Amid ‘dramatic’ increase in refugees, UN urges Greece and wider Europe to boost humanitarian response

18 August - The escalating refugee crisis in Greece is continuing, with migrant arrivals accelerating “dramatically,” the United Nations warned today, urging the Greek Government to strengthen reception facilities and services and for wider Europe to bolster humanitarian coordination.

“The number of refugees and migrants arriving in Greece is accelerating dramatically and has now reached the 160,000 mark,” William Spindle, spokesperson of for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said at a press briefing in Geneva.

The latest data from the UN agency shows that as of 14 August, 158,456 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece by sea while 1,716 entered by land through turkey.

“The pace of arrivals has been steadily increasing in recent weeks,” said Mr. Spindle, adding that more refugees and migrants arrived in Greece during the month of July (50,242) than during the whole of last year (43,500).

During the week 8 to 14 August, 20,843 people arrived in Greece by sea, almost equal to half of those arrived in 2014, with the majority coming from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

According to UNHCR, the up-to-date figures from Greece bring the total number of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean this year to some 264,500, including 158,456 to Greece, approximately 104,000 to Italy, 1,953 to Spain and 94 to Malta.
However, there is a lack of reception infrastructure and registration procedures both on the islands and on the mainland, which need to be strengthened urgently.

As UNHCR is working to support Greece, “we are recommending Greek authorities to designate a single body to coordinate an emergency response and set up an adequate humanitarian assistance mechanism,” stated Mr. Spindle.

He also urged the Government to build up the conditions in the whole country, and said there was a need for neighbouring countries, such as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, to do the same.

**Record civilian casualties and widening conflict stretch humanitarian capacities in Afghanistan – UN**

**18 August** - The Afghan conflict has intensified in 2015, resulting in record high levels of civilian casualties and new displacements that are stretching the humanitarian community’s ability to sufficiently meet life-saving needs, the United Nations relief wing reported today.

According to the mid-year review of the Afghanistan humanitarian response, in the first half of 2015 has been shaped by intensification of the conflict resulting in 4,921 civilian casualties, including 1,592 civilian deaths, and a sharp increase in conflict-induced displacement – up some 43 per cent – if compared to the same period in the previous year.

And as military operations in North Waziristan continued and expanded throughout 2015, the anticipated spring return of refugees has not occurred, resulting in a protracted crisis with families indicating they do not expect to be able to return home for two to three years, according to the review, issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

OCHA also said the first half of 2015 also saw “an increase in people requiring humanitarian assistance coupled with insufficient funding for food security agencies, particularly WFP [the UN World Food Programme].”

Programmes for Afghans forcibly displaced by the conflict, vulnerable returnees, refugees and malnourished children “are all seriously under-resourced and in some cases have been terminated.”

Specifically, “the first half of 2015 saw an increase in conflict both in terms of frequency and geographic spread, notably in Helmand, Kunduz, Faryab and Nangarhar, while various provinces in Central Region remain highly unstable, generating continuous displacement,” the report said.

“Additionally, provinces that have not been traditionally affected by large-scale displacement have experienced significant forced population movements, including Badakshan, Sār-i-Pul, Baghlan, Takhar and Badghis,” it said.

OCHA noted that “localized clashes between the Taliban and other non-State armed opposition groups have intensified, with fragmentation of groups expected to further affect the complexity and intensity of conflict.”

“This intensification and dispersion of conflict, inaccessibility in many conflict areas, and record high levels of civilian casualties is stretching the humanitarian community’s ability to sufficiently cover all life-saving needs,” it said.

A significant upsurge in displacement was reported compared to the same period in previous years, largely owing to new conflict which broke out in Kunduz province in the northeast part of Afghanistan in April 2015.

“The total number of displaced is likely even higher due to inaccessibility for assessment teams in areas where internally displaced persons may be present,” according to OCHA.

Finally, “depleting resources remain a critical factor in the humanitarian community’s ability to meet growing life-saving needs.”
The humanitarian response plan for Afghanistan had received $195 million or 48 per cent of the $406 million total funding requirement by mid-year, OCHA said.

**After new displacements, UN officials call for an immediate halt to demolitions in the West Bank**

18 August - Senior United Nations officials are calling today for an immediate freeze on demolitions in the West Bank, after dozens of structures were demolished yesterday by Israeli authorities in Palestinian Bedouin refugee communities, near East Jerusalem.

“A total of 22 structures were demolished in four communities, displacing 78 Palestinians, including 49 children, the vast majority of whom are Palestine refugees,” said a joint statement issued today by the Coordinator for Humanitarian and UN Development Activities for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Robert Piper, and the Director of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Operations in the West Bank, Felipe Sanchez.

