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ISIL may have committed genocide, war crimes in Iraq, says UN human rights report

19 March - A report released today by the United Nations human rights office says that the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) may have committed genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in its attacks against ethnic and religious groups in the country.

The report found widespread abuses committed by ISIL that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, according to a news release issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Compiled by investigators sent to the region last year by the High Commissioner, the report highlights violations, including killings, torture, rape and sexual slavery, forced religious conversions and the conscription of children.

ISIL’s attacks on the Yezidi population “pointed to the intent of ISIL to destroy the Yezidi as a group,” the report says, which “strongly suggests” that ISIL may have perpetrated genocide.

The report also highlights violations carried out by the Iraqi Security Forces and associated militia groups, including killings, torture and abductions, with some incidents pointing, at the very least, to a failure by the Government to protect persons under its jurisdiction.

More than 100 people who witnessed or survived attacks in Iraq between June 2014 and February 2015 helped the
investment team compile its report, which cites brutal and targeted killings of hundreds of Yezidi men and boys in the Ninewa plains in August 2014.

Yezidi populations rounded up, with men and boys over the age of 14 separated from the women and girls. The males were led away and shot by ISIL, while the women were abducted as the ‘spoils of war.’ “In some instances,” the report found, “villages were entirely emptied of their Yezidi population.”

Yezidi female escapees described being openly sold or handed over as “gifts” to ISIL fighters. Witnesses described rapes of girls as young as six and nine years old and a scene where ISIL members sat laughing as two teenage girls were raped in the next room.

Boys between the ages of eight and 15 also described horrific experiences, as they were separated from their mothers, transported to locations in Iraq and Syria and forced to convert to Islam. They were subjected to religious and military training, including how to shoot guns and fire rockets, and were forced to watch beheadings.

“This is your initiation into jihad,” one boy was told. “You are an Islamic State boy now.”

Christians, Kaka’e, Kurds, Sabea-Mandeans, Shi’a and Turkmen also suffered brutal treatment at ISIL’s hands, the report says, citing the thousands of Christians uprooted from their homes in June last year, when ISIL ordered them to choose between conversion, taxation or displacement, and the 600, mostly Shi’a prisoners who were massacred by ISIL members.

An Iraqi Government investigation into that incident and another into an ISIL massacre of over 1,500 cadets from Speicher army base have yet to reveal their conclusions publicly, the report notes, calling for investigations into all crimes detailed in the report, including those alleged to have been committed by Government forces.

Numerous sources told the investigation team that Iraqi Security Forces and affiliated militia had also committed serious human rights violations during their counter-offensive operations against ISIL, operating “with total impunity, leaving a trail of death and destruction in their wake.”

Retreating Iraqi forces allegedly set fire to an army base in Sinsil, where several dozen Sunni prisoners were held, and in another incident, at least 43 prisoners were allegedly shot dead in the al-Wahda police station in Diyala. Villagers reported being rounded up and taken to al-Bakr airbase at Salah-ad-Din where, the report says, torture is allegedly routine.

As one witness put it: “we hoped for the best when the Iraqi army and the ‘volunteers’ liberated the area from ISIL. Instead…they pillaged, burnt and blew up houses, claiming that all villagers are part of ISIL. This is not true; we are just ordinary poor people.”

The report urges the Government to become a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and ensure that international crimes defined in that Statute are criminalised under domestic law.

It also calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the UN Security Council to address, “in the strongest terms, information that points to genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes,” and to consider referring the situation in Iraq to the International Criminal Court.
UN officials say suffering in Nigeria ‘immense,’ warn of regional humanitarian crisis

19 March - Amid ongoing fighting between Government forces and Boko Haram insurgents, the effects of the crisis in north-eastern Nigeria are increasingly reverberating across the region, two senior United Nations humanitarian officials said today, as they urged international donors to ramp up financial support for relief efforts.

Briefing the press at UN Headquarters in New York, John Ging, Operations Director for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and Afshan Khan, Director of Emergency Programmes for the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), reported on the growing tragedy facing civilians following their recent visit to the city of Yola, near the Nigerian-Cameroonian border.

“The people of north-east Nigeria have suffered immensely,” stated Mr. Ging.

