UN launches new aid appeal as Yemen faces ‘looming humanitarian catastrophe’

19 June - The United Nations relief arm has called for over one billion dollars in funding in order to lift Yemen from a devastating crisis that has plunged the country into severe food insecurity and left it on the brink of an all-out humanitarian disaster, the Organization today confirmed, as national stakeholders from the Gulf state wrapped up UN-backed political consultations in Geneva, Switzerland.

Speaking at the launch of the $1.6 billion appeal in Geneva earlier this morning, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O’Brien, told delegates that as fighting intensified across Yemen, the country faced “a looming humanitarian catastrophe” with people across the country struggling to feed their families and basic services collapsing in all regions.

“Millions of families no longer have access to clean water, proper sanitation or basic healthcare,” Mr. O’Brien warned. “Deadly diseases such as dengue and malaria have broken out, and supplies for acute trauma care are running dangerously low.”

According to a recent joint survey released by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP), six million people in Yemen are slipping towards severe hunger and now need emergency food and life-saving assistance, a sharp increase from the last quarter of 2014. In addition to the population facing a food security 'emergency,' over 6.5 million people are classified as facing a food insecurity security 'crisis.'

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

The humanitarian stresses brought on by the conflict, however, have only compounded the already severe human toll of the fighting.

The UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which Mr. O’Brien heads, has noted that thousands of people in the country have been killed and injured by airstrikes and ground fighting in the last three months alone while over 1 million people have fled their homes. In addition, a staggering 80 per cent of the Yemeni population currently need humanitarian assistance.

“The disregard for international humanitarian law by parties to the conflict has come with a high human toll,” Mr. O’Brien continued. “There is also an urgent need for full resumption of commercial imports as reductions have crippled the country, putting millions at risk.”

OCHA’s new appeal – a revision of its 2015 Humanitarian Response Plan – will seek to deliver essential protection and lifesaving assistance, including food, water and shelter, to Yemen's most vulnerable, or an estimated 11.7 million people.

“While this plan allows us to relieve the dire human suffering in Yemen, it alone is not enough to end the living nightmare faced by so many families,” the OCHA chief concluded. “Only a political solution to the Yemen crisis can end the unacceptable and intolerable level of suffering.”

To that point, Yemeni stakeholders convened this week in Geneva to attend UN-facilitated consultations aimed at finding a peaceful way out of the conflict.

Addressing reporters at a press briefing this afternoon to mark their conclusion, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, explained, however, that the consultations were “not an end in themselves but the launch of a long and arduous path.”

Nevertheless, he said, there was optimism that specific goals, including the imposition of a humanitarian ceasefire, could be achieved.

“There has been positivity in responding to the invitation, coming to Geneva, responding to the UN Security Council resolution and the ceasefire accompanied by a withdrawal so there are things on which we can build,” continued Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed.

“We don’t want to hold another meeting. We thought it would be better now to get back to shuttle diplomacy,” he added. “The humanitarian situation cannot wait anymore. It must be dealt with urgently. That’s why we need a humanitarian pause – that’s the priority.”

Adopting resolution, UN creates International Day against Sexual Violence in Conflict

19 June - In an effort to boost the global fight against the horrors faced by women and girls in zones of conflict worldwide, the United Nations General Assembly today approved by consensus a new resolution to commemorate 19 June as the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict.

“Rape and other forms of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict constitute grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law,” President of the 193-member Assembly, Sam Kutesa, declared as he greeted the resolution’s adoption. “Yet these deprived acts still occur and are used to terrorize and control civilian populations in conflict zones.”

“Together, we must prioritize prevention and response efforts, empower victims, provide comprehensive assistance and shift
the stigma of shame from the victims of these crimes to those who commit them and condone them,” he added.

The International Day – which will now be observed annually – will aim to raise awareness of the need to end conflict-related sexual violence and urge the international community to stand in solidarity with the survivors of sexual violence around the world.

The new initiative, moreover, comes amid an uptick in reports from areas controlled by militant groups aligned with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) of brutal acts of sexual violence against women and girls. Just last year, ISIL affiliate Boko Haram abducted some 276 girls their school in Chibok, located in Nigeria’s restive north-eastern Borno state, as the militant group ramped up brutal attacks targeting the African country’s children.