According to the statement, all four communities are located in and around the area of the planned ‘E-1’ settlement, and both officials noted that this is the largest number of Palestinians displaced in the West Bank in one day in nearly three years. Concerns are also rising over reports of new displacements today in a Jordan Valley community.

“Yesterday’s demolitions targeted some of the most vulnerable communities in the West Bank,” Mr. Piper said. “The scale of displacement is particularly concerning – nearly 50 children lost their homes yesterday.”

“Many of these refugee families have now been displaced four times in the last four years” added Mr. Sanchez.

The four communities are among 46 located in the central West Bank included in Israeli plans to transfer Palestinian Bedouin communities to three designated sites.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had previously stated that the implementation of the proposed “relocation” would amount to forcible transfers and forced evictions, contravening Israel’s obligations as an occupying power under humanitarian law and human rights law.

“The strategic implications of these demolitions are clear,” said Mr. Piper. “[They] are occurring in parallel with settlement expansion. The relocation plan for these communities would effectively remove Palestinian presence in and around the planned E1 settlement project. This…project anticipates the construction of thousands of new Israeli housing units in the West Bank on the outskirts of Jerusalem.”

E-1, he recalled, has long been opposed by the international community as an obstacle to the realization of the two-state solution and a violation of international law.
Changing habits and behaviours is key to overcome vaccine hesitancy – UN health agency

18 August - With one in five children still not receiving routine life-saving immunizations, and an estimated 1.5 million dying each year of diseases that could be prevented by vaccines, people who delay or refuse vaccines for themselves or their children are presenting a growing challenge for countries seeking to close the immunization gap, according to the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO).

“As the recent Ebola crisis tragically brought to light, engaging with communities and persuading individuals to change their habits and behaviours is a lynchpin of public health success,” the WHO said in a special issue of the journal Vaccine published today entitled ‘WHO recommendations regarding vaccine hesitancy.’

Dr. Philippe Duclos, Senior Health Adviser for WHO’s Immunization, Vaccines and Biological Department and guest editor of the special issue, said: “Vaccine hesitancy is an increasingly important issue for country immunization programmes.”

The recommendations proposed by WHO suggest ways organizations can increase acceptance of vaccines, share effective practices, and develop new tools to assess and address hesitancy.

“Concerns about vaccine safety can be linked to vaccine hesitancy, but safety concerns are only one of many factors that may drive hesitancy,” says the UN health agency.

WHO went on to explain that “vaccine hesitancy can be caused by other factors such as: negative beliefs based on myths, e.g. that vaccination of women leads to infertility; misinformation; mistrust in the health care professional or health care system; the role of influential leaders; costs; geographic barriers and concerns about vaccine safety.”

But the authors note there is no “magic bullet,” or single intervention strategy that works for all instances of vaccine hesitancy.

“Effective communication is key to dispelling fears, addressing concerns and promoting acceptance of vaccination,” according to WHO.

Vaccine hesitancy is not only an issue in high income countries, but is a complex, rapidly changing global problem that varies widely, it said.

For example, a higher level of education does not necessarily predict vaccine acceptance. The experts noted that a number of studies identify higher education as a potential barrier to vaccine acceptance in some settings, while other studies identify education as a promoter of vaccine acceptance in different areas.

“Even fear of needles can be a factor for vaccine refusal,” noted WHO.
Evolving peacekeeping landscape requires stronger global-regional partnership, Security Council told

18 August - Since the United Nations increasingly shares responsibility for peace and security with regional organizations, everything possible should be done to help them resolve regional problems and to include the States concerned in solutions, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today.

“At the same time, regional organizations should continue contributing to United Nations peace and security efforts. We count on them for political leverage as well as civilian and military capacities,” Mr. Ban told the Security Council, during an open debate on the subject of regional organizations and contemporary global security challenges.

Noting that cooperation with regional and sub-regional organizations have gained “greater influence” in recent years, partly because of the changing nature of conflicts, Mr. Ban explained that a number of aggravating factors prompted him to request a fresh review of UN peace operations.

“Urbanization, unemployment and population movements, including massive displacement, are increasing dramatically. Technological advances in warfare, including cyber threats, pose grave dangers to civilians. And against this shifting security landscape, the United Nations is deploying into fragile and remote environments with little peace to keep.”

The Secretary-General said that he is now analyzing the report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations to identify the recommendations the Organization can carry out “immediately” – and those that will require action by legislative bodies, Member States and partners.

One of these recommendations is a “stronger global-regional partnership” to ensure that the Security Council can draw on a “more resilient and capable network of actors,” he underlined.

“In recent years, we have seen how practical cooperation among the United Nations, the African Union and the European Union has enhanced progress in Africa. Now we need to build on this trilateral cooperation and boost our collective ability to manage, plan and execute peace operations,” Mr. Ban reminded.