Clashes between Boko Haram and Nigerian Government forces have intensified in recent weeks as fighting has spilled across borders and become increasingly regionalized. During the past few weeks alone, the group has also perpetrated deadly attacks against civilians in Chad, Cameroon and Niger.

Mr. Ging confirmed that more than 1 million people had already been displaced by the fighting and an estimated 6,300 civilians had been killed while countless others had suffered atrocities and violations of human rights law. Ninety per cent of those displaced, he continued, had been integrated into host communities, further burdening their services. In Yola alone, the city had doubled in population from 300,000 to 600,000 due to the influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Meanwhile, the crisis was also having a dire impact on food security in the immediate region and across the Sahel, Mr. Ging said.

“With the rainy season just two months away, and host communities’ resources rapidly diminishing, we must urgently mobilize assistance to help people in need, in support of the local communities and organizations who have done so much already.”

Mr. Ging explained that the Sahel region remained “dependent” on Nigeria’s food production, receiving half of its cereals from the conflict-ridden country. Now, with agriculture disrupted by violence, the longer-term consequences of the crisis were growing in severity.

He added that OCHA was injecting $28 million dollars from its Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to “enable rapid surge and increase in international humanitarian action” across Niger, Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria. Nonetheless, he also called on donors to boost funding as the appeal for Nigeria remained only 8 per cent funded.

Ms. Khan voiced concern that the conflict in north-eastern Nigeria had been one of the deadliest in terms of its impact on children, with girls raped and forced into early marriage and thousands of boys forcibly recruited to fight.

She warned that women and children were suffering the bulk of the crisis, as they suffered sexual abuse and violence and were coerced to flee the zones of conflict.

“Behind these statistics and numbers are some very real stories impacting people in a very tragic way,” Ms. Khan told journalists. “Despite all they have been through, the women we met held unshakeable strength, courage and determination to rebuild their families, their communities and their country.”
The UNICEF official suggested that empowering affected women economically, in terms of a programmatic response, would help promote a positive trickle-down effect as the women, in turn, would be able to take care of their children and rebuild their lives.

“Their asks are extremely humble – protection and justice, a plot of land, an opportunity for a livelihood, free access to healthcare, and education for their children – and we must all work to support them,” she said.

Ukraine crisis taking heaviest toll on women, children and elderly – UN officials

19 March - Women, children and the elderly are disproportionately bearing the devastating impact of the protracted conflict in Ukraine, which has left five million people in need of humanitarian assistance, senior United Nations officials said today, as they stressed the “grave and urgent need” to scale up international relief efforts.

Accessing vulnerable populations and lack of funding remain the two biggest obstacles to getting the help to where it is needed most, John Ging, Director of Operations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), told a press conference in New York.

Fresh off a multi-agency visit to Ukraine and Nigeria, Mr. Ging, who was joined by Afshan Khan, Director at the Office of Emergency Programmes, UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), called his trip an “unprecedented mission.”

“We saw the first-hand consequences of conflict. Five million people are in need of human assistance, including 3.2 million who are highly vulnerable. Some 1.7 million people have fled their homes and over one million are internally displaced,” he said.

Mr. Ging described how temporary orders to restrict movement of people and goods across the conflict line were severely hampering efforts to get aid to those in need. Residents in affected regions of Donetsk and Luhansk have not received their salaries since July 2014.

Elderly homes, psychological centres and orphanages are in need of critical, even lifesaving supplies. Pensions are not being paid, further compounding the suffering of the elderly.

“The only means that communities have to survive at the moment is basically through their coping mechanisms which are being exhausted very quickly,” Mr. Ging warned, emphasizing that many health clinics have closed and medical personnel have fled.

Some 1.4 million people require health care and the centres that are open are struggling to care for the sick who were moved from damaged and destroyed clinics, in addition to treating those wounded from the conflict. In Donetsk, 77 out of the 350 health centres have been damaged or destroyed.

“We have witnessed and have also been told of real shortages of basic medical supplies such as cancer drugs, pain killers and even antibiotics,” Mr. Ging said, stressing that “all of this is leading to real human suffering.”

He warned of the long-term consequences of the protracted crisis: “No child has been vaccinated since this conflict began and again it’s the children that are the most vulnerable and are bearing the brunt here.”

Mr. Ging also cited the increasing danger of unexploded ordinance, as well as the fact that the banking system has been cut off again to non-government controlled areas – additional obstacles to delivering humanitarian support and paying staff salaries.

