Protecting children in war zones is a moral imperative and legal obligation, Security Council told

18 June - “A moral imperative and a legal obligation,” protecting children should never be jeopardized by national interests, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today, deploring that 2014 was one of the worst years in recent memory for children in countries affected by conflict.

Speaking at the Security Council during an open debate on children and armed conflict, which focused on what the Council sees as an increasing trend of mass abductions, Mr. Ban reported on the enormous challenges the international community faces in “upholding the fundamental rights of tens of millions of children.”

“We have seen crises multiply and intensify, making protection more and more difficult. Grave violations against children have been an affront to our common humanity in the Central African Republic, Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic.”

Alarmed at the suffering of “so many children” as a result of “Israeli military operations in Gaza last year,” the UN chief urged Israel to take concrete and immediate steps, including “by reviewing existing policies and practices,” to protect and prevent the killing and maiming of children, and to respect the “special protections” afforded to schools and hospitals.

Acknowledging that groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) have kidnapped children for years, the Secretary-General warned that the scale and nature of this violation is changing.

“Abduction is now being used as a tactic to terrorize or target particular ethnic groups or religious communities, and children have been a particular focus.”
The shocking number of abductions by Da'esh and Boko Haram, he added, should not conceal the fact that this practice prevails in many other situations and is perpetrated by a great range of other non-state armed groups.

In the resolution it adopted today, the Security Council, among other provisions, expressed “grave concern” over the abduction of children in conflict situations and requested the Secretary-General to include in the annexes to his annual report on the issue those parties that engage in patterns of abduction of children in situations of armed conflict.

Mr. Ban also encouraged governments represented at the Council today to redouble their efforts to implement the goals of the Children, Not Soldiers campaign launched last year by his Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, who also briefed the Council today.

“I am pleased to report that we continue to make progress towards ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children by national security forces by 2016. We have seen important steps forward in 2014 in Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Somalia,” said Mrs Zerrougui.

She said that only one case of recruitment by Government forces in the DRC was documented in 2014, with no reports so far in 2015. The Secretary-General also welcomed the release of 1,757 children from the Cobra Faction, a “bright spot” in an otherwise “bleak picture” in South Sudan.

In her wide-ranging remarks, Ms. Zerrougui explained that as conflicts have spread and intensified over the past year, some 230 million children currently live in countries impacted by fighting and unrest and more than five million others are on the run, fleeing war zones.

With “appalling impacts” on the welfare of children being felt from Africa to the Middle East and beyond, the findings set out in the Secretary-General's annual report “should not just shock us…this is a call to action for us all,” she said, highlighting the need to assess obstacles and assist children that fall victim to a raft of conflict-related ills, including extremist violence, abduction, sexual exploitation and deprivation of liberty.

Mr. Ban regretted that the contents of the annual report to the Council, which presents a strong overview of egregious violations suffered by children in conflict in 2014, have been the subject of “more controversy and discussions” than usual, “to the extent of threatening its integrity.”

“The [reporting] mechanism has withstood this scrutiny and the content of my report should speak for itself,” he assured.

Speaking to reporters near the end of the first half of the all-day Council meeting, Mr. Ban expressed his full support for his Special Representative and for the “excellent” work that she and her team have done.

Stressing the importance of ending impunity, he also wished to reassure his commitment to ensuring that the United Nations itself does “more and better” to prevent any abuse of children in the context of conflict. “Recent allegations concerning abuse in the Central African Republic (CAR) make this all the more essential.

“Sexual abuse by those entrusted to protect a population is particularly egregious, it is our collective responsibility to do our utmost to prevent such behaviour, and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable in all contexts,” Ms. Zerrougui added.
Security Council condemns deadly terrorist attacks against mosques in Yemen

18 June - The United Nations Security Council today condemned in the strongest terms the “horrific” series of terrorist attacks on mosques which left dozens dead and wounded in the Yemeni capital of Sana’a.