“Rape as a weapon of war must be stopped,” Mr. Kutesa continued. “We should ensure that the perpetrators of these crimes and their superiors who condone their actions are held accountable and that victims get justice.”

Also welcoming the creation of the Day, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Zainab Bangura, commended delegates, especially Argentina, which led the drafting of the text, for the increasing attention paid by the international community to the scourge of sexual violence but warned that the challenge now remained in converting “political will into concrete actions and protections on the ground.”

She said the Day will also create opportunities to pay homage to the thousands of survivors of sexual violence including women, girls, men and boys, who, despite the grievous harm suffered, have shown extreme determination, resolve and unflinching courage to speak out against this scourge.

“This annual commemoration will serve as a global call to action for security, justice and service actors on behalf of survivors of sexual violence in conflicts all over the world,” she stated.

Ms. Bangura recently returned from the Middle East where she met with female survivors of sexual violence committed by ISIL extremists. In an interview with the UN News Centre, she recounted grim tales of brutality and detailed new patterns of child and forced marriage to fighters as well as sexual slavery.

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

Adding her voice to the proclamations, the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, who also joined delegates in the General Assembly Hall after the adoption of the resolution, hailed the creation of the International Day as “a victory for all the survivors who stay too often silent.”

“This is a day for all of us,” Ms. Zerrougui affirmed. “This resolution is an engagement from all Member States that commit to fight against sexual violence in conflict.”

The date 19 June commemorates the breakthrough adoption in 2008 of UN Security Council resolution 1820, which recognized sexual violence as a tactic of war and a threat to global peace and security, requiring an operational security, justice and service response. It further recognized that rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity and/or constitutive acts of genocide.
UN experts deplore South Carolina killings, urge measures against racially motivated crimes in US

19 June - In the wake of the ‘appalling’ attack that left nine African Americans dead at church in South Carolina, a group of UN human rights experts today called for prompt action by authorities in the United States to investigate the hate crimes and urged measures to prevent gun violence affecting the security of African-Americans, their communities and wider society as well.

Issuing a statement on behalf of the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, the current Chairperson, Mireille Fanon-Mendes-France, denounced what the experts flagged as racially motivated 17 June killings.

“We utterly condemn the appalling attack on the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, this week and the killing of nine African Americans,” the experts said, welcoming the “prompt action by the authorities” to investigate the hate crime, underscoring that “every effort must be made to ensure the person guilty of this act is prosecuted and punished accordingly.”

The statement continued: “Urgent measures must be taken to prevent gun violence and racist crimes motivated by prejudice that affect the security of Afro-Americans, their communities and society as a whole.”

The Group's heartfelt condolences were offered to the people of the United States, “especially the families and friends of those who were murdered while in worship at Church.”

The Working Group, established on 25 April 2002 by the Commission on Human Rights, is composed of five independent experts serving in their personal capacities.

The experts' comments echo UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's strong condemnation of the killings in a statement issued yesterday by his spokesperson in New York. The UN chief also expressed the hope that those responsible for such a “hateful act of violence” will be brought to justice extended his deep condolences to the loved ones of the victims and his solidarity to the survivors.

US news reports subsequently suggest that a suspect in the murders was arrested yesterday in the neighbouring state of North Carolina.

Mali: UN welcomes announcement by armed groups of withdrawal from eastern town

19 June - The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has welcomed the announcement made last night by the armed groups of the so-called “Platform” to withdraw from the town of Menaka, in accordance with the arrangements for a cessation of hostilities.

“The MINUSMA endorses the courageous and responsible decision by the movements of the “Platform,” which demonstrates their commitment to promote the peace process to the benefit of all Malians,” said the Special Representative and Head of MINUSMA, Mongi Hamdi.

The announcement came the same day than a UN Security Council press statement, urging the armed groups of the Platform to disengage from the town of Menaka, in the Gao region.
In that statement, the Council members also reiterated their support to the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, signed last May in Bamako by the Government and the “Platform” armed groups. The Council said it “looks forward” to the signing of this Agreement by armed groups Coordination, which is scheduled for June 20, 2015.

