South Sudan: UNICEF warns women and children being victimized ‘with frightening regularity’

19 May - Almost two years since the eruption of the conflict in South Sudan, the situation continues to deteriorate with women and small children making up the majority of most recent casualties, a representative from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in the country said today.

Speaking by phone from the capital, Juba, UNICEF Representative Jonathan Veitch confirmed to journalists in Geneva that dozens of children have been killed, raped and abducted in the Unity state over the previous two weeks.

“The deliberate targeting of children in these attacks is an outrage,” said Mr. Veitch in a press statement issued by UNICEF.

“If children are to be protected from further harm, an immediate cessation of hostilities is urgently needed, together with full access for humanitarian workers,” he added, underscoring that an urgent and thorough investigation is also required to identify and hold accountable those responsible for these latest atrocities against children.

Fighting has been reported to be ongoing even today, and it is unclear who was in charge of some areas. There were reports of women and girls being taken away to be raped or killed.

He said that a 17-year old girl, who had managed to reach a UN Mission (UNMISS) base, said that when the attackers had come, they had taken and burned her belongings. The attackers were boys, 16 or 17 years old, who proceeded to shoot many people. The girl did not have enough food to feed her 8-month old twins. This example shows how international law is being violated and the need for unconditional access to all areas.
According to dozens of testimonies from people who have fled burning villages, children have been both the victims and perpetrators of recent violence in Unity state, with armed men and boys in military and civilian clothing responsible for the widespread destruction of life and property.

UNICEF said that witnesses reported that they believed the attacks were undertaken by armed groups aligned with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

Mr. Veitch said that if people reached the refugee camps, children would at least be protected and taken care of, but outside of the camps, it is very difficult to provide protection.

There is no clear answer for the brutality. Some fighters explained that it was better to kill children now, before they grew up and returned for revenge, he said. It is an unprecedented use of children in conflict with almost 13,000 children registered to have been recruited by both sides thus far, Mr. Veitch said.

UNICEF has been in contact with the SPLA and trying to contact the opposition forces. There is a serious command and control issue at stake. The UN’s monitoring mechanism has shown that 13,000 children have been recruited over the past one and a half years.

Prior to that, South Sudan had been doing well in releasing children from armed forces and armed groups. The majority of the recruited children are likely in the opposition armed groups. It is becoming increasingly complex to work in the refugee camps due to the tribal differences, but services provided there are solid.

UN peacekeepers are providing a lot of protection, escort and patrolling and they have been targeted on numerous occasions outside of the camps. Mr. Veitch said that there was a strategic humanitarian response plan in place but it is extremely difficult to raise money for many of the budgets with many crises happening simultaneously around the world.

In some places in Jonglei State, people had returned home, Mr. Veitch explained, but in other places, the numbers of the displaced had gone up for security reasons and there were no indications that they would subside any time soon.

The agency added that fighting has been escalating in Unity and Upper Nile states in recent weeks, with violations against children occurring with frightening regularity.

Meanwhile, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said today that in Malakal, UNMISS reported military movements in the area of Melut, in Upper Nile state. Three explosions were heard approximately 40 kilometres from the Mission’s base.

Some 270 displaced persons have arrived at the Mission’s protection site in Melut this morning, joining the thousand civilians already there, and another 250 to 350 civilians are also sheltering at a newly allocated protection area adjacent to the Mission’s base, said Mr. Haq.

“"The Mission continues to be deeply concerned by the overall escalation of the conflict, and once again calls on the Government and Opposition leadership to immediately cease all hostilities and resume negotiations, with a view to signing a comprehensive peace agreement," he added.
At Security Council, senior UN official warns Middle East status quo ‘not tenable’

19 May - The Middle East is threatened by “a vicious tide of terror and extremism” amid stalled peace negotiations and growing regional tensions, a United Nations envoy on the region warned today.

“The inability to respond, for over 60 years, both on the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for a state and to Israel’s quest for security, has fuelled a situation that is becoming more dangerous by the day,” UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov told the Security Council this afternoon.

“This hard-earned belief in peace and negotiations must not be allowed to wither away,” he added. “If it does, it can further destabilize the Middle East for decades.”

Mr. Mladenov noted that thousands of people had died across the region so that one truth could emerge from the haze of conflict: “peace cannot be achieved through violence, but at the negotiating table.”