The attacks – perpetrated on 17 June – targeted three mosques in Yemen’s capital city in the latest bout of violence to convulse the war-torn country.

“The members of the Security Council reaffirmed that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security, and that any acts of terrorism are criminal and unjustifiable regardless of their motivation,” the 15-member body declared in a press statement issued late this afternoon.

In addition, the Council reiterated its determination “to combat all forms of terrorism” and underlined the need to bring the perpetrators, organizers and financiers of the attacks to justice.

During the period spanning 11 to 15 June, a total of 50 civilians, including 18 children and 11 women, were killed in the ongoing fighting in Yemen, bringing the total number of civilian deaths to 1,412, with another 3,423 confirmed as injured, according to UN data. The Organization recently reported that the total casualty figures from the country’s conflict have surpassed 2,600.

Concluding their press statement, meanwhile, Security Council members also reminded States that “they must ensure that measures taken to combat terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law.”

Yemen’s hostilities – which began in mid-March – have only deepened the country’s 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.

At the same time, 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.

This past Monday, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon attended the opening in Geneva of UN-backed consultations among Yemeni stakeholders, telling the press that the parties in Yemen had a responsibility to end the fighting and begin a real process of peace and reconciliation. “Yemen’s very existence hangs in the balance. While parties bicker, Yemen burns,” Mr. Ban underscored at that time.

The consultations are being facilitated by UN Special Envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, who yesterday said the fact that both Yemeni delegations are in now Geneva to participate in the consultations “an important start towards the return to a political process.”
Ban condemns apparently racially motivated killings in South Carolina as ‘hateful act of violence’

18 June - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has strongly condemned the apparently racially motivated killings at an historic African American church in South Carolina in the southern United States, and expressed the hope that those responsible for such a “hateful act of violence” will be brought to justice.

In a statement issued earlier today by his spokesperson in New York, Mr. Ban deplored the killing last night of nine people in a historic African-American church in Charleston, South Carolina.

“He extends his deep condolences to the loved ones of the victims and his solidarity to the survivors. He hopes the person or persons responsible for this hateful act of violence will be swiftly brought to justice,” conclude the statement.

News reports subsequently have suggested that a suspect in the murders has been arrested in the neighbouring state of North Carolina.

UN warns of ‘record high’ 60 million displaced amid expanding global conflicts

18 June - The international community is experiencing a dramatic shift in the situation facing the world’s refugees as a global surge in war, conflict and persecution has caused a record number of people to flee their homes in search of safety, the United Nations refugee agency reported today.

According to data gathered by Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) over the course of 2014, the number of people forcibly displaced during the reporting year swelled to a staggering 59.5 million people compared to the 51.2 million from the previous year. The figures, collected by the UN agency for its latest Global Trends: World at War, suggest that one in every 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. If this were the population of a country, says UNHCR, it would be the world’s 24th largest.

“We are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres declared in a press release issued earlier today and marking the report's release.

“It is terrifying that on the one hand there is more and more impunity for those starting conflicts, and on the other there is seeming utter inability of the international community to work together to stop wars and build and preserve peace,” he added.

In a detailed analysis exploring the range of conflicts that have given rise to the current mass diaspora of refugees, the UNHCR report notes that in the past five years, at least 15 conflicts have erupted or reignited.

In Africa, the outbursts of hostilities, many of which are sectarian in nature, have consumed eight countries, including Côte d’Ivoire, the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, northeastern Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and, more recently, Burundi. In the Middle East, Syria, Iraq and Yemen remain ablaze while, in Europe, Ukraine has spawned a displacement crisis subsuming more than more than 1.3 million people, mostly across the country's eastern provinces of Dinetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkivska. In Asia, meanwhile, the unresolved tensions in Kyrgyzstan and in several
areas of Myanmar and Pakistan, continue to force people across the countries’ borders.