“This positive development, as well as the imminent…signing of the Agreement for Peace and National Reconciliation tomorrow in Bamako by the movements from the Azawad coordination are clear and reassuring signs, both for the Malian population and for the international community,” said Hamdi.

“The peace process is on track with the commitment of stakeholders to respond to Mali’s people aspirations,” he summarized.

In coordination with the relevant authorities, the MINUSMA also said it would accelerate the implementation, in the locality of Menaka, of the security provisions included in the Arrangement.

This arrangement is temporary and will remain in effect until the establishment of relevant mechanisms under the Peace Agreement of 15 May 2015 and according to its implementation schedule, said the UN mission in Mali.

**UN agency urges Dominican Republic to refrain deporting stateless people**

19 June - The Dominican Republic must ensure that people whose citizenship was thrown into question by a 2013 ruling of the Constitutional Court will not be deported, the UN refugee agency said today.

“The Court’s ruling and the subsequent regularization plan which gave individuals born in the Dominican Republic until mid-June to regularize their status, impacts tens of thousands of people”, explained an Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesman, Adrian Edwards, during a press conference in Geneva. “Most of them were born in the Dominican Republic and are of Haitian descent,” he added.

“This with a stateless population in the Dominican Republic estimated at more than 200,000 people, the consequences of expulsion could be devastating,” he warned.

UNHCR is concerned about the human rights considerations for people who may be expelled and end up being pushed into Haiti, even though they are not considered as citizens of that country. “This would have serious repercussions for all who are affected and be a serious setback to efforts worldwide to end the problem of statelessness.”

It is of the utmost importance, Mr. Edwards emphasized, that the Dominican Republic takes necessary action to prevent any expulsions of stateless Dominicans and to avoid creating a new refugee situation. In this regard, UNHCR has offered its support to the Dominican authorities to identify and register these individuals.

While the Dominican authorities have announced that they will conduct screenings of all individuals subject to deportation, UNHCR has recommended that for people who claim to be Dominican but do not have the required documents, the authorities can use other screening approaches, such as knowledge of Spanish – “in order to allow a reasonable determination of whether people are likely to have been born and lived all their lives in the Dominican Republic,” the spokesperson added.
UN cites strong concerns over Hungarian border fence plan that could deter refugees and asylum-seekers

19 June - Two United Nations agencies today expressed strong concerns over Hungary’s plans to build a four-metre high fence along its border with Serbia, with the UN refugee agency saying the wall will “be a further obstacle for people who have fled from war zones like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq and who desperately need safety and protection.”

On the eve of World Refugee Day, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) both also expressed strong concern over the Hungarian Government’s efforts to paint refugees as a threat to the country.

OHCHR noted the Hungarian Government’s plans announced this week to build a fence along its border with Serbia, saying such a move could “force migrants to adopt more risky routes and modes of transport, putting them at greater risk of abuse by traffickers and smugglers.”

“If adopted…such harsh border enforcement measures…may prevent asylum-seekers, who may be in need of international protection, from accessing Hungarian territory,” Cécile Pouilly, OHCHR spokesperson told reporters today in Geneva.

UNHCR Regional Representative for Central Europe, Montserrat Feixas Vihé said: “We are deeply concerned that this wall will be a further obstacle for people who have fled from war zones like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq and who desperately need safety and protection.”

So far this year, more than 23,000 people from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq – three countries plagued by war and instability – have applied for asylum in Hungary, according to the refugee agency.

The human rights spokesperson, meanwhile, said: “We reiterate our concerns at the anti-migrant xenophobic rhetoric that is being disseminated by the Hungarian Government, most recently through an anti-migration billboard campaign.”

“One of the Government’s posters reads: “If you come to Hungary, you cannot take away Hungarians’ jobs,” Ms. Pouilly said.

“On 22 May, we publicly criticized a questionnaire on immigration sent by the Government to its citizens, in which unfounded links were sought to be made between migration and terrorism,” she added.