The UN already has a significant humanitarian operation under way in Ukraine, delivering medicine, blankets, food, hygiene kits, and household items to those in need. But more needs to be done, the officials stressed, noting that they only have five
per cent of the $316 million sought for humanitarian efforts in Ukraine. “It is very clear to us that we have to scale up the international component to this response,” said Mr. Ging.

Expanding more on the plight of children in Ukraine, Ms. Khan said that 1.7 million of them bear the brunt of the emergency, including 140,000 who have been internally displaced. She warned that the displacement numbers are likely “much higher” because people, and particularly children, are hesitant to register as ‘displaced’ for fear of losing the right to the homes they fled.

“Children living in or forced to flee conflict areas have suffered enormous stress and have witnessed unimaginable violence,” she stated, as she held up two drawings made by children at an orphanage she visited during her mission. “These pictures are from children who are obviously traumatised from the fighting.”

The need for the most basic services is great as well, Ms. Khan said, recalling her visit to a bomb shelter where the water and sanitation situation was “very disturbing.” There too, the children were impacted psychosocially from the violence that they have experienced. But staying in a shelter without clean water and hygiene will also have a lasting impact. “Living in those cramped quarters is an experience no child will forget,” she said.

UNICEF has boosted its vaccination efforts with the planned delivery of 4.8 million polio vaccines, the first batch by the end of April. Also, 200,000 families and children have been educated on mine-risk. Safely returning children to school will require the clearing of such unexploded remnants. In addition to expanding school access, the focus must be on children living in institutions, those with disabilities and those infected with HIV/AIDS, she added.

The visit to Ukraine and Nigeria comprised of 14 emergency directors from various UN agencies and international partners.

**UNICEF rushes emergency supplies for cyclone-affected Tuvalu**

*19 March* - The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is dispatching emergency life-saving supplies to communities in Tuvalu as part of its efforts to assist communities in the Pacific region that were affected by Tropical Cyclone Pam, with nutrition and hygiene kits arriving today.

The archipelago nation comprising of nine islands with about 11,000 people has declared a state of emergency, following tidal surges caused by last weekend's cyclone, according to a UNICEF press release.

“Assessment data shows that 42 per cent of households in the northern islands of Tuvalu were seriously affected by flooding from tidal surges,” said UNICEF’s Pacific Representative, Karen Allen. “These supplies will help to meet their immediate health needs in the coming days.”

An assessment team has also been deployed to affected areas by the Government of Tuvalu, but lack of power has hampered reporting. Presently, there are around 89 UNICEF staff spread across Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, and more people are on their way to help with the emergency.

Initial reports suggest that Nui, and to a lesser extent other islands, have been severely hit with storm surges, inundating houses, undermining building foundations, flooding food sources and killing livestock. Damaged water tanks have also taken a heavy toll on water reserves on the worst impacted islands.

Supplies include a basic health kit, 1,000 packs of water purification tablets, and vitamin A capsules. The health supplies will be distributed by the Ministry of Health, while the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) supplies will be managed by Tuvalu Red Cross.

The health kit will enable UNICEF to meet the initial health care needs of the affected population where government clinics and private shops have both been damaged or destroyed. The kit contains medicines, medical supplies and basic equipment.
for up to 10,000 patient visits.

Water purification tablets are important in ensuring safe water for children, in order to prevent diseases such as diarrhoea, intestinal worms and typhoid. Vitamin A can boost children's immune system and increase their resistance to disease, improving their chances for survival.

“We are awaiting assessment information particularly on damages to schools since we firmly believe that continuation of education in emergency situations is extremely important not only for learning outcomes but also for psycho-social recovery,” Ms. Allen said.

**UN envoy outlines progress in DR Congo from ‘shattered’ country to ‘proud nation’**

19 March - The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is unified with a “clear, shared and celebrated” identity, the top United Nations envoy there told the Security Council today, as he briefed on the latest developments in the vast African nation.

“It is no longer at war, neither in transition. It is a proud nation,” said Martin Kobler, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of the UN peacekeeping mission in DRC (MONUSCO). “When [the original mission in the country] MONUC arrived, some 15 years ago, the country was socially, economically and politically shattered. When MONUC arrived, the country was at civil war.”