The plethora of crises and conflicts, observes the UN study, has also provoked a dangerous and worsening trend in irregular migration as millions of refugees around the world are pushed into an uncomfortable and deadly dynamic with human traffickers and smugglers as they seek passage to safety.

Sea crossings from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe have surged with the most recent official figures showing that as of 8 June a total of 103,000 refugees and migrants had arrived in Europe: 54,000 in Italy, 48,000 in Greece, 91 on Malta and 920 in Spain. This includes record numbers of refugees landing daily in the Greek islands. Meanwhile, the overall forced displacement numbers in Europe for the 2014 reporting period totalled an overwhelming 6.7 million.

Half way around the world, the refugee situation in Asia is equally tragic. In its report, UNHCR explains that Asia has long been one of the world's major displacement producing regions and, in 2014, the numbers of internally displaced across the continent grew by 31 per cent to 9 million people. The ongoing plight of the Rohingya from Myanmar's Rakhine state and in the Kachin and Northern Shan regions has similarly produced a maritime refugee crisis.

Last year, the number of people leaving Myanmar and Bangladesh by boat is estimated to have climbed to around 53,000. Some 920 migrants are known to have perished in the Bay of Bengal between September 2014 and March this year.

Against that backdrop, the alarming figures detailing the global refugee situation and released today by UNHCR is ultimately compounded by the agency's grim confirmation that over half of the world's total refugees are children.

“With huge shortages of funding and wide gaps in the global regime for protecting victims of war, people in need of compassion, aid and refuge are being abandoned,” Mr. Guterres continued.

“For an age of unprecedented mass displacement, we need an unprecedented humanitarian response and a renewed global commitment to tolerance and protection for people fleeing conflict and persecution.”

**Unspeakable violence against children in South Sudan must stop – UNICEF chief**

18 June - The head of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has appealed “in the name of humanity and common decency” for a halt to the worsening violence against children in South Sudan that has seen boys reportedly castrated and left to bleed to death and girls as young as eight who have been gang raped and murdered.

“The violence against children in South Sudan has reached a new level of brutality,” UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake said in a statement issued Wednesday. “The details of the worsening violence against children are unspeakable, but we must speak of them.”

Mr. Lake said as many as 129 children from Unity state in South Sudan were killed during only three weeks in May.

“Survivors report that boys have been castrated and left to bleed to death,” he said. “Girls as young as 8 have been gang raped and murdered...Children have been tied together before their attackers slit their throats...Others have been thrown into burning buildings.”

Further, he said “children are also being aggressively recruited into armed groups of both sides on an alarming scale.”

An estimated 13,000 children have been forced to participate in a conflict not of their making, according to UNICEF.

“Imagine the psychological and physical effects on these children – not only of the violence inflicted on them but also the
violence they are forced to inflict on others,” Mr. Lake said.

“In the name of humanity and common decency this violence against the innocent must stop,” he said.

South Sudan’s ongoing conflict began in December 2013 and has been marked by brutal violence against civilians and deepening suffering across the country. Some 120,000 people are sheltered in UN compounds there while United Nations estimates that the number of people in need for 2015 will include an anticipated 1.95 million internally displaced persons and a projected 293,000 refugees.

**UN chief hails Papal Encyclical spotlighting climate change as critical ‘moral issue’**

18 June - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today welcomed the release of Pope Francis’ Papal Encyclical in which the leader of the Catholic Church deplored climate change as one of the principal challenges facing humanity and called for a ‘new dialogue’ about shaping the future of our planet.

“The Secretary-General reaffirms that humanity has a significant obligation to care for and protect our common home, the planet Earth, and to show solidarity with the poorest and most vulnerable members of society who are suffering most from climate impacts,” declared a statement issued earlier today by a UN spokesperson.

“The Secretary-General therefore urges governments to place the global common good above national interests and to adopt an ambitious, universal climate agreement in Paris this year.”