Nevertheless, he remains deeply concerned about the advancement of settlement activities in East Jerusalem and the West Bank over the past month and he urged the 15-member Council to have “no illusions about the impact of these unilateral actions,” which could only further destabilize a political and security climate already exacerbated by ongoing violence between Palestinians and Israeli security forces.

Turning to the situation in Gaza, meanwhile, the UN official recalled his initial “shock” during his first tour of the enclave devastated by last summer’s 51-day conflict between Israel and local militant group, Hamas.

According to a recent UN assessment, over 100,000 homes were damaged or destroyed in Gaza during the brief but intense fighting which ultimately affected more than 600,000 people and killed more than 2,100 Palestinians and more than 70 Israelis. Today, many Gazans still lack access to the municipal water network. Blackouts of up to 18 hours per day are common.

“No one can remain untouched by the scale of devastation, the slow pace of reconstruction, and the vast needs to rebuild lives and livelihoods,” Mr. Mladenov continued, while also highlighting the positive developments in the UN’s ongoing efforts to assist in Gaza’s reconstruction.

He emphasized that Gaza remained “desperate and angry” at its forced isolation, imposed by the ongoing blockade, the closure of the Rafah border crossing, at Hamas’ imposition of a so-called solidarity tax, and at donors for “not honouring their financial commitments for reconstruction.”

“There is a clear moral and humanitarian imperative not just for the United Nations and the international community, but primarily for the Israeli and Palestinian authorities to prevent the implosion of Gaza,” he said.

Beyond that, he underscored the need to support any and all efforts to establish one Palestine which unifies Gaza and the West Bank through legitimate institutions amid a favourable economic climate in which the movement of people and goods is permitted and border crossings are reopened.

“The United Nations has repeatedly warned that maintaining the status quo is not tenable,” Mr. Mladenov concluded. “It will inexorably lead to the continued erosion of living conditions for Palestinians and Israelis alike, and will undermine the security and stability for all.”

Concerning Lebanon, he said that, as of 25 May, the country would have been without a President for one year, which
jeopardized the functioning of State institutions. With 1.2 million registered Syrian refugees forming the highest per capita concentration of refugees in the world, he urged the international community to fulfil existing pledges, and to both increase and expedite support to Lebanon.

He said the shared border with Syria had been impacted by “infiltration” attempts by armed extremists, particularly as a result of fighting in the Qalamoun region. Against that backdrop, Lebanon had received its first shipment of military equipment from France on 20 April, financed by a $3 million grant from Saudi Arabia, which he called a necessary and welcome contribution.

Finally, in the Golan, he described clashes between the Syrian Armed Forces and armed opposition members, as well as heavy fighting among armed groups in the area of separation, stressing that such developments had the potential to jeopardize the ceasefire between the two countries.

**Violence against women and girls ‘shames every society,’ UN anti-crime chief warns**

19 May - Voicing concern over the continued killing of women and girls, the United Nations anti-crime chief today issued a strong call to end such acts, as well as to unravel the gender at the heart of the “dreadful daily experiences of violence” that blight so many of their lives.

“Violence against women and girls, in all its many forms, shames us all,” Yury Fedotov, Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), said in a statement issued in Vienna today during the 24th Session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, which opened yesterday and runs through 21 May.

According to UNODC, women and girls continue to be killed in large numbers worldwide. In 2012, for example, at least 43,000 women were murdered by their intimate partners or family members.

Yet such crime is only the most visible and brutal sign of what is happening to millions of women. Hidden from our view, Mr. Fedotov said, are the dreadful daily experiences of violence that blight the lives of women and girls.

Such experiences, including terrible sexual violence, occur in the countryside and cities; as well as in schools, work places and especially the home.

“We must also acknowledge that, just as no society is immune from these violent acts, we are all part of the solution,” Mr. Fedotov underscored, adding that “no woman or young girl must be allowed to feel isolated or in danger.”

Therefore, not only should societies provide women with much needed security, but also offer them opportunity, equality and prosperity.

Citing efforts to tackle crime against women and girls, Mr. Fedotov said UNODC is working to unravel the gender bias that has been woven into many legislations and criminal justice systems, and which perpetuates impunity for these violent acts.