Different forms of engagement with other organizations proved equally successful, he said, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the League of Arab States (LSA), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

“The Panel recommends that we deepen the strategic UN-AU partnership. I fully agree. Almost two thirds of our peace operations and nearly 90 per cent of our uniformed peacekeepers are deployed in Africa,” insisted the Secretary-General.

The report also calls for greater support to Security Council-authorized African Union peace operations, the experts recommending that the UN enable regional organizations to share the burden in accordance with the UN Charter.

“Toward that end, I draw attention to the Panel’s call for more predictable financing, including through the use of UN-assessed contributions,” Mr. Ban observed, while emphasizing other important forms of support, like planning processes, logistical packages, UN-managed trust funds and access to all UN expertise, systems, materiel and services.

“The UN’s broad support for the AU and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also includes political cooperation – which is difficult to quantify but still highly valuable.”
Joint efforts have made a meaningful difference, he continued, in defusing tensions and supporting the transition in Burkina Faso, encouraging political dialogue ahead of elections in Guinea, resolving the electoral crisis in Kenya and ending a political deadlock in Madagascar through a Southern African Development Community (SADC) Roadmap, among other engagements.

“We have succeeded in dramatically enhancing our partnerships. We have come to rely on each other in critical times. We will continue to advance progress,” assured the UN chief.

**South Sudan: UN chief looks forward to President Kiir’s endorsement of peace agreement**

18 August - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today welcomed the signing by former South Sudan Vice President Riek Machar and the Former Detainees of the compromise peace agreement put forth by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development Partners Forum (IGAD) mediation, meant to end the conflict raging in the country for the past 20 months.

“He takes note that President Salva Kiir initialled a copy of the agreement with some reservations [and] expresses his strong hope that President Kiir will sign the agreement by the end of the 15-day deadline,” said a statement released in New York by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson.

According to media reports, Mr. Kiir, who initialled but has not yet signed the agreement, has asked for an additional two weeks to consult with his constituencies.

Thanking the IGAD mediation for its “tireless” efforts to assist the parties reach agreement, the Secretary-General is encouraged by the regional and international consensus in support of the agreement, which the United Nations also signed as a witness, the statement added.

He reaffirmed the continued readiness of the UN to work with IGAD, the African Union and other international partners to finalize the agreement and move swiftly towards its implementation.

“Deeply pained” by the “horrendous” suffering of South Sudanese civilians, the Secretary-General called on all belligerents to immediately cease all hostilities, uphold international human rights and humanitarian law, and extend their full cooperation to UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and to the Humanitarian Country Team’s “life-saving activities” there.

The security situation in South Sudan has deteriorated steadily over the past year since political in-fighting between President Kiir and Mr. Machar, and their respective factions erupted in December 2013. The hostilities subsequently turned into a full-fledged conflict, resulting in reported atrocities and possible war crimes.

According to the latest estimates released by the UN refugee agency, more than 730,000 people have fled into neighbouring countries such as Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan, which has seen the highest arrival rate this year. Meanwhile, another 1.5 million remain internally displaced, often relocated to increasingly overcrowded 'protection-of-civilians' sites run by UNMISS.
Security Council welcomes Ban’s pledge to strictly enforce ‘zero tolerance’ against sexual abuse by UN personnel

18 August - Welcoming Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s commitment to strictly enforce his ‘zero tolerance’ policy against sexual exploitation or abuse by United Nations personnel, the Security Council today stressed the importance of the UN quickly investigating the most recent allegations of misconduct by peacekeepers, and if substantiated, working with the troop contributing countries involved to ensure those responsible are held accountable.

In a press statement that follows a 13 August briefing from Mr. Ban on allegations of sexual exploitation committed by UN peacekeepers, including the latest allegations of abuses committed in the Central African Republic (CAR), Council members said they “shared his outrage and anger…and recalled that peacekeepers should protect civilians in the areas where they are deployed.”

They stated that the UN, and particularly its peacekeepers, must comply with relevant provisions of international law, including with respect to the protection of human rights. The Council also noted that the Organization should “not let the actions of a few tarnish the heroic work of tens of thousands of United Nations peacekeepers and personnel.”

The Council’s statement follows a flurry of action at the highest levels of the United Nations after allegations were revealed late last week by the human rights group Amnesty International concerning actions by UN peacekeepers serving with the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).

In the wake of the revelations, the Secretary-General vowed decisive action and immediately announced that he had accepted the resignation of MINUSCA chief Babacar Gaye, scheduled an urgent meeting with the heads of all United Nations peace operations and Force Commanders, as well as a special closed-door session of the Security Council on the matter.

Over the weekend, Anthony Lake, Executive Director of the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) announced that the agency’s staff in CAR had met with the young girl reportedly raped by a UN police officer, and stressed that UNICEF is providing her with “every possible help,” including medical assistance and support to deal with the psychological impact of the incident.