According to the statement, the encyclical’s findings acknowledge the “very solid scientific consensus” showing significant warming of the planet’s climate system and that such warming is “mainly a result of human activity.”

In addition, the Papal declaration describes climate change as a critical moral issue requiring respectful dialogue with all parts of society.

“The Secretary-General welcomes the contributions of all religious leaders and people of influence in responding to the climate challenge and in strengthening sustainable development,” the statement says.

“He looks forward to welcoming Pope Francis at the United Nations in September to address the UN General Assembly,” the statement concludes looking ahead to the Pontiff’s visit to the UN during the high-level opening of the world body’s 70th anniversary session.

Speaking to reporters in New York after the statement was issued, the Secretary-General said that he and Pope Francis agree that climate change is a moral issue that requires collective urgent actions.

“It is an issue of social justice, human rights and fundamental ethics,” continued the UN chief, urging the international community to “do far more to help the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, who are suffering most from climate impacts yet had least to do with causing the problem.”

Mr. Ban deeply thanked Pope Francis for taking such a “strong stand” on the need for urgent global action. His moral voice is part of a growing chorus of people from all faiths and all sectors of society speaking out for climate action.
Ukraine: UN warns number of displaced persons and refugees on the rise

18 June - The number of people fleeing their homes in Ukraine continues to rise, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

“More than 1.3 million people are now internally displaced, making it the ninth largest internally displaced population in the world, and some 890,000 people have fled to neighbouring countries,” said a UN spokesperson today.

According to OCHA’s latest update, no crossing points are available for humanitarian cargo to non-government controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

“Access to water remains a critical issue for many civilians living along the contact line, up to 1 million people being at risk of lack of access to safe water,” pointed the update from June 12.

Funding for humanitarian operations remains critically low: only 31 per cent of $316 million required for 2015 is funded or pledged.

Several locations across the contact line continue to be theatre of fighting, resulting in additional humanitarian suffering and loss of lives. Since the beginning of the conflict, at least 6,500 people have been documented as killed and another 16,287 as wounded in the conflict zone of eastern Ukraine, OCHA emphasized.

Security Council looks forward to weekend signing of Mali peace accord by armed groups

18 June - The United Nations Security Council, reiterating today its support to the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, said it looked forward to the expected signing of the accord this weekend by the so-called ‘Coordinating’ armed groups.

“Recognizing the aspiration of all Malian citizens to enjoy lasting peace and development, the members of the Security Council urged the Coordinating and Plateforme armed groups to refrain from any action that could undermine the peace process and to demonstrate responsibility and courage in the supreme interest of peace in Mali,” the Council said in a press statement.

Council members “reiterated their support to the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali and looked forward to its signing by the Coordination armed groups on 20 June 2015, thereby completing the signing process.”

They also expressed their concern over the security situation in and around Menaka in eastern Mali, and urged the Plateforme armed groups to withdraw immediately their forces from the city and to sign the accord.

The Security Council established the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in April 2013 to support political processes in that country and carry out a number of security-related tasks.
Yemen facing serious food insecurity as conflict deteriorates, new UN study finds

18 June - Six million people in Yemen are slipping towards severe hunger and now need emergency food and life-saving assistance, “a sharp increase” from the last quarter of 2014, according to a new joint study by two United Nations organizations.

“We are seeing a serious deterioration of the food security situation because of the ongoing conflict, which is also making humanitarian access difficult,” warned Salah El Hajj Hassan, Yemen Representative for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

In addition to the population facing a food security ‘emergency,’ another over 6.5 million people are classified as facing a food insecurity security ‘crisis,’ says the report, released yesterday and prepared by the FAO, in cooperation with the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation in Yemen (MoPIC), on behalf of other technical partners, including a number of non-governmental organizations.

“Unless access to the affected population is guaranteed to provide humanitarian assistance, further deterioration of the situation is very likely,” added Mr. Hassan.