He also called for all those in the criminal justice system to respect and protect women and girls and to view domestic violence as a serious crime.

“To end this serious crime, we must all work in a spirit of partnership and cooperation to change laws, change perceptions and change behaviours,” declared Mr. Fedotov, warning that if no action is taken “we will continue to see this violent crime undermine our efforts to build better, more inclusive societies.”
Iraq and global community must protect internally displaced as crisis deepens – UN expert

19 May - A United Nations human rights expert today urged the Government of Iraq to step-up its efforts and give a higher priority to nearly three million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

In a press release from Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Chaloka Beyani, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, called on the international community not to turn its back on the situation in light of a significant shortfall in humanitarian funding.

“Despite some positive steps by the Government, its approach to the displacement crisis has been largely ad hoc to-date,” Mr. Beyani said after his first official visit to Iraq from 9 to 15 May.

“Disturbing ongoing developments, including the fall of Ramadi to ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], and possible Government offensives to regain lost cities including Mosul, will certainly result in massive new displacement,” he added.

“Despite the challenges in the short, medium and long-term, it is imperative that the international community recognizes its responsibilities and remains a consistent and reliable humanitarian partner,” the UN expert stressed. “Agencies are stretched thin and unable to address all urgent needs. They can only work with the resources that they have and those are grossly inadequate at the present time.”

“IDPs from all ethnic and religious communities are surviving in precarious conditions, often under the threat of violence and further displacement and with inadequate shelter, healthcare, food and water,” he stated. “The situation of hundreds of thousands of IDPs living in areas controlled by ISIS [also known as ISIL or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant] is unclear and deeply worrying.”

“Access to humanitarian assistance for many IDPs is poor and must improve. This means ensuring access to humanitarian actors,” Mr. Beyani said. “Many IDPs have also lost documents and face bureaucratic barriers to receiving assistance. One family told aid workers ‘we could not save our daughter, how could we save our documents?’”

The expert visited IDPs living in cramped, substandard conditions in collective shelters and unfinished buildings. He noted that a one-off cash payment to families of $700 dollars is insufficient even to cover basic needs including shelter and food.

On another note, at least 100 families had to return from Baghdad to Ramadi where their homes had been damaged when ISIS still controlled much of the city. Now that the city has reportedly fallen, the Government must allow the newly displaced from Ramadi to freely enter Baghdad. The Babylon Governorate has refused to admit displaced men between 15 and 50, causing family separation as only women and children are allowed entry.

“While legitimate security concerns exist, including that ISIS may infiltrate IDP communities, the overwhelming majority of IDPs are innocent victims of the conflict and must be treated as such on protection and humanitarian grounds,” the Special Rapporteur concluded.

Chaloka Beyani, professor of international law at the London School of Economics, was appointed Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons by the Human Rights Council in September 2010.

Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, the largest body of
independent experts in the UN human rights system. They work on a voluntary basis, are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work.

**UN chief announces rare visit to DPR Korea, aiming to help boost cooperation on Peninsula**

**19 May** - UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today announced he will visit an industrial complex in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) on Thursday, saying that he hoped the rare trip “will provide positive impetus to further develop it and expand to other areas” to promote inter-Korean relations.

“My visit is also significant as the first by the United Nations Secretary-General to set foot on the DPRK in more than 20 years since the last visit by the former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali,” Mr. Ban told a press conference in Inchon, Republic of Korea, where he later addressed the World Education Forum.

“The Kaesong project is a win-win model for both Koreas,” he said referring to the industrial complex just north of the heavily fortified border between Republic of Korea (ROK) and the DPRK. “It symbolizes a good way to tap the advantage of South and North Korea in a complementary manner. I hope my visit will provide positive impetus to further develop it and expand to other areas.”

Earlier today, the UN chief said he is deeply engaged on the Korean Peninsula because it is “a dangerous international flashpoint,” and that he will do “everything possible” in his capacity as the top UN official to promote peace and confidence-building between the two Koreas.

“My message to both Koreas is: the United Nations is your United Nations,” Mr. Ban told the Asia Leadership Forum, in Seoul. “We are here to offer a helping hand. With the consent of our partners, we can assist in confidence-building measures, mediation, and promoting and helping in establishing rule of law and promoting human rights.”