Mr. Kobler, who was joined in briefing the Council by the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Said Djinnit, described the Government’s efforts to restore security, saying it had succeeded in freeing a large amount of territory from armed groups, which were now limited to the country’s eastern provinces.

“The overall security situation however is still not stable, let alone irreversible,” he said. “Many still live in fear of rape, fear of attack, fear of being robbed of already meagre possessions. This fear affects every aspect of daily life.”

He said more work was needed to reduce the threat from armed groups and violence against civilians to a level that can be effectively managed by Congolese institutions and to achieve stability through the establishment of functional, professional, accountable State institutions and strengthened democratic practices.

“Our combined efforts against the ADF, like the operations against the M23 two years ago, has forged a bond between the FARDC [national army] and MONUSCO soldiers: they are now brothers in arms,” said Mr. Kobler, stressing that the FDLR remained the biggest threat to peace and security in the Great Lakes region and stressing the need for joint efforts to tackle that threat.

Mr. Kobler noted that FARDC officers who had formerly commanded units with a credible history of human rights violations were brought in and the UN was forced to suspend participation in and support for operations under their command.

“The decision to suspend support is upholding indisputable values enshrined in the protection of human rights,” he said. “We want to support the fight against the FDLR and implement our human rights policy. We do not want to choose between fighting the FDLR or upholding human rights.”

He said he knew that the Government and President Kabila had a zero-tolerance policy on human rights violations, adding that he was confident that appropriate action would be taken to remedy the “unfortunate situation” soon.

Tackling the FDLR also required a well-functioning demobilization and repatriation process and effective extension of State authority, he said, underscoring the need for non-military initiatives against the FDLR.
“There is no purely military solution to the problem of the FDLR,” he said. “Surrendered FDLR elements are still in the camps of Kanyabayonga, Walungu and Kisangani where they maintain intact a perfectly well functioning military structure. A few FDLR combatants have disarmed, yes, but their demobilization has not yet started, let alone their repatriation.”

As he stressed the need to build an atmosphere of confidence and trust between the Government and MONUSCO, he said the two were aligned on goals, including the wellbeing of the population, bringing an end to violence in the east and the eventual departure of the Mission.

“With more security in more places, the time will come for MONUSCO to begin its gradual drawdown,” he said. “As I have always said: MONUC entered through the west, MONUSCO will exit through the east. MONUSCO will not stay in the DRC forever. We look forward to the day when MONUSCO can leave Congo, with continuing development support transferred to our colleagues in the UN Country Team.”

To ensure that peace was sustainable and that the persistent cycle of violence was disrupted, it was vital to address the root causes of the conflict. One area of focus was on natural resources crime and a task force was working to help safe guard the natural wealth of DRC for future generations. It would also work to address the underpinnings of conflict.

Citing figures on the value of illegal natural resources exploitation in eastern DRC of $1 billion per year, he added that up to 98 per cent of the net profits from illegal natural resources exploitation – mainly gold, charcoal and timber – go to transnational organized criminal networks, as opposed to funding rebel groups.

“How many hospitals could be built if illegal trade would become legal? How many kilometres of road rehabilitated? How many teachers paid?” he asked. “The objective is clear: Turning gold into taxes; turning taxes into schools; turning schools into a prosperous future.”

He also looked ahead to upcoming elections, welcoming the publication of the global electoral calendar and adding that all parties were responsible for ensuring an atmosphere conducive to achieving peaceful elections. He also expressed concern about the recent arrests of several dozen civil society actors.

“The region remains at a crossroads,” Mr. Djinnit told the Council. “Despite notable progress, significant challenges remain to be addressed to achieve the goals in the framework agreement.”

Armed groups had to be neutralised and relations between the countries in the region had to be improved to remove misunderstandings and suspicions, he said, adding that he was keen to support rapprochement to foster a climate of cooperation. In addition, the region was in a “crucial electoral cycle” that would make a major contribution to strengthening democracy and stability.

Over and above those goals, he said it was essential to deal with the deep-seated instability in the DRC. He promised that his office would contribute to all initiatives already underway, prioritising action to achieve sustainable solutions on citizenship and property.

He underlined the importance of civil society and women in implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework – signed by Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, DRC, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, and Tanzania – which encompasses commitments at the national, regional and international levels to bring peace and stability to the eastern DRC and the region, and he called for the continued engagement of the Security Council on the issue.