Ten out of Yemen’s 22 governorates are now classified as facing food insecurity at ‘emergency’ level, finds the report. Millions more are highly vulnerable and could easily fall into emergency levels unless there is a dramatic improvement in the availability and access to food at prices that most people can afford.

The intensified conflict in Yemen has created a scarcity of staple foods and other essential commodities, disrupting livelihoods, markets, agriculture and fisheries, import, export and commercial activities, among others.

That situation has resulted, the report stresses, in a serious reduction in people’s incomes, as well as difficulty in accessing basic staple foods. Although the entire country is facing the effects of the conflict, the poorest households, internally displaced, unskilled labourers, and marginalized groups, are most affected.

“Until a political solution is in place in the country, we will continue to see an increase in the number of people struggling to feed themselves and their families across Yemen,” underlined WFP Representative and Country Director Purnima Kashyap. “We appeal to all parties to ensure unrestricted access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to affected people.”

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis used to collect these data meets international standards and underwent a rigorous real-time external quality review conducted by the global multi-partner IPC Global Support Unit (IPC GSU).

“The quality review concluded that the analyses made the best use of available evidence to infer the current situation. The findings are invaluable for response planning,” concluded Ms. IPC Global Programme Manager Cindy Holleman.
‘A justice system that fails children ultimately fails society,’ UN rights expert warns

18 June - The treatment of children in judicial proceedings around the world, both civil and criminal, is not satisfactory and often “unacceptable,” the UN human rights expert on the independence of judges and lawyers said today and called on countries to develop justice systems that are sensitive to the needs of children.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers Gabriela Knaul made public her findings during the presentation of her latest report to the UN Human Rights Council.

“Every day throughout the world, countless children suffer adverse consequences at the hands of justice systems that disregard or even directly violate their fundamental human rights,” she noted. “Not only do children face the same obstacles as adults to access justice, but they also encounter challenges and barriers linked to their status of minors.”

“Children still count among the most vulnerable to human rights violations and other types of abuse,” Ms. Knaul said, calling on States to develop justice systems adapted to their needs and rights. “Justice must be child-sensitive; it needs to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of children and take into account their best interests.”

Despite the quasi-universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the report notes that children still count among the most vulnerable to human rights violations and other types of abuse, and Ms. Knaul said “it is unacceptable that children who come into contact with the justice system are often victimized or re-victimized.”

“For this reason, the importance of child-sensitive justice – justice that respects, protects and fulfils the rights of children – cannot be overemphasized,” the expert said in her report. “An administration of justice that fails children ultimately also fails society.”

According to the report, “between 1 March 2014 and 28 February 2015 inclusive, she sent a total of 117 communications alleging violations of human rights in the context of her mandate to 54 Member States. Of these communications, 86 were urgent appeals and the remaining 31 were letters of allegation.”

“Every day throughout the world, countless children suffer adverse consequences at the hands of justice systems that disregard or even directly violate their fundamental human rights,” Ms. Knaul said. “Not only do children face the same obstacles as adults to access justice, but they also encounter challenges and barriers linked to their status of minors.”

Ms. Knaul called on states to develop justice systems adapted to their needs and rights because “justice must be child-sensitive; it needs to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of children and take into account their best interests.”

Among her 19 recommendations, the Special Rapporteur called for adoption of alternative mechanisms to complement or replace judicial proceedings, in order to mitigate or avoid the trauma that can result when children go through the established process.

“Judges, prosecutors and lawyers can influence the future course of children’s lives,” the expert said. “To discharge such a great responsibility, it is essential that they receive specialized education and training in international human rights and in particular children’s rights.”

Ms. Knaul took up her functions as UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers on 1 August 2009. Experts like Ms. Knaul work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.
UN health agency ramps up efforts against Tanzania cholera outbreak

18 June - The cholera outbreak in Tanzania continues to spread among the populations in the country’s western Kigoma region amid an influx of refugees from neighbouring Burundi, the United Nations health agency warned today as it detailed its ongoing response aimed at stemming the epidemic.