The Secretary-General said he welcomed all the efforts being made, including by the ROK Government, to seek creative ways to resume dialogue and repeated his readiness to visit Pyongyang “when and if” such a visit is helpful.

“I will do everything possible in my capacity as Secretary-General of the United Nations to support meaningful engagement, especially in New York where all six parties are represented,” he said referring to so-named Six-Party Talks on denuclearization on the Korean peninsula involving the two Koreas, China, the United States, Japan, and Russia.

Mr. Ban also said ‘humanitarian assistance should never be linked to political or security considerations.”

Noting that the UN country team in the DPRK has identified urgent humanitarian requirements for the most vulnerable, particularly children, Mr. Ban said “the number of children suffering from stunting is alarmingly high” and that he appreciated ROK President Park Geun-hye’s “generous and humanitarian policy to de-link humanitarian from political issues.”

The Secretary-General, on his first visit to his home country in two years, also spoke on a wide range of topics affecting Asia and the wider world.

He lauded the ROK for its “valuable leadership throughout the negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda” and for serving “as a model on climate change and green growth.”

“As one of the first contributors to the Green Climate Fund (GCF) at the 2014 Climate Summit meeting which I convened last September, it spurred others to do the same,” he said. “I hope that the GCF begins disbursing resources as soon as possible.”

The Secretary-General also attended the opening ceremony of the World Education Forum 2015. In opening the Forum, he
said it was indefensible that 57 million people are still denied the most basic right of an education. Mr. Ban stressed that the international community would not be able to call this world prosperous if it is too poor to educate its children.

**Amid ongoing fighting in Yemen, UN agencies urge ‘predictable pauses’ for humanitarian aid**

*19 May -* Yemen’s five-day ceasefire aimed at allowing the delivery of critical aid to the country’s beleaguered civilian population did not last long enough for providing the necessary relief, according to the United Nations humanitarian agencies.

“Checkpoints, insecurity and high transport prices make it difficult to move about. Access to basic health care is too far away for many, and transport to expensive,” the spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Adrian Edwards, told reporters today at a press briefing in Geneva.

“Scores of children were found to be malnourished, while the accumulation of garbage makes crowded situations worse, raising fears that disease will spread.”

Until its official end on 17 May, the truce greatly facilitated access to areas which had been extremely difficult to reach.

In the first four days of the humanitarian pause, relief workers dispatched enough food aid to cover one month of food needs for more than 273,000 people, delivered fuel to ensure safe water access for 1.2 million people, and transported or distributed enough essential non-food items for nearly 32,000 people. Some 47 metric tonnes of medical supplies were given to hospitals and health facilities in five governorates.

Mr. Edwards acknowledged that the truce had permitted UNHCR to fly in more aid, transport supplies from ports to distribution hubs in the capital, Sana’a, and Aden, and to preposition and distribute aid to displaced people in previously hard-to-reach areas.

But, he added, insecurity, fuel shortages and other logistical challenges had hindered full implementation of the humanitarian plan during the pause and thousands of civilians were still encountering enormous difficulties.

“Teams found traumatized populations – afraid, upset and struggling to meet basic needs,” the UNHCR spokesperson continued.

Indeed, health facilities report that since 19 March, some 1,820 people have been killed and 7,330 injured due to the conflict. Casualty figures are likely to be underestimates. Meanwhile, humanitarian partners estimate that more than 545,000 people have been displaced in Yemen since 26 March.

In a press release confirming UNHCR’s concerns, World Food Programme (WFP) Country Director in Yemen Purnima Kashyap explained that although her agency had “raced against time and a volatile situation on the ground,” its relief efforts had only reached half of the intended target.

The WFP had, in fact, dispatched food for more than 400,000 people during the 72-hour pause, and managed to reach areas that were previously inaccessible, but this was only half the 738,000 people it hoped to reach as transporters were reluctant to send their trucks to hotspots, where fighting and shelling continued.

“We are seriously concerned about families out of our reach,” Ms. Kashyap stated. “We need predictable pauses in fighting to allow us to line up partners on the ground to move food and reach the maximum number of people.”

According to the WFP, almost half of the population in Yemen were food-insecure even before the conflict, meaning that around 10 million people did not know where their next meal would come from. The country reportedly imports almost 90 percent of its food from abroad.
The United Nations now estimates that the conflict has pushed many more Yemenis into hunger.