“We have seen considerable progress in overcoming the tragedies of the past,” he said. “But we are yet to achieve irreversible progress.”
Guinea reports highest weekly Ebola case total so far this year, new UN data shows

19 March - The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) has reported the highest weekly number of Ebola cases in Guinea so far this year and noted that while transmission was confined to a narrow geographically contiguous arc straddling the capitals of Guinea and Sierra Leone, the population is highly mobile, thus creating a challenge “to prevent the seeding of new outbreaks.”

In the latest update on Ebola reissued today, Liberia reported no new confirmed cases for the third consecutive week and Sierra Leone had the lowest weekly total recorded since June 2014.

And to date, there have been more than 25,000 cases of Ebola reported in the hardest-hit West African countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone with over 10,000 reported deaths, according to WHO.

According to the latest update, a total of 150 new confirmed cases of Ebola virus disease were reported in the week to 15 March, compared with 116 the previous week.

Of these new cases, 95 were in Guinea, the highest weekly total for the country in 2015, according to the update.

“Key response indicators for Guinea suggest that there remain significant challenges to overcome before transmission is brought under control,” the WHO report said.

Sierra Leone reported 55 new confirmed cases over the same period: the country’s lowest weekly total since late June 2014, and Liberia reported no new confirmed cases for the third consecutive week, WHO reported.

The 15th of March was day 12 since the last patient in Liberia had a second negative test for Ebola, the agency said, noting that 42 days must elapse before transmission can be considered to have ended.

WHO said 12 districts in Guinea and Sierra Leone reported a confirmed case in the week to 15 March, all of which lie on a geographically contiguous arc in and around Conakry, Guinea to the north and Freetown, Sierra Leone to the south.

“Though transmission is currently confined to a relatively narrow geographic corridor, the population is highly mobile, with a great deal of movement throughout surrounding districts and countries,” report said. “Limiting the movements of cases and contacts is challenging but essential to prevent the seeding of new outbreaks.”

By contrast with Guinea, key response indicators for Sierra Leone present a more promising outlook,” the update said.

The UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) reported today that the World Food Programme (WFP) is supporting the construction of the Nongo Ebola Treatment Unit in Guinea.

Also, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) is increasing its support to medical waste management at Sierra Leone’s hospitals and treatment units, UNMEER reported, noting sterilization machines will improve the quality of infection control practices in Sierra Leone’s hospitals.
Independent UN human rights expert calls trial of former Maldives President 'mockery'

19 March - An independent United Nations human rights expert has warned of the “seriously deteriorating situation” regarding the independence of the justice system in the Maldives in the wake of the sentencing of former President Mohammed Nasheed, calling his trial a “mockery” of the country’s Constitution.

“I am extremely concerned about the lack of respect for the most basic principles of fair trial and due process during Mr. Nasheed’s criminal proceedings,” Gabriela Knaul, the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, said in a press release issued today.

“The series of due process violations that were reported to me since Mr. Nasheed’s arrest on 22 February are simply unacceptable in any democratic society.”

According to the UN human rights office (OHCHR), Mr. Nasheed’s trial began one day after his arrest, which was made on the charge that he authorised the unlawful detention of Criminal Court Judge Abdulla Mohamed in 2012 when he was the country’s President. Having previously faced charges for the same complaint, which were withdrawn by the Prosecutor-General, Mr. Nasheed was arrested again under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

OHCHR has noted that the trial did not follow stipulations in the Maldives’ Constitution, which states that anyone accused of a crime shall have the right to adequate time and facilities for the preparation of his defence, and did not follow international fair trial standards.

Similarly, Ms. Knaul noted that Mr. Nasheed’s defence team was allegedly prevented from attending his first hearing and was not granted adequate time to prepare for his defence. In addition, when the defence team later resigned, the trial proceeded without allowing him to seek new legal representation.

The former President has since been sentenced to 13 years imprisonment.

“Mr. Nasheed’s trial was not only a clear violation of the Maldives’ international human rights obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but it also made a mockery of the State’s own Constitution,” Ms. Knaul stated. “The speed of the proceedings combined with the lack of fairness in the procedures lead me to believe the outcome of the trial may have been pre-determined.”

She urged authorities in the Maldives to “seriously consider” the recommendations made in a 2013 report she submitted following her visit to the country and called for guarantees that Mr. Nasheed’s appeal process “respect the most stringent fair trial and due process guarantees.”