For its part, UNHCR’s regional office in Budapest has prepared a set of billboards showcasing refugees who have successfully integrated into Hungarian society. One of the UNHCR posters features Zeeshan, a young Pakistani man who plays in Hungary’s enthusiastic, but little-known, national cricket team. “I want to play well for this country,” his message reads.

“The campaign clearly demonstrates how tragic human stories can end positively both for refugees and the receiving country,” said Ms. Feixas Vihé, adding: “Our campaign shows how integration can be a ‘win-win.’”
Only ‘limited window to act’ to assist farmers in Nepal recovering from earthquakes – UN agency

19 June - With only 13 per cent of a United Nations emergency agricultural appeal met by donors, Nepal’s farmers trying to recover from this year’s twin earthquakes will not be able to plant rice seeds before the start of the monsoon rains expected in the coming days and replenish livestock, fertilizers, and tools lost in the disaster, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

“We only have a limited window to act,” said FAO Representative in Nepal Somsak Pipoppinyo.

Two separate earthquakes and a series of powerful aftershocks struck Nepal in April and May, killing more than 8,000 people and devastating large parts of the country. The disaster heavily disrupted agricultural activities, threatening the livelihoods of rural families.

“Agriculture is a critical priority because two-thirds of Nepalis depend on farming for their livelihoods,” according to the FAO Representative.

Some $23 million is urgently needed to support farmers in earthquake-hit Nepal resume agricultural activities and stave off the threat of prolonged food insecurity facing an estimated one million people, but to date, FAO has received only $3 million, or 13 per cent of the amount requested thanks to contributions from Belgium, Italy and Norway.

In a press release, FAO said “the most urgent needs for the current cropping season are seeds and fertilizers, followed by irrigation, tools and technical support. The repair and functioning of irrigation systems will be critical for the winter cropping season, as well as barley and wheat seeds.”

An FAO-led Agricultural Livelihood Impact Appraisal has found that in Nepal's six hardest-hit districts – half of all farming households – lost nearly all of their stored crops of rice, maize, wheat and millet. And some 16 per cent of cattle and 36 per cent of poultry were lost in the disaster “with detrimental effects on rural household consumption and income.”

In addition, the earthquakes destroyed farming tools, kitchen gardens and supplies of fertilizer and caused significant damage to small-scale irrigation.

Livestock also urgently require shelter, feed water, medicine and vaccinations, FAO’s appraisal noted.

But current levels of international assistance for Nepal’s earthquake-affected farmers will deliver "only a fraction" of the assistance urgently required, Mr. Somsak said.

He also noted how rice seeds have to be distributed urgently before the start of the heavy monsoon rains which are expect to arrive in the coming days, FAO said.

FAO has already distributed 40,000 (5 kilogram) bags of rice seeds to the six most-affected districts in time for farmers to plant before the monsoon, and is looking at ways of increasing the resilience of Nepal’s most vulnerable farmers to future crises. FAO will also look at mapping major earthquake cracks in key districts, monitoring any changes and establishing early warning systems to advise farmers of emerging landslide risks.
Thailand confirms first MERS case as outbreak spreads – UN health agency

19 June - Thailand has confirmed its first case of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, or MERS, in a male traveller from Oman, and the World Health Organization (WHO) today is urging countries in Southeast Asia to step up vigilance and review preparedness to respond to the disease.

WHO spokesperson Christian Lindmeier told reporters today at the UN press briefing in Geneva that on 15 June, Omani man presented himself to physicians, who detected his symptoms and isolated him in hospital and ran tests.

Three of his family members had also been isolated, according to Mr. Lindmeier. In addition, 59 people he had been in contact with – including healthcare staff – were being followed up on and had been quarantined for 14 days.

The spokesperson said the vigilance shown by the Thai authorities was exactly what it would expect in the current situation, and as the risk of individual travellers becoming infected and bringing the coronavirus back to their country could not be avoided, individuals had to stay vigilant.

Earlier this week, WHO declared that the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, or MERS, outbreak that had spread from the Middle East to the Republic of Korea did not constitute a ‘public health emergency of international concern’ but was nonetheless a “wake-up call” for all countries to be prepared for the unanticipated spread of serious infectious diseases.