**At UN forum, Ban urges leaders aim to set global education roadmap until 2030**

19 May - Education is not a privilege but rather a birthright that secures human rights and fights violent extremism, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today in Incheon, Republic of Korea, as he opened the World Education Forum 2015 which aims to set the roadmap for global education until 2030.

“The terrorists know this. That is why they keep attacking schools, like in Garissa, Kenya and Peshawar, Pakistan. They target girls with books, like Malala Yousafzai and her friends as well as the girls in Chibok, Nigeria,” Mr. Ban told the 1,500 participants gathered at the WEF.

“I urge action to focus on girls and women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities and children living in conflict-affected areas, rural areas and urban slums,” Mr. Ban added.

At a press conference later in the day, Mr. Ban announced that he will visit an industrial complex in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) on Thursday, saying that he hoped the rare trip “will provide positive impetus to further develop it and expand to other areas” to promote inter-Korean relations.

“When I was a child in wartime Korea, we were constantly told to study hard. That was the only way to invest in our future – and it worked,” Mr. Ban said back at the Education Forum.

Studies show that one dollar invested in education can generate up to $15 in economic gain, he said. If all students in low-income countries learned basic reading skills, more than 170 million people could be lifted out of poverty.

The Declaration on Education 2030, the expected outcome of the Forum, aims to mobilize countries to implement the new agenda, and propose ways for its financing. The Forum also sets a new course for education as the United Nations prepares to adopt a bold agenda for sustainable development this September in New York.

Mr. Ban also commended the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for focusing education because today primary school enrolment is more than 90 per cent.

“Education must do more than produce individuals who can read, write and count. It must nurture global citizens who can rise to the challenges of the 21st century,” Mr. Ban declared.

Echoing that sentiment, Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) pointed out the power of education to eradicate poverty, transform lives and make breakthroughs on all the proposed sustainable development goals.

“We have the collective duty to empower every child and youth with the right foundations – knowledge, values and skills – to shape the future as responsible global citizens, building on the successes of the past 15 years,” she added.

According to UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics, there were 76 million fewer out-of-school children and adolescents in 2012 than in 2000. During the same period, around 67 million more children received pre-primary education and approximately 50 million more enrolled in primary school.

Joining Mr. Ban and Ms. Bokova was the President of the Republic of Korea, Park Geun-hye, who also spoke at the opening of Forum, which UNESCO is leading in collaboration with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UN Women and the World Bank Group.
The Forum brings together more than 130 government ministers, along with high-level government officials, Nobel Prize Laureates, heads of international and non-governmental organizations, academics, representatives of the private sector, researchers and other key stakeholders.

This morning, the Secretary-General attended the opening of the 6th Asia Leadership Forum in Seoul, where he spoke about the general situation on the Korean Peninsula. He underscored that the relationship between the two Koreas is critical for lasting peace – not only in the region but globally. And he added that maintaining peace and security in Northeast Asia requires a commitment from all the region’s countries.

Later, Mr. Ban participated in the opening session of the UN Global Compact Korea Leaders’ Summit in Incheon. In his remarks to the gathered business leaders, he congratulated them on their energetic participation in the local global compact business network. But he also encouraged them to do much more, especially in confronting what he called the great issues confronting our planet: poverty, climate change and conflict.

World must not ‘squander’ opportunity in Somalia, UN envoy tells Security Council

19 May - While it is too soon to celebrate definitive success in Somalia, and while the situation remains challenging, progress is being made and the international community would be missing a strategic opportunity if it failed to realize how much is being achieved, the top United Nations in the country told the Security Council today.

“When I spoke to you in February, I was both excited and worried about the year ahead. The last few months have highlighted the progress and the challenges,” said Nicholas Kay, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Somalia and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) as briefed Council members this morning.

“The world should not squander this opportunity. We need to reinforce success with increased engagement and resources in the coming months.”

Mr. Kay said momentum had been regained on efforts to achieve political progress, pointing to work by federal, regional and local leaders, parliamentarians, and people from all walks of life to build a State through dialogue and reconciliation, and top-level commitment to deliver Somalia’s Vision 2016 plan, as well as commitment to several other important targets the Government set.