“The fact that one former president is being tried on serious terrorism-related charges for one alleged offence when his predecessor has not had to answer for any of the serious human rights violations documented during his term is also troubling for a country whose Constitution enshrines the independence and impartiality of the justice system as a prerequisite for democracy and the rule of law,” Ms. Knaul said.

Special Rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council and carry out their work in an independent and unpaid capacity.
Despite progress, Georgia needs to do more, says UN expert dealing with torture

19 March - The United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture today praised the Government of Georgia for its positive advances in the treatment of prisoners since the October 2012 parliamentary election but cautioned that “there is still room for improvement and a need for anchoring.”

“The impact of measures adopted in this time period is visible and even quantifiable,” Juan E. Méndez said at the end of his official mission to the country, the first visit in ten years by an independent expert tasked by the UN Human Rights Council to monitor and report on the use of torture and other cruel or inhuman treatment or punishment.

“In less than three years, the Georgian authorities have managed not only to introduce extensive policy changes, but also to implement radical changes in the mentality of its staff throughout the entire chain of command,” he noted.

A news release issued by the UN human rights office (OHCHR) noted that Mr. Mendez “tried to include Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia during his eight-day visit, but the respective de facto authorities there did not grant him access from Georgia.” However, he did visit both eastern and western Georgia, where he carried out unannounced calls to places of detention such as police stations, pre-trial facilities and penitentiaries.

“Through numerous testimonies, I found convincing evidence that the use of corporal punishment and forced confessions has been effectively abolished,” Mr. Méndez said, emphasizing that the Government “has done away with overcrowding and, in turn, with many of its detrimental consequences by significantly diminishing its prison population.”

Overall, the Special Rapporteur found acceptable cell conditions, adequate provision of food and medical care, and a reasonable access to phone calls with families. However, there was room for improvement in other areas.

“It strikes me that pre-trial prisoners – who ought to enjoy the presumption of innocence – are kept in cells for 23 hours per day and are not allowed to make phone calls nor receive family visits – sometimes for many months,” he said.

Additionally, he identified a general absence of meaningful work opportunities and activities offered to prisoners and expressed concern with regard to them serving long and life sentences.

“Much more needs to be done to promote accountability for torture and ill-treatment, and fulfil the right of reparations for victims,” the Special Rapporteur underscored. “There have been significant prosecutions and convictions for the torture and abuse of the recent past, but a large legacy remains and hundreds of victims still demand an effective remedy.”

Mr. Méndez urged the authorities to consolidate the reforms of the past two years as State policy “to ensure there will never be a regression to the use of torture.” In his view, “this must be done by further legislation and policy directives, and especially through a firm commitment to breaking the cycle of impunity for torture.”

“I encourage the Government to include all relevant stakeholders in this process and take into account as many views and concerns as possible in the decision on how best to organize the institutional, procedural and jurisdictional resources to ensure accountability for torture and to prevent future mistreatment,” he stated.

During his information-gathering visit, the Special Rapporteur met with relevant authorities in the executive, the judiciary, parliamentary committee members, national human rights institutions, civil society, international and regional organizations, and detainees. Mr. Méndez will present a country report with his recommendations to the Human Rights Council next year.
UN agency announces new digital system to prevent spread of plant pests

19 March - A new global electronic certification system aimed at reducing the spread of plant pests and diseases has been approved by representatives from more than 150 countries, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) announced today.

The new initiative – known as e-Phyto – will seek to curb the spread of threats to plants through international trade in “a more secure and cost-effective way” and will be developed by the Commission on Phytosanitary Measures (CPM), the governing body of the International Plant Protection Convention, otherwise known by the acronym IPPC, the FAO said in a press release.

The decision taken by countries will pave the way towards the eventual replacement of the current “complex, bureaucratic process,” in which millions of paper phytosanitary certificates are created, printed and exchanged between countries on an annual basis, with a more efficient digital system.

FAO noted that e-Phyto is already expected to reduce overall costs from the existing paper-based methods while, at the same time, significantly strengthening global harmonization and adherence to the IPPC standards for phytosanitary certification.

In addition, it is expected to simplify and reduce the cost of the $1.1 trillion annual global trade in agricultural products, increase the ability of countries to identify items that pose a high risk and reduce the potential for fraud and hence collateral damage.