“While respecting the integrity of the investigation into the incident, it is clear that this child has endured a most brutal ordeal,” said Mr. Lake.

The Security Council, in its statement today, noted the recent appointment of an External Independent Panel to look into reports of allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse in the Central African Republic and the United Nations’ systemic response, and looked forward to its findings being made public.

The members of the Security Council reiterated the primary responsibility of troop and police contributing countries to investigate allegations against their uniformed personnel, and, if appropriate, to prosecute, and to inform the United Nations, in a timely manner, of the progress and outcome of investigations.

They asked the Secretariat to keep police and troop contributing countries fully informed as soon as allegations against peacekeepers are made, stressed the need for full and appropriate reporting within the UN system, and regretted that some allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse including the latest allegations by the United Nations peacekeepers in the CAR were brought to their attention by external actors such as the media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Stressing the importance of the United Nations quickly investigating in a credible, transparent manner the most recent allegations of misconduct and abuse, and if substantiated, working with the troop contributing countries involved to ensure
those responsible are held accountable, the Council also underscored the importance to build the capacity of troop contributing countries to investigate allegations and hold accountable those involved in abuses within their own national legal frameworks.

The members of the Security Council emphasized the need for victims and their families to be assisted when such abuses occur, including through better information sharing on the actions taken by troop and police contributing countries to hold those committing abuse accountable and underlined the importance of addressing the needs of the victims.

They paid tribute to General Babacar Gaye’s tireless efforts in support of peace, security and reconciliation in the Central African Republic and during his United Nations career. They took note of the Secretary-General’s nomination of Parfait Onanga-Anyanga as Acting Special Representative and Head of MINUSCA and assured him of their full support to MINUSCA.

Libya: UN human rights office alarmed by reports of ISIL-led violence, reprisal killings

18 August - The United Nations human rights office today expressed concern over violence in Sirte, Libya, involving militants claiming allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

“It seems that fighting erupted in the city after a local imam, Khaled Ben Rajab al-Ferjani, known for his vocal opposition to ISIL, was shot dead on 10 August. He is reported to have been killed while resisting abduction by ISIL fighters,” Rupert Colville, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), told reporters in Geneva.

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) was told by local residents that most civilians had fled the area, which was reportedly indiscriminately shelled by ISIL forces by the morning of 13 August. The total number of fatalities is currently not known, but unconfirmed estimates received by UNSMIL range between 4 and 38, and at least 16 men were captured.

Both UNSMIL and OHCHR have previously expressed deep concern at apparent reprisals carried out by ISIL militants against civilians in Libya whom they perceive to be opposing them. In July, the group deliberately destroyed at least seven homes in Sirte and also summarily executed a man they accused of “treason,” whose body was put on public display.

“In April 2015, the bodies of three members of a prominent family in Derna were also put on public display. During its control of Derna, which lasted until June this year, ISIL also carried out at least four public summary executions and an amputation. It seems that the public flaunting of these murders is intended to send a message to anyone challenging ISIL in Libya,” Mr. Colville said.

In addition, he stated, groups affiliated with ISIL have also been targeting individuals on the basis of their religion. In April 2015, one such group released a video showing the execution of at least 28 Christians in two separate incidents in Libya while in February, 21 mostly Egyptian Coptic Christians were beheaded by ISIL, which continue to commit serious human rights violations.
UN chief welcomes peaceful parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka

UN Photo/Martine Perret (file)

18 August - Applauding the people of Sri Lanka for their peaceful and broad-based participation in yesterday’s parliamentary elections, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has encouraged the new Government to make further progress on good governance, accountability and reconciliation.

“The Secretary-General applauds the people of Sri Lanka for their peaceful and broad-based participation in the parliamentary elections of 17 August,” said a statement issued by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson.

The UN chief in his statement also commended the President for having shepherded an inclusive process and the Election Commissioner for his exemplary efforts in helping guarantee the exercise of the right to vote of the people of Sri Lanka.

“The Secretary-General encourages the new Government to make further progress on good governance, accountability and reconciliation,” the statement continues, adding that Mr. Ban looks forward to continuing to work with the President, the Prime Minister, the Government and the people of Sri Lanka in support of building long-term peace and prosperity.

Concerned by rising violence along India and Pakistan ‘line of control,’ Ban urges countries to resume dialogue

UN Photo/Martine Perret (file)

18 August - United Nations Secretary-General today expressed serious concern about the recent escalation of violence along the Line of Control between India and Pakistan, which reportedly resulted in a number of casualties on both sides, including civilians.

“The Secretary-General calls upon the Governments of India and Pakistan to exercise maximum restraint and take all feasible steps to ensure the protection of civilians,” reads a statement issued by a UN spokesperson.

The Secretary-General, adds the statement, urges both countries to continue to address their differences through dialogue.