“Carrying out social mobilization, including door-to-door campaigns and health education is a key component to educate populations and inform district and community leaders about the disease,” Dr. Rufaro Chatora, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) Representative for Tanzania, declared in a press release.

The Tanzanian cholera epidemic – spawned by a massive inflow of Burundian refugees fleeing their country’s political unrest – has claimed 34 lives since the beginning of the outbreak on 10 May. In total, 4,662 suspected and confirmed cases have been reported.

Since early April, nearly 100,000 Burundians have fled their country and streamed across the country’s borders into neighbouring states such as Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), according to UN estimates. At the same time, the cholera epidemic gained momentum as refugees gathered along the shores of Lake Tanganyika in Tanzania.

As a result of the ongoing outbreak, the WHO has announced that it is mobilizing some 164,000 doses of oral cholera vaccines (OCVs) to populations living in high risk areas, including all refugees at the Nyarugusu camp, as well as at-risk Tanzanian communities neighbouring the camp, and identified villages such as Kagunga, Karago and Kigoma Ujiji.

Meanwhile, in addition to the OCV campaign, relief and health efforts are also focusing on the provision of safe water, sanitation and personal hygiene as the main cholera prevention and control measures.

In the press release, Dr. Chatora explained that additional staff from both the WHO and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) had arrived on the ground to help support the Regional Health Management Team and facilitate the coordination and preparation of the campaign “in order to reach and protect as many people as we can.”

FEATURE: Sold for a packet of cigarettes – UN envoy fights to help women suffering sexual violence in the Middle East

18 June - A young man wants to smoke a cigarette but does not have the money to buy a pack.

“He has a slave girl, he goes and sells her to another man, and he gets enough money for a pack of cigarettes. That’s it. She is the value of a pack of cigarettes,” said Zainab Bangura, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

This is the story of countless Yazidi women living in Iraq who have been sold into slavery by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other terrorist groups, which are using sexual violence as a central aspect of their ideology.
Ms. Bangura recalled these and other stories after she returned from a mission to the Middle East in April during which she met with women and girls who survived sexual violence.

“I was heartbroken,” stated the United Nations official. “I listened to girls who have tried to commit suicide, girls who tried to jump out of windows, run away, and girls whose family had to pay ransom. I think these stories actually shocked me.”

Ms. Bangura’s visit took her to Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. In Syria, one in three women is at risk of gender-based violence. The five-year crisis there has given rise to completely new patterns of child and forced marriage to fighters and sexual slavery. Sexual violence is increasingly being used as a weapon of war.

"I'll be their voice" - UN Envoy on Sexual Violence in Conflict. Credit: United Nations

According to a report submitted earlier this year, the ideological opposition of extremist groups to the education of girls has placed them at heightened risk of abuse. Other trends include the use of sexual violence as a form of persecution to forcibly displace populations as well as the vulnerability of displaced and refugee women and girls to sexual abuse.

From information Ms. Bangura received during her visit, and from reports that came in, ISIL allegedly issued a “regulation” setting out the prices to be paid for Yazidi and Christian women and girls, the amounts varying according to age. The promise of sexual access to women and girls has been used in ISIL propaganda materials as part of its recruitment strategy and an estimated 1,500 civilians may have been forced into sexual slavery.

The purpose of her trip was to hear the personal stories of women who have lived through the ordeal, the stories that the world hears time and time again and has even become numb to, but not Ms. Bangura.

“What I heard was just unbelievable, shocking,” she said. “The most difficult moment was actually in Jordan, where I was told about a girl who, for the last four years, had been married 22 times. She is 21 years old, and every time this marriage is arranged, they had to do a surgical operation to her, to be able to rebuild her virginity so that she can become a virgin for her next marriage. Twenty-one-year-old girl, married off 22 times, stitched 22 times just so that somebody can make money on her.”