“Security and confidentiality are crucial concerns that have been thoroughly addressed in the system design,” Peter Thomson, the IPPC’s Bureau lead for the e-Phyto development, told the CPM meeting in Rome this week.

“Secure electronic exchange of certificates between NPPOs [National Plant Protection Organisations] will eliminate problems some countries currently experience with the use of fraudulent certificates by importers or exporters.”

A number of countries have already begun to use electronic forms of certification which can be considered predecessors to e-Phyto, the FAO continued, including Australia, Canada, Kenya, the Republic of Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the United States.

Meanwhile, the CPM is also seeking funding for the system’s initial establishment in order to also support those Member States that currently do not retain the capacity to engage in e-Phyto.
China and US telecom giants lead global patent activity in 2014 – UN report

19 March - Three telecoms giants from China and the United States led international patent filings in 2014 in a fifth consecutive record-breaking year that “underscores the increasing importance of intellectual property as it moves from the periphery to the centre of the global economic system,” the United Nations reported today.

According to the UN World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) annual review of international patent filings, a leading Chinese telecoms giant overtook a Japanese firm as the largest applicant last year, and China and the US together accounted for 87 per cent of the total growth in filings under WIPO’s Patent Cooperation Treaty (PCT).

Under that system, some 215,000 applications were filed in 2014, a 4.5 per cent increase over the previous year, WIPO said in a news release.

The agency also noted that “in a significant development,” the US became the biggest filer of international trademark under the so-called WIPO Madrid System, which the agency described as “a one-stop solution for registering and managing marks worldwide.”

WIPO Director General Francis Gurry said: “The rapid growth in international patent applications underscores the increasing importance of intellectual property as it moves from the periphery to the centre of the global economic system.”

The agency noted that telecoms giant Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd. of China, with 3,442 published applications, overtook Panasonic Corp. of Japan as the largest applicant in 2014, while the US-based Qualcomm Inc. was the second largest applicant in 2014, with 2,409 published applications, and China’s ZTE Corp. took third place with 2,179 applications.

The US was the primary country of origin for filers in 2014, with 61,492 applications and 7.1 per cent growth. Japan followed with 42,459 applications, representing a 3 per cent decline on 2013. Applicants from China filed 25,539 applications – an 18.7 per cent annual increase.

The annual review also noted that Europe “showed signs of improvement as it strives to address a challenging economic environment,” reporting that for the first time since 2007, the top three European Union countries recorded growth in filings, with strong growth coming from France and the United Kingdom.

Among the top 10 filing countries, China (+18.7 per cent) is the only country that saw double-digit growth in 2014. The UK recorded the second fastest growth rate (+9 per cent), followed by the US (+7.1 per cent). In addition to Japan, Switzerland (-5.9 per cent) and Sweden (-0.5 per cent) are the two other countries among the top 10 with less PCT applications in 2014 than in 2013.

WIPO noted the top three applicants have similar patent filing profiles, with digital communication accounting for the bulk of their total filings.

Universities and public research organizations show a strong presence, accounting for 26 per cent of pharmaceutical filings. This is in contrast to computer technology and digital communication where these entities accounted for 4.6 per cent and 2.8 per cent, respectively.

The University of California, with 413 published applications, is the top applicant among educational institutions followed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (234), the University of Texas System (154) and Harvard University (147). US universities occupy nine of the top ten positions among educational institutions.
According to the findings, which also reviewed dispute resolution activities, since the WIPO Arbitration and Mediation Centre administered the first Uniform Domain Name Dispute Resolution Policy case in 1999, total WIPO case filings have passed the 30,000 mark, encompassing over 58,000 domain names.

In 2014, cybersquatting case filings with WIPO increased by 2 per cent, with 2,634 cases concerning 5,591 domain names lodged by trademark owners alleging abuse of their mark.

WIPO, a UN specialized agency based in Geneva, is the global forum for intellectual property policy and services.

**Political vacuum undermines Lebanon’s ability to tackle many challenges – Security Council**

19 March - The Security Council voiced its concern at the 10-month stalemate in the election of a president in Lebanon, saying it undermined the country’s ability to address the security, economic and social challenges it faces.

In a presidential statement, the 15-member body also called on all parties to “act responsibly and put Lebanon’s stability and national interests ahead of partisan politics,” and called on Parliament to convene to elect a president “without further delay.”