“In that regard, he welcomes the planned meeting between their respective National Security Advisors on 23-24 August, and expresses the hope that it will lead to positive outcomes.”

The UN has long maintained an institutional presence in the contested area between the two countries. According to the Security Council mandate given in resolution 307 of 1971, the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) observes and reports on ceasefire violations along and across the Line of Control and the working boundary between the South Asian neighbours in Jammu and Kashmir, as well as reports developments that could lead to ceasefire violations.

UNMOGIP currently comprises 40 military observers and a number of civilian staff members.
INTERVIEW: “At the end of the day, every life saved is an achievement in itself.” – UN humanitarian chief Stephen O’Brien

18 August - Stephen O’Brien has hit the ground running since taking up his post a couple of months ago as Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, having seen first-hand the devastation wrought by ongoing conflicts in South Sudan, Iraq, Yemen and Syria.

The British national with more than 20 years of experience in international development and public health understands the many complexities of humanitarian assistance, which range from ensuring food, shelter and safe drinking water to appreciating the psychological trauma experienced by those affected and the importance of providing hope.

There can be no higher purpose than trying to be part of the broad team saving lives and giving people a chance to have more dignity...

In a recent interview with the UN News Centre, Mr. O’Brien, who heads the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), discusses the vital aspects of humanitarian work, some of today’s most urgent crises, and the challenges and importance of donor participation. The interview, conducted prior to Mr. O’Brien’s recent visits to Yemen and Syria, has been edited for length and clarity.

UN News Centre: Why would you accept this kind of work?

Stephen O’Brien: There can be no higher purpose than trying to be part of the broad team saving lives and giving people a chance to have more dignity, more opportunity. Ultimately, the UN is the world’s biggest organization carrying those aspirations in the most consensual way. In a sense, the work represents for me a combination of so many of my rather blended experiences. I’ve been a professional lawyer and an industrialist, a politician and a minister, and a representative of my prime minister in various parts of the developing world. And so, it not only carries a lot of logic, I am genuinely enthusiastic about working with a lot of brilliant people doing amazing things. Despite the enormous demand on the humanitarian system to deliver life-saving humanitarian support, this is something really worth doing.

UN News Centre: This isn’t your first exposure to humanitarian work. Can you expand on your background in this area?

Stephen O’Brien: In parallel with my professional life, I’ve always, from the time I was a university student, been very interested in how one participates in the development of countries whose history put them at a different starting point than ours in the traditional Western, Northern world. I have been engaged in the development agenda, and in particular, focussed on public health and the great battle against malaria – the world’s greatest killer disease – which is totally treatable and avoidable.

On the back of that experience, I have worked with many brilliant people globally. First, as a parliamentarian in the United Kingdom, I had a platform where I could champion the issue, be an advocate. Later, my role grew internationally and I became a global advocate for the Roll Back Malaria project. It was absolutely clear to me that the opportunities public health give you was a good example of where humanitarian work can reach out to those who are most vulnerable, most in need, and make a massive difference.

UN News Centre: What are your impressions of what you’ve seen and what you’ve done so far in your current role?
Stephen O'Brien: The world, through the United Nations and all the Member States, carries a massive will, a determination to meet human need when it arises. You can see it in natural disasters, very often turning into protracted crises, how the world comes together, including numerous stakeholders – be they philanthropists, the private sector as well as all of the UN agencies, international NGOs [non-governmental organizations], national NGOs and local governments. The scale of the UN’s ability to meet those humanitarian needs is absolutely vital. The challenge with conflicts, with parties in dispute, is having the access. That is clearly where the difficulty lies.

So what are my first impressions? Within OCHA, as Under-Secretary-General and in my other role as Emergency Relief Coordinator, the main leadership functions are divided between New York and Geneva, although we have about 4,000 people around the world. Ultimately, it is our job to help coordinate and procure resources – and to make sure we are doing this through with the most optimum effect. We try to save 80 million lives a year and need to raise about $20 billion to do it. So you can see the scale of what has to be done is absolutely vast and made more complicated by the fact that so much of it is within conflict.

I can say that I have met only really dedicated, skilled, deeply experienced, committed people doing a lot of brilliant work. The question is: how do we marshal those resources and get the optimum effect to meet the exponential rise in demand for humanitarian need, whether it is shelter or food, clean drinking water, basic health provision or education. These are the main things that we focus on. We’ve got a good base on which to build but there is so much more to be done.

UN News Centre: Tell us about what you’ve done in the job so far. For example, have you travelled to the field and met with interlocutors?

Stephen O’Brien: I certainly have. You have to meet and deal with a wide range of people, including the very generous donors – either more traditional ones or the new partnerships we are creating in many parts of the world. These are the people who are determined. They want to commit resources to deliver on the UN’s strategic approach to saving lives and finding ways to give those lives greater dignity, greater opportunity. We help sustain the work by building in resilience. We build in the ability for people to take on responsibilities for survival and growth in their own lives.