Regarding the latest case, Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO’s Regional Director for South-East Asia, said he had written to the Health Ministers of the 11 countries in the region to review and strengthen preparedness against MERS in view of the recent spread of the disease.

“Strong health systems using strict infection control measures would be the key to prevent the spread of the virus and protect health-care workers and others,” Dr. Khetrapal said.

Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) is caused by a virus. Typical symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath. Pneumonia is common, but not always present. Gastrointestinal symptoms, including diarrhoea, have also been reported.

The disease was first identified in Saudi Arabia in 2012, from where the majority of cases have been reported since then, according to WHO. Since then 1,333 cases have been reported from 26 countries.

In response to a question about new cases of MERS in the Republic of Korea, the WHO spokesperson in Geneva said there had been one new infection case and one new death, bringing the total numbers for Republic of Korea to 24 deaths of 166 cases.
Blatant rights failures in Burundi make upcoming elections ‘impossible,’ UN expert warns

19 June - Decrying Burundi’s “blatant failures” to respect freedom of expression and assembly and the fact that open issues from the past are ensnaring the upcoming elections process, a United Nations rights expert today issued a strong call for greater global efforts to ensure independent monitoring and reporting and for all Burundian parties to safeguard fair elections and keep protests peaceful.

“In Burundi, the neglected violent past has become a major obstacle for the country’s future.” Pablo de Greiff, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, said today while presenting his latest open statement to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council.

He specifically highlighted the lack of transparency in political parties, the “instrumentalization” of, or outright disregard for the judiciary, the ignorance for the rights of citizens, and the increased manipulation of ethnicity in the country.

Of great concern, Mr. de Greiff said, were the authorities’ “blatant failures to respect freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.”

Warning that the governing party and its youth militia use violence to limit freedom of speech and hate speech to obtain certain electoral outcome, the independent expert stressed the utmost importance to disarm those youth militias.

“Voters must be free to support or to oppose any political party…without undue influence or coercion of any kind which may distort or inhibit the free expression of the elector’s will,” Mr. de Greiff underscored, while recalling the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Burundi in 1990.

Turning to democratic legitimacy, it is deliberately circumvented and sharply departed from a rule of law based society, according to Mr. de Greiff.

“This requires not only the absence of coercion and repression, but also for access to media and the possibility to organize meetings,” the expert urged these measures for legitimate elections.

As such a hostile environment does not bode well for free and fair elections, Mr. de Greiff called on Burundi authorities to break the ‘tradition of impunity’, with all parties working constructively together.

Meanwhile, the Special Rapporteur encouraged international community to boost its support as fully fledged monitoring capacities on the ground are urgently needed.

Burundi has been embroiled in a political crisis since mid-April when popular protests erupted after the country’s ruling National Council for the Defence of Democracy – Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party nominated President Pierre Nkurunziza as its presidential candidate for a third term.

Since early April, nearly 100,000 Burundians have fled across the borders, seeking safety in neighbouring Rwanda, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has joined with 17 partners to launch the Regional Refugee Response Plan.

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff.
Palestinian life in West Bank constrained by Israeli policies – UN expert

19 June - The international community must ensure the promise of universal human rights no longer rings hollow to Palestinian “living under the 48-year-long Israeli occupation,” today said a UN independent expert.

The crisis in war-torn Gaza is deepening. In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, there are daily infringements of Palestinian rights as land is increasingly lost to illegal settlements,” warned the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967.

Reporting at the Human Rights Council, Makarim Wibisono said “that occupation policies constrain Palestinian life and push Palestinians to leave their land and homes, especially in area C of the West Bank, and East Jerusalem,” said the expert after his second mission to the region.

From 9 to 12 June, Mr. Wibisono visited Amman, Jordan, where he met with civil society and Palestinian local community representatives, UN agencies, and Palestinian government officials. He was unable to access the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), as the Israeli Government has not granted him access and has not formally responded to his requests.

“Accountability is critical for dealing with past violations as well as preventing future ones,” he explained. “This includes accountability for violations in the context of successive Israeli military operations, including the 2014 hostilities in Gaza. It is the only way to move forward.”