There has been a presidential vacuum in Lebanon after the term of Michel Sleiman came to an end on 25 May 2014. UN officials and the Security Council have repeatedly urged the Lebanese Parliament to elect a new leader without delay.

The country has also been dealing with renewed terrorist threats and a growing refugee population resulting from the conflict in neighbouring Syria that currently numbers almost 1.2 million.

“The Security Council expresses its deep concern at the increasing and negative impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon’s stability and the immediate threat to its security,” said the statement, which follows a closed-door briefing to the Council earlier this week by the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Sigrid Kaag.

It also strongly condemned acts of terrorism, including hostage taking by terrorist and violent extremist groups, including the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Daesh, and Jabhat al Nusra, on Lebanese territory.

Further, the Council voiced its deep concern following the recent incidents which occurred across the Blue Line separating Lebanon and Israel, and in the area of operations of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

“The Security Council stresses that such violence and the presence of unauthorized weapons in the UNIFIL area of operations violates resolution 1701 and the cessation of hostilities,” the statement said, referring to the resolution that ended the month-long war between Israel and the Lebanese group Hizbollah in 2006.

“It underlines the risk that such events could lead to a new conflict that none of the parties or the region can afford.”
On trend in its 70th anniversary year, UN launches new ‘modern, mobile-friendly’ homepage

19 March - A revamped United Nations website was launched this week after a year of design, consultation and testing, making it easier for users to view the gateway to the world body on mobile internet devices.

“You may have noticed that we have a new, modern, mobile-friendly UN home page,” spokesperson Farhan Haq told a news conference at UN Headquarters in New York, adding that the new look reflects the results of extensive discussions. “We have tested it for some months, conferred with content producers to iron out kinks and to ensure functionalities work.”

Most large organisations looking to renovate their web presence would be looking at using a budget of around $10 million to do so. However, in a time of budgetary restraint, the UN completed its project “within existing resources,” relying on the design, technical and linguistic talents of internal staff to launch the new page.

The UN Department of Public Information (DPI) handled the building of the new site, which has been completely restructured to give a more intuitive, visually arresting and dynamic user experience that reflects a forward-looking UN as the Organization celebrates its 70th anniversary.

“With a single click, journalists can access a dedicated section where they will find important resources, such as ‘Media Accreditation,’ ‘Spokesperson of the Secretary-General,’ ‘United Nations News Centre,’ ‘Meetings Coverage,’” said Mr. Haq, “as well as subscribe to UN documents and receive e-mails or RSS feeds.”

The website is also a ‘mobile-first’ design, meaning that it is designed to function firstly as a website viewed on mobile internet devices. In 2014, global mobile internet use surpassed desktop and the new website will adapt to either form seamlessly.

UN urges Pakistan to reinstate suspension of death penalty

19 March - The United Nations has expressed deep concern today at the increasing number of executions in Pakistan since December 2014, and at the Government’s recent announcement that it has now withdrawn its moratorium on the death penalty for all cases, not only those related to terrorism.

“It has also been reported that among those executed there are persons who were minors when the offence was committed. According to some estimates, there are more than 8,000 prisoners on death row,” said a statement from the UN office in Pakistan.

The UN expressed concern over cases where the death penalty was handed down to minors and welcomed reviews of these cases. “The UN has consistently called for an unequivocal end to the execution of anyone, anywhere, who is convicted of committing a crime when they are under the age of 18,” the statement said.

More than 160 UN Member States with a variety of legal systems and religious backgrounds have either abolished the death penalty or do not practice it.

Moreover, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein has expressed deep regret at the resumption of executions in Pakistan, stressing that no judiciary – anywhere – can be infallible.
There is no scientific proof, according to the UN, that the death penalty serves as a deterrent or contributes to combating crime or violent extremism.

“While we appreciate the need for effective counter-terrorism measures to protect people, including children, such action must strengthen human rights and be proportionate and necessary in a democratic society,” the UN said in today’s statement.

Under international treaties, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Pakistan legally committed itself to ensuring due process and not imposing the death penalty.

“The UN in Pakistan, therefore, urges the Government to reinstate its moratorium as soon as possible. We stand ready to support it in doing so and to assist in strengthening the existing justice system if so requested,” the statement emphasized.