On an upbeat note, in February 2014, Iraq became the first nation in the Arab world to adopt a national action plan for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) that includes elements addressing sexual violence. National authorities have been asked to join hands in preventing impunity.

Ms. Bangura, who herself grew up a refugee in Burundi, said she wanted to bring hope to the women and girls she met.

“I tell them my own story, and I tell them how I came out very strongly, and I give them insights of other women I’ve visited around the world and they are doing extremely well. So it’s hope. You can’t give them something immediately but you can give them that sense of hope.”

“They know that someone knows their story, and someone is listening to them,” Ms. Bangura added. “That gives them the inspiration to fight back, stand up and pick up the pieces of their life.”

Education, she stressed, is the “golden key” and the best asset that a child can have.

“Both of my parents were illiterate… and look at what I am today. I never thought I would be in this position, but because of education, and the resilience of my mother and the support, I became the Minister of Foreign Affairs in my country and now I am at a global stage.”

“These are people who believe the world is against them, so you are standing with them and saying ‘you know you could be like me but you just need to take one step, and that step is go to school, get an education, concentrate on it, and you’ll come out a winner.’”
But tangible changes are still needed. Since her return from the Middle East, Ms. Bangura has presented her case to the Security Council as well as other UN colleagues.

“Sometimes people have tears in their eyes and people are so shocked. I don’t really believe people have a lot of knowledge of what is happening because we try to be politically correct.

“We try to be civilized, we don’t say certain words, you know, we try to cushion the words. But I say it like it is and I really hope that it is going to galvanize a lot of people to understand things for what they are.

“I’ll be their voice,” the envoy added, referring to the women and girls she met. “I’ll bring their stories to the international arena.

“People need to know that these women and girls are alive, that their stories are real and that they need help. And I’ll continue to do it and make sure people know how terrorist groups institutionalize sexual violence and the brutalization of women.”

In addition to being a voice for the voiceless, Ms. Bangura advocates for the victims when she confronts parties to conflicts, both State and non-State actors, who have an obligation under international humanitarian law to prevent and punish such crimes.

As the world body’s top official dealing with sexual violence in conflict, she works with UN agencies active in the field that are providing the critical protection and assistance needed, particularly by the women and girls who are suffering even in the places where they are seeking refuge.

After meeting with displaced women in Iraq and Syria, and refugees who had fled to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, she recently told Fareed Zakaria of CNN that “such extreme violence requires political and security responses, but also legal and social response.”

She drew attention to the fact that the provisions of humanitarian appeals dealing with services to sexual violence survivors are perpetually underfunded, and advocated for support to the neighbouring refugee-hosting countries that are under tremendous pressure.

For example, UN staff at the sprawling Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan spoke of the need going forward to expand the cash-for-work assistance programmes – now primarily designed for men – and alternative forms of livelihood for single women and single mothers as a concrete example of the options and mechanisms that should be place.

And as part of her work to assist, the top UN population officer in Jordan is collecting evidence-based information after a surge in requests from young refugee women who want post-abortion care for “unplanned” pregnancies or those related to “unwanted relations.”

Meanwhile, UN investigator Rabiaa el-Gharani compared the “much higher and horrifying” level of violence in Iraq, citing the attacks on different villages like the one last August on a large group of Yazidi women, to the more “individual cases” of rape and sexual violence reported in Syria at check-points, detention centres and homes.

But what all victims seem to have in common is a fear of reaction of community and family members and the stigma attached to survivors of sexual violence, which results in “extreme” underreporting, a key challenge that Ms. Bangura heard throughout her trip.

So in order to be able to do what she can as their top advocate, Ms. Bangura urges groups with their eyes and ears on the ground in the field to provide the information and facts about sexual violence that women and girls are being subjected to so that she can use the collected data to confront governments.
“If don’t look, you don’t see,” she appealed to a group of local NGOs working with refugee women in Turkey. “It is very difficult when a woman has been raped to admit that she has been raped.”