Nine months after the ceasefire, some 12,600 Gaza homes totally destroyed during the 2014 hostilities with Israel, “not a single one has been rebuilt”, stated the UN independent expert, claiming that multiple factors affect the slow reconstruction in Gaza, including unfulfilled donor pledges.

Mr. Wibisono noted that the blockade around the strip, now in its eighth year, imposes severe restrictions on Palestinian movement, imports and exports and has left Gaza dependent on international aid and with soaring unemployment.

“The bottom line remains that, if Gaza is to recover from the damage wrought by multiple rounds of hostility and a shattered economy, the blockade must be lifted. The people deserve help and realisation of their human rights, not collective punishment,” he advocated.

The Special Rapporteur was also briefed on the lack of access to health care in Gaza, where more than 11,000 Palestinians were left injured after last summer’s escalation of hostilities. “Health services too are affected by the blockade. There are prolonged and chronic shortages of drugs and medical supplies,” he said.

In addition, the expert was briefed on how the extensive damage caused to civilian infrastructure has worsened the provision of essential utility services. “One man described how ‘Gazans wake up every day to wash with salt-water and sleep at the end of the day without electricity’ – People are deprived of the means to help themselves and they cannot leave – this is a very dangerous situation,” he warned.

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the independent expert noted the “interplay” between Israeli control of natural resources, such as land and water, and advancement of Israeli settlements.

“The impact of untreated sewage and waste from settlements on Palestinian crops and the environment is also concerning,”
Mr. Wibisono added, stressing the situation of families that live under the threat of settler violence, home demolitions and forcible transfer.

“Occupation policies and practices go beyond control of land – they impact every aspect of life and wear heavily on the social fabric of communities,” he said.

Concerned by movement restrictions between Gaza and the West Bank, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and within the West Bank, including by the separation wall, the Special Rapporteur highlighted that Palestinians family and social life is “dictated” by the granting or refusal by the Israeli authorities of the right permit.

Finally, he expressed concern over Palestinian deaths and injuries resulting from excessive use of force by Israeli security forces, as well as detention.

Maldives court decision undermines human rights protections in country, warns senior UN official

19 June - The United Nations human rights chief has voiced concern over a judgement issued by the Maldives Supreme Court in which the country’s human rights processes appear to be severely challenged.

“The Supreme Court judgement is yet another example of the judiciary undermining human rights protection in the Maldives,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein affirmed in a press release issued earlier today. “National human rights institutions play a pivotal role in independently monitoring and protecting human rights and should be empowered to report on rights issues without fear.”

According to the High Commissioner’s Office (OHCHR), the Maldives Supreme Court handed down a verdict on 16 June against five members of the country’s Human Rights Commission following its submission of a written contribution to the second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Maldives before the UN Human Rights Council. In its submission to the UN, the Commission cited criticism of the Maldivian judicial system by the UN’s independent experts.

As a result, the Supreme Court this week declared the Commission’s submission unlawful and declared that the rights body would be required to abide by a set of 11 “very broad and ill-defined guidelines in carrying out its activities,” OHCHR added.

“Imposing such extraordinary and broad restrictions on the Human Rights Commission, including on their engagement with international organisations, is completely unacceptable,” Mr. Zeid continued.

“In this case, the Supreme Court appears to be yet again overreaching its mandate by playing a legislative role. Laws regulating the very important human rights monitoring and reporting work of civil society and independent institutions must be transparently adopted by legislative bodies following wide consultations and open debate, in line with international human rights laws and standards.”

The human rights situation in the Maldives has been the focus of OHCHR’s concern in recent months, particularly following the arrest, trial and conviction of the country’s former President Mohammed Nasheed which UN rights experts have deemed as “vastly unfair, arbitrary and disproportionate.”

Meanwhile, in late March, the UN High Commissioner condemned the treatment of former President Nasheed as being riddled with “flagrant irregularities.”
In today’s press release, Mr. Zeid urged the Maldives Government to take legal steps to ensure that the independence and integrity of the Human Rights Commission remain uncompromised and that the Commission’s right to freely communicate with international human rights mechanisms be firmly preserved in law and practice.