We try to save 80 million lives a year and need to raise about $20 billion to do it. So you can see the scale of what has to be done is absolutely vast...

It’s been hugely important to meet those who help us with the resources and, above all, to meet the affected people. So far, I have managed to go to Iraq, to the Kurdistan region, and into Lebanon. And I’ve been to South Sudan. I was able to see there, the outstanding work of the UN. It was absolutely clear that the UN has saved many thousands of lives because it works alongside numerous partners – both in the charitable sector, particularly the local NGOs, as well as international NGOs – who come together for this very important work.

I will be visiting other countries very shortly. We have a number of really big humanitarian crises around the world, namely Syria, Iraq, South Sudan and Yemen. Also we have the Central African Republic. We have the continuing care and vigilance that we need to maintain with the West Africa Ebola outbreak. We have a continuing crisis across many parts of the Sahel in North and West Africa. Additionally, there is the continuing need to move from the immediate emergency response phase, as in the Philippines, Haiti or, most recently, in Nepal. Looking to the reconstruction phase, we have to work as we transition more into a development role, which is taken on by other parts of the UN system.

So yes, it’s been a pretty busy time because in addition to all that, I have to be here in New York where I have an administrative, management, leadership responsibility; and in Geneva, where we have many of the OCHA team doing strong work; and equally, in the capitals of the world, where we have to forge relationships in partnership with many donor agencies who make sure that we do good work. Additionally, the World Humanitarian Summit is due to take place next year.

UN News Centre: You’ve been air-bound for the past eight or nine weeks. How much time have you been at Headquarters as opposed to being out in the field?

Stephen O’Brien: I haven’t actually counted, but it must be about 14 or 15 days. It’s been a pretty intense immersion. Of course, the work has got to be done but most importantly it’s getting the chance to meet all of the people who are
contributing within what is a remarkable team approach. Humanitarian work is extremely complex, very demanding and urgent at all times – and is normally in the context of an emergency. You need people with great experience who know what to do each time. As best we can, we need to make sure that we have the right people in place. The difficulty is that you cannot be sure where some of the emergencies are going to arise.

Humanitarian work is extremely complex, very demanding and urgent at all times – and is normally in the context of an emergency.

Equally, a lot of situations, particularly in conflict, are turning out to be protracted crises. So then, it isn’t so much about knowing where it is, it’s about knowing how to maintain the necessary resourcing to sustain the activities to satisfactorily and efficiently meet the humanitarian need. It is a huge challenge, but one that we have try to continue to meet on a daily basis.

UN News Centre: On a more personal note, how important is it to go to the field and see first-hand the most urgent needs?

Stephen O'Brien: There is no substitute for seeing it yourself… As global citizens, we are all sensitized – particularly working under international humanitarian law and the principles that govern it – to make sure that we focus on where the needs and vulnerabilities are, no matter how they arise or who they are. We have to try and be able to meet them. But equally, it is important for the credibility of those under a UN mandate to give a voice to the voiceless, to put rights up front. Those of us advocating for people in need must be credible. We have to see it for ourselves, and meet the people who may be even part of the protagonists in conflict.

For instance, I was in Unity state in South Sudan and was able to meet some individuals coming through the swamps. People don’t realize [that, though] a landlocked country, a lot of South Sudan is covered in water for much of the time – not deep but very marshy. Because of the nature of seasonal challenges, it puts you at massive risk of malaria infection. Safe travel is difficult when you are fleeing. As I said to the Security Council the other day, many of the millions living in South Sudan have an extraordinarily stark choice: either flee or be killed.

You really feel it when talking to the people on the ground, mainly women and children. Women in particular take the responsibility to try to find food, shelter and clean drinking water and safeguard their children. They undergo absolutely atrocious experiences while they are fleeing places of danger – as armies or militias run amok across the bush. They are chased through swamps and often used as weapons of war.

Of course that gives rise to massive humanitarian need where, in particular, generous host communities take them in – even before the UN or NGOs can get there with their camps or more engineered approaches. The host communities will give these very vulnerable people shelter. They will often use next year’s seeds to help feed them, so you end up with an even greater humanitarian need. This is why it is so important to recognize that there is a role for the world at large to be able to respond to crises and to make sure that we really do take responsibility for people in need.

UN News Centre: Can you give us a run-down of the main humanitarian crises at present, starting with Yemen?