“The prevailing environment of mistrust accumulated over 25 years makes the task difficult and painstaking.” he said. “But it must continue, and deserves our sustained support.”

He expressed concerns about a lack of progress on the constitutional review process and about the timetable for elections in Somaliland, which were due next month, while the National Independent Electoral Commission would work in a compressed timeline to discharge its duties, albeit with the support and advice of the UN.

The UN would also work with the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) and European Union member States on forming Interim Regional Administrations that ensure inclusivity for women, minorities and youth. The mandate of UNSOM remained highly relevant and it would evolve as progress on federalism proceeded, with, for example, work in the country’s regions becoming increasingly important.

On the economic front, Mr. Kay said he was encouraged by work to support implementation of the New Deal Somali Compact, including approval of seven projects worth $100 million within the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund. However, only 10 per cent of funds pledged through the Compact architecture were committed and Somalia’s financial system remained high risk. Nonetheless, steps were being taken within the New Deal framework to ensure robust oversight of overall governance.

“There is still a long way to go,” he said, “but I am pleased to report that a Treasury Single Account is now in place, creating...
a single channel for national revenues and payments.”

He drew attention to an “alarming” humanitarian situation, stressing the need for “constant attention” to the issue in the form of adequate funding as well as continuous upgrades to our analytical and forecasting capabilities and systems.

“One third into the year, the Humanitarian Appeal is only 12 per cent funded, having received only $100 million of the $863 million needed.” He said. “The situation could be further compounded by a poor rainy season, the closure of the Somali remittance operators and an escalating conflict in Yemen. As of 14 May Somalia has received 6,949 arrivals since 27 March. The vast majority – around 92 per cent – are Somali nationals of whom many have refugee status in Yemen.”

Noting the need for progress on human rights, he said Somalia would take part this year in the UN Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review, stressing his concerns about a marked recent increase in executions and death sentences, despite commitment to a moratorium, as well as continued presence of threats and intimidation to journalists.

The security of around 1,400 UN staff in Somalia was a priority, he said, particularly in the context of an attack in Garowe on 20 April, which killed four UNICEF staff and three Somali guards. He thanked the Council for supporting expansion of the UN Guard Unit, especially important since the Mission established offices in Mogadishu city.

“This is the first time a Security Council mandated mission has operated from outside the airport zone since 1995.” he said. “With so much at stake between now and 2016, we can expect Al-Shabaab to do everything it can to derail the political process. Renewing the joint Somali and AU offensive against Al Shabaab is an urgent priority.”

Maman S. Sidikou Special Representative of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, also stressed the importance of such action, underlining the fact that the recent joint AU-UN peacekeeping benchmarking mission had highlighted the need to maintain the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troop surge until the end of 2016 at least, with that date also cited as the earliest at which a UN peacekeeping force could be deployed.

Successes in recent AMISOM and Somali National Army (SNA) joint offensives opened up space for stabilization efforts in recovered areas but continued asymmetric warfare tactics by Al Shabaab undermined the force’s effectiveness and with it the population’s confidence. Force enablers and multipliers, such as helicopters, authorized under UN Security Council resolution 2124 (2013) were lacking and reduced the agility and flexibility needed to counter Al Shabaab’s tactics.

Mr. Sidikou also addressed the AU’s report on allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by AMISOM soldiers, noting that two of the allegations made were proven and that the investigation made several observations and recommendations to strengthen existing mechanisms to address abuse.

He pointed to specific actions taken in response, including development of a Whistle-blower’s policy expected to be passed by the AU’s policy organs this year, as well as preparation of a draft Annex to the existing Memorandum of Understanding between the AU Commission and the troop and police contributing countries aiming to make responses to any future allegations more robust.

“We will continue to respect the dignity of all Somali women and girls and to uphold the religious and cultural values of Somalia as AMISOM continues to implement its mandate to restore peace and stability in the country.” Mr. Sidikou said. “[I] reiterate AMISOM’s leadership commitment to enforcing the AU’s ‘zero tolerance’ policy.”
Burundi humanitarian crisis deepens as political tensions in country grow

19 May - The humanitarian crisis caused by the “escalating political tensions” in Burundi has worsened, according to the United Nations which today reported an uptick in the number of Burundian refugees seeking asylum and a deterioration in health conditions at refugee camps receiving them.

