva earlier this morning. The UN recently reported that the total casualty figures of the country’s conflict have surpassed 2,600.

The OHCHR spokesperson noted that another 14 civilians were reportedly killed as a result of violent clashes between local armed groups and military forces acting together against Al Houthi-affiliated Popular Committees in Lahij, Taiz, Dhale and Aden Governorates. Meanwhile, at least 36 civilians were reportedly killed as a consequence of airstrikes carried out by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition in Sana’a, Hudaydah, Dhamar and Sada’a.

Adding to the scale of destruction, Mr. Colville today also observed that at least 13 civilian public buildings had been impacted during the five-day reporting period, bringing the total to 141 civilian public buildings partially or completely destroyed as a result of the armed conflict.

Yemen’s hostilities – which began in mid-March – have only deepened the country’s already existent humanitarian crisis, plunging civilians even further into despair. Already the poorest nation in the Gulf region prior to the fighting, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) recently stressed that more than 15 million Yemenis do not have access to basic healthcare, with 53 health facilities closed and malnutrition increasing. Eighty per cent of the country’s population is currently in need of critical humanitarian aid.

In addition, the country’s extensive archaeological and historic heritage has been increasingly under threat following a surge in aerial bombing raids in the Old City of Sana’a, Yemen’s capital.

Also addressing the press briefing in Geneva, UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) spokesperson, Christophe Boulierac, warned that the number of children in Yemen who had been killed in the last 10 weeks was four times more than the number of children killed in 2014.

Mr. Boulierac suggested that this showed the brutal impact of the country’s escalating violence and explained that the use of children in the conflict – whether to man check-points or carry arms – had also increased precipitously.

Beyond that, he said, an estimated 9.4 million Yemeni children remained in need of humanitarian assistance as much of the population continues to struggle with food, power and water shortages.

The grim humanitarian statistics come as international, regional and Yemeni stakeholders meet in Geneva for a series of UN-backed consultations opened yesterday by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

According to UN spokesperson, Ahmad Fawzi, the UN Special Envoy on Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, is currently meeting with the various delegations and will brief the press once the consultations are concluded.
Azerbaijan: UN rights office urges Government to ensure free expression and association

16 June - Voicing concern over “a shrinking democratic space” in Azerbaijan as human rights defenders, journalists and Government critics are increasingly being deprived of their liberty, the United Nations rights office today called on the authorities to galvanize efforts to safeguard the freedoms of expression and association in the country.

“These cases are indicative of a shrinking democratic space in Azerbaijan, where many civil society actors, journalists and lawyers fear reprisals or legal and administrative obstruction in carrying out their important work,” Rupert Colville, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said today at a press briefing in Geneva.

He added that the closure of some media outlets and the denial of entry to certain journalists and international human rights organizations, especially ahead of the European Games in the capital, Baku, is “one symptom of a wider problem.”

In this regard, he said that High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein has reached out to the authorities regarding individuals who are reportedly suffering from serious health problems and has sought their release on humanitarian grounds. The official is also seeking the release of the rest who have been deprived of their freedom for exercising their human rights.

“There is an urgent need to relax the legislative and administrative requirements concerning civil society organisations,” stressed Mr. Colville, adding that local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should be allowed to monitor domestic trials on human rights as well as to cooperate with human rights mechanisms without fear of reprisals.

Urging the Government of Azerbaijan to ensure due process and to prevent any interference with defendants’ rights to counsel, OHCHR underscored the independence and accountability of administration of justice and its full respect for the international human rights obligations and commitments.

While applauding progress made on social and economic rights and on working with the displaced people in Azerbaijan, the UN human rights office also called on the authorities to “give the same attention to ensuring respect for the rule of law and to urgently review all cases where people may have been deprived of their liberty for expressing dissenting views or otherwise exercising their fundamental rights.”

Azerbaijan is the host of the first European Games, which began on 12 June in Baku. The Game represents “an opportunity for the countries of Europe to come together and celebrate the Olympic spirit of freedom and inclusiveness.”