Stephen O'Brien: Yemen is a nation that has had security challenges for quite some time. While the country’s profile is coming up, it needs to be much higher on people’s agenda. It has taken time to recognize the extent of what is going on there and the humanitarian needs that must be filled. Today, 80 per cent of Yemen’s population, just over 21 million people, are in some form of humanitarian need. This has happened with a resurgence of violence and war and entails whether they have shelter, clean drinking water and enough food to eat. There are also very serious shortages of medical supplies… Traditionally, Yemen has had about 80 per cent of its supplies imported – including fuel, which has not been able to get in for a while. Fuel is needed for daily life… it is essential to run the mills, to grind the corn for cereals and to run pumping mills for water.

While the warring is going on, we are doing our very best to negotiate the access required for the United Nations to impartially get into Yemen to provide supplies through the local NGOs, supply chains and brave volunteers. We are also conferring with the commercial shipping inspection regime and trying to raise funds for those who run programmes, and, above all, the commodities. It’s a very tough, ongoing situation. Working with a host of people, we are doing our best to
make sure that we can meet those needs. I cannot give you any kind of satisfactory answer that all of those needs are being met… they are not, as of today.

UN News Centre: What are the challenges in Iraq and what is OCHA doing to respond?

Stephen O'Brien: I was in both Bagdad and Erbil. I went to a new extended camp on the outskirts of Bagdad where 20 days before, the women and children that I met had been running in from Ramadi. Trying hard to flee, they had been stuck on the Bzebiz Bridge. One woman had her children and her terribly ill, disabled husband. When I met him, he was being kept in a separate tent in the refugee camp. They had managed to escape from Ramadi as ISIS [also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)] fighters had come and homes had been burnt. Prior to that, they had fled another town. Part of their extended family was living in a village on the outskirts of Ramadi.

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The camp itself, which was provided through the UN agencies under OCHA’s coordination, was well built. It gave people shelter, clean drinking water and regular supplies of food. There were even some hook-ups providing one or two of them with air coolers that just make the 40 degrees and higher heat tolerable. Of course everybody there was desperate to go back home but they had no homes to go back to – they had been burnt. Their uncertainty was compounded by the fact that many of the people who had run in from Ramadi hadn’t necessarily left poverty. They had actually left what might be described as a middle class existence. Having had many of the things that all of us are generally used to, they were also going through a big psychological adjustment of having lost everything.

Their humanitarian needs were no different, no better, no worse than the terrible needs of anybody in a humanitarian crisis. But, in their own minds, they were suffering from the contrast of what they had had and the terrible uncertainty that it all looked as though there was no hope for the future. Those of us engaged in providing humanitarian needs are trying to give not just the ability to survive, but some form of tangible hope. To mothers who ought to be able to look after their children and to young people who want to know that there is a world in which they can participate and influence. So these are really important aspects of humanitarian work.

UN News Centre: And in South Sudan?

Stephen O'Brien: In a previous role I had seen so much hope in the people as they became the youngest country on the planet – and that was only back in 2011. When I met with President Salva Kiir, I told him that I was there when that hope had come about and how it was dashed today with the continuing warring between his forces, the rebel forces and other militia in the fray. There are great insecurities in the nation that has yet to build any capacity and has known only ongoing dispute for three or even more decades. And so with the seasonal water levels rising across swampy marshland – which characterises up to 40 per cent of the whole of South Sudan – the humanitarian needs of people fleeing violence in all directions is phenomenal. There are camps that have to be set up to protect civilians against one side while camps or host communities are looking after those fleeing from the other side… We are seeking to raise resources and goods to ensure that the needs of the South Sudanese can be addressed.

We must do everything we can to give them protection, to give them the fundamental rights they should enjoy as human beings. Above all, they must have shelter, food, clean drinking water and the ability to get medical attention.

UN News Centre: Can you speak about the importance of dealing with the people who have the resources, the funds, to get the necessary things to those in need?

Stephen O'Brien: The pool of people who want to ensure their resources are made available to meet humanitarian needs has grown, and needs to grow more. We are all much more conscious of what it is to be a global citizen. Even though some tend to see things in silos, I think most people would acknowledge the importance of security, the future of our planet, humanitarian needs, and, above all, the ability of economies to be self-sustaining.

As part of being global citizens, we have an obligation to try to make available to everyone across the world the opportunity to participate, to be engaged in their own politics and feel that their voice is being heard. This should not be restricted to those, by sheer luck, born in countries with democratic and secure systems. We have to recognize that it is driven...
fundamentally by the values of humanity. Donors in the richer countries want to know where their hard-earned income is going. It is important that we demonstrate how if one invests in humanitarian work here, it equals a result there, and to demonstrate that fantastic humanitarian results are being achieved… We do this through our advocacy, our witness, the partnerships that we create, both on the ground and amongst all the areas where emergencies arise – be they natural or in conflict settings.