Addressing journalists at a press briefing in Geneva earlier this morning, World Health Organization (WHO) spokesperson Tarik Jašarevic voiced concern about the situation in the village of Kagunga in neighbouring Tanzania where the original population has increased from 10,000 to 90,000 due to the influx in refugees.

The crisis in the village, Mr. Jašarevic added, had recently degenerated following the discovery of several cases of cholera on 13 May.

Kagunga is a small village surrounded by a steep mountain range on the Tanzanian side and is best accessible by boat. Since Burundian refugees started to arrive in Kagunga in early May, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) has moved them by boat to Kigoma and from there to the refugee camp in Nyarugusu.

More than 20,000 refugees have either been moved to, or arrived at the refugee camp which, according to UN officials, has already reached the threshold for the maximum number of persons. Additional refugees are now being housed in local schools while awaiting temporary tents. UNHCR confirmed it is taking urgent preventative measures to improve sanitation, hygiene and early detection, as well as a hygiene promotion information campaign.

In Tanzania, the number of refugees arriving in Kagunga has risen sharply over the last few days and the living conditions have become extremely dire. Local immigration authorities reported that over 50,000 Burundians were living rough in Kagunga on the shore of Lake Tanganyika.

Meanwhile, responding to a question at the same briefing, UNHCR spokesperson Adrian Edwards said that there were 26,000 refugees in Rwanda, and 111,000 refugees in all three neighbouring countries.

In related news, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told reporters that the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, Said Djinnit, met today with Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza.

“Speaking to the press after the meeting, he reiterated the Secretary-General’s condemnation of the attempt to oust an elected government and the need for political dialogue to create conditions for holding free and fair elections,” added Mr. Haq.

He said that Mr. Djinnit continues to hold consultations with political parties, civil society and religious organizations, Government officials and the diplomatic community, with the view to reconvene the political dialogue as soon as possible.

The Special Envoy is expected to brief the Security Council via videoconference tomorrow.
UN calls on Southeast Asian countries to better protect migrants making ‘perilous’ sea journeys

19 May - Several senior United Nations officials have today strongly urged the leaders of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, to protect migrants and refugees stranded on vessels in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, to facilitate safe disembarkation, and to give priority to saving lives, protecting rights, and respecting human dignity.

In a joint statement issued today, the UN High Commissioners for Refugees and for Human Rights, together with the UN Special Representative for International Migration and Development and the Director-General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) urged regional leaders to work with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to respond to what they called “grave events” in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea in recent days involving migrants and refugees on boats attempting to move in search of safety and dignity, fleeing persecution, abject poverty, deprivation, discrimination, and abuse.

“Such perilous journeys, whether by land, sea, or air, have become a global phenomenon,” said António Guterres, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, Peter Sutherland and William Lacy Swing, who all signed a statement that noted that 88,000 had tried to migrate by boat in Southeast Asia since 2014. “Nearly 1,000 are believed to have perished at sea due to the precarious conditions of the voyage, and an equal number because of mistreatment and privation at the hands of traffickers and abusive smugglers.”

The joint statement detailed the harsh conditions experienced by migrants and refugees in the Bay of Bengal, where they are fed only white rice and are subjected to violence, including sexual violence.

“Women are raped. Children are separated from their families and abused. Men are beaten and thrown overboard,” the statement said. “We are deeply concerned at reports that boats full of vulnerable women, men and children are unable to land and are stranded at sea without access to urgently needed food, water, and medical assistance.”

The four officials urged States in the region to protect the lives of those migrating on boats by allowing safe disembarkation and they called on States in the region to strengthen Search and Rescue (SAR) Operations, to stop ‘push-backs’ and to uphold the principle of non-refoulement and other fundamental human rights standards.

The statement also contained calls for effective, predictable disembarkation at safe reception locations, for avoidance of the use of detention, for ensuring that human rights – particularly those of children – are protected and prioritized, and for setting in place of screening procedures staffed jointly by Government and relevant international organization personnel to identify the individual circumstances of all those arriving.