This is, however, much more complex in conflict settings. As so many are protracted, sustainability becomes even more difficult. We have to build trust, confidence and accuracy of the data. My office, in particular, has a great responsibility to make sure that we have the very best factual information. A lot of our authority comes from the fact that we quickly present the facts with authority, so people know exactly what they are dealing with. When we try to raise and match the resources to meet the needs, we can use the pipeline effect to illustrate that if they put money in, it will achieve a result without getting diverted or at too great a cost, which gives people the confidence.

And we’re creating more partnerships. As the overarching global body, the UN must meet vulnerability and need wherever it is found, however it arises, under whoever’s influence. As humanitarian law requires, we must act impartially, first depending on the facts. Secondly, we must be trusted to operate independently. We can only do that by making sure that we don’t allow ourselves to be influenced in one way or another while meeting everybody’s needs. That’s how we raise the resources in the most sustainable way. Trusted relationships – with governments, donors, philanthropists, NGOs and the private sector – are very important amongst the UN agencies. There are huge numbers of stakeholder constituencies with whom we have to forge and develop relationships.

UN News Centre: Tell us about the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul next year and what you hope to see come out of it.

Stephen O’Brien: The Summit will be held from 23 to 24 May 2016 in Istanbul… it is a tremendous opportunity to re-inspire a whole new generation to be engaged both through the UN and the entire humanitarian family in tremendous work. Once the idea first came along, a very inclusive consultation process was put in place by the UN. As part of the OCHA team, the World Humanitarian Summit secretariat just concluded eight regional consultations, bringing together the best ideas to culminate in a synthesis report, which will also have the benefit of some thematic meetings that have been taking place. The synthesis report will then bring everything together, adding value by giving a certain consistency and logic, but also showing where innovation and well-proven techniques have phenomenal humanitarian impact. That will crescendo in October at a Geneva event, where we will bring everyone together to ensure we have a tremendous toolkit. We will then add what will emerge from that event with other work that we are doing on the Secretary-General’s report, which by very early next year, we will share with all the stakeholders – the Member States, donors, affected peoples, NGOs and all the other people who are very much engaged.

With so many uncertainties and challenges, there are massive humanitarian needs. The demands seem to be outstripping our ability to meet them. It will be up to the Member States and all who are engaged to find the path from Istanbul once we identify what we are able to do, declare the political will to do it and then have everybody join in to move forward. I think, because of the inclusive process and rigorous examination to identify some emerging themes, it will be a tremendous opportunity to see, for example, how you tie the almost episodic emergency work of humanitarian response into a more sustained developmental agenda within the affected areas.

UN News Centre: What can the recipient of UN aid on the ground in some war-torn country expect to receive, and how can they benefit from next year’s Summit?

Stephen O’Brien: We must be very careful not to presume we know the answer every time. It is important to marshal the resources, to make sure that we can deliver for nominal humanitarian impact. But first, we should be listening more closely and empowering the affected peoples to have a much greater say in the partnership, both from the broad international humanitarian community – the UN agencies in particular, because they can do these things at great scale but alongside the international and the national NGOs – but equally from their own governments. They should be able to expect their own governments to support them when emergencies arise. It’s always a little easier to imagine this in relation to natural disasters. When talking about conflict, it is more complicated because governments are often focused purely on security rather than the provision of basic services for people.
What is to stop us these days from trying to make sure, for example, that people in affected areas have mobile phones, safe in hand, powered by solar with a dedicated satellite? When the floods and the earthquakes happen, they will be in a position to call for help, which is better than all of us fighting to get assistance in and then discovering that we had not necessarily brought the right help. We need to empower the people. Most importantly, we must let those in need know that we are all on their side, making sure not to leave anyone behind. That is a central theme in everything the Secretary-General and the United Nations are pursuing. It is imperative to make clear that there is massive political will of the world’s people wanting to know that we give our best humanitarian assistance, for the impact to be immediate and that it gives people a chance to survive and live productive and dignified lives.

UN News Centre: When you finish your term as the head of OCHA, what are your main hopes for achievement?

Stephen O'Brien: I am an optimist. I believe in humanitarian work, to meet needs as they arise and to make sure that as we look back we will not have been found wanting. That, as part of the global team, we seek to deliver humanitarian assistance to meet the fundamental basic needs of saving lives and of making sure that those lives can live without vulnerability. The impact of this should give the affected people dignity, opportunities to grow resilience to avoid a repeat cycle of fear and security for families, communities and lives. Not to be found wanting because the UN, its family of UN agencies and its partnerships with the donors – be them philanthropists, governments or foundations – are making sure that along with the private sector, we have built up a series of partnerships that together, through coordination – to avoid duplication and ensure that we hit the targeted destiny – will purchase results that yield confidence and future sustainability.

I hope that, above all, we can look back at any period – I or anybody who’s been engaged in this work – and say they were not found wanting. They did all that they could and produced the best they could at the time. At the end of the day, every life saved is an achievement in itself. That takes a huge number of people working together and the political will and determination of the world.