More broadly, the statement called on States to expand avenues for safe and legal migration, including for labour migration at all skills levels, to expand efforts to prosecute traffickers and smugglers, to redouble efforts to address the root causes of refugee and migrant flows and to put in place dedicated measures to combat xenophobia and discrimination against any group on the basis of race, sex, language, religion, ethnicity, nationality and national origin, or other status.
UN rights expert urges Armenia to ‘shed light’ on violence against children

19 May - The UN independent human rights expert on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography today urged the Armenian government to devote more attention to the issue of violence against children as well as irregularities in adoption processes, which can amount to sale of children.

“The objective of my visit was to assess on the ground the situation of sale and sexual exploitation of children in Armenia and its national child protection system, including law enforcement, in order to make recommendations to prevent that children fall victims to prostitution, online sexual abuse and other forms of sexual exploitation, child marriage and illegal adoption,” Special Rapporteur Maud de Boer-Buquicchio said in an end-of-mission statement she issued in the Armenian capital of Yerevan.

“There is a need for the provision of adequate resources and an integrated approach in the domain of child protection,” Ms. de Boer-Buquicchio said.

Despite the low figures of cases of child sexual exploitation reflected by the official data, she drew attention to the gaps in terms of child-friendly identification, detection and reporting mechanisms, and urged the national authorities to establish a comprehensive data collection and information system.

The independent expert welcomed the current legislative reform process, and urged law makers to speed it up in order to bring the family code and the criminal code in line with the international obligations of Armenia, including in relation to adoption.

She also noted that “irregularities committed in adoption processes, which can amount to sale of children for the purpose of illegal adoption, continue to be a major concern in the country.”

“Adoptions must be governed by the best interest of the child, instead of the prospective adoptive parents, and should constitute a measure of last resort,” the expert said.

She also urged authorities to prioritize the adoption of the law against domestic violence as an important tool to prevent and combat abuse and violence against children, as well as gender inequality.

Among her recommendations, Ms. de Boer-Buquicchio encouraged the Government to shift its focus from institutionalization of children in vulnerable situations and children with disabilities, towards care in family environment and community based services.

In respect to the prevalence of child marriage among the Yezidi minority in Armenia, the human rights expert urged authorities to conduct awareness-rising and engage with leaders of the Yezidi minority to eradicate child marriage.

Regarding the fast-increasing use of the Internet, Ms. de Boer-Buquicchio noted that it offers many opportunities to Armenians but also requires the education of children and parents about the risks associated with online usage.

She also called for the incorporation of child participation mechanisms in the development of an effective national child protection system.

As a teenage girl told her during her visit in Gyumri, ‘Adults should listen to us when taking decisions that affect our lives,’ Ms. de Boer-Buquicchio asked the Government to make this call a reality with the ultimate goal of better protecting children in Armenia,” according to a press release issued today.
During her visit from 12 to 18 May, she met with Government officials, members of the police, the office of the prosecutor and the judiciary, members of the legislative, the office of the ombudsperson, lawyers, representatives of telecommunications operators, non-governmental organizations working on child protection issues and children themselves.

UN human rights experts are part of what it is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, the general name of the independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. The experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work.

**UN agency calls for renewed global commitment to develop effective HIV vaccine**

19 May - To mark HIV Vaccine Awareness Day, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, or UNAIDS, has renewed its call for a sustained worldwide commitment to finding an effective HIV vaccine.

Steadfast in leaving nobody behind in the HIV response, UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé explained: “A vaccine would be a major step towards ending the AIDS epidemic.”

The UN agency elaborates that one major advantage of vaccines is that they promote equity and can be used effectively in all communities and settings, including where many other health services may be harder to deliver.

“There have been encouraging recent scientific advances that give us hope for the future development of an HIV vaccine,” Ms. Sidibé said in a press release on the Day, marked annually on 18 May, pointing to studies that indicate with great promise the feasibility of an HIV vaccine.

The clinical RV144 vaccine trial in 2009, which combined two vaccines that failed on their own, lowered the rate of HIV infection by 31 per cent – offering hope that further research building on this test will deliver results.

Newer vaccine candidates, as well as neutralizing antibodies, are also being studied.

Vaccines have effectively controlled a number of infectious diseases, including diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, mumps, measles and rubella; have eradicated smallpox; and are close to eradicating polio.

However, in 2013, HIV vaccine research and development dipped to its lowest investment decline since 2008, according to the agency.

In order to transform promising concepts into an effective and accessible vaccine, increased and sustained funding is critical.