At Security Council, UN relief chief cites ‘incomprehensible’ scale of human suffering in Yemen

19 August - Just back from Yemen and “shocked” by what he saw there, the top United Nations humanitarian official told the Security Council today that the scale of human suffering is nearly incomprehensible, and that unless stakeholders get the parties to stop the fighting and return to the negotiating table, soon “there will be nothing left to fight for.”

“The civilian population is bearing the brunt of the conflict – a shocking four out of five Yemenis require humanitarian assistance and nearly 1.5 million people are internally displaced. More than 1,000 children have been killed or injured and the number of young people recruited or used as fighters is increasing,” Under-Secretary-General for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Stephen O’Brien, said to the 15 members-body.

Reporting about “massive” needs among the population, he said they keep being exacerbated by impediments to commercial imports, resulting in widespread scarcity of food and fuel. In Aden, where people are overwhelmed by the scale of the destruction, the task ahead is rebuilding in their “shattered” city, where unexploded ordnance litter the streets and buildings. Electricity, essential for water pumping and cereal milling, is rare and intermittent, he added.

Against this backdrop, humanitarian assistance alone cannot meet all the needs of an entire country with a population of 26 million people. “This is why airports and seaports need to remain open and be used for both commercial imports and humanitarian supplies – without restrictions,” he advocated.

Denouncing the “disregard” for human life by all parties, he condemned reports of airstrikes and other shelling in and around Hudaydah port earlier this week, which damaged the main lifelines for the import of basic goods.
“I am extremely concerned that the damage to the port of Hudaydah could have a severe impact on the entire country, and would deepen humanitarian needs, making more people food insecure, leaving them without access to water or medicines, which could also mean the spread of disease.”

Parties to the conflict, he underlined, must ensure that humanitarian aid is facilitated and not hindered, and they must respect and implement international humanitarian law and possible violations must be investigated and perpetrators held accountable.

“As we reflect on the state of play globally on World Humanitarian Day, we unfortunately see a worsening situation, and a scale of needless humanitarian suffering that is truly shocking. We must act. We must do more to ensure that those of us in a position to prevent the abuses perpetrated against those who can do nothing are stopped, and that those who continue to carry them out are held to account,” said Mr. O’Brien, who is also the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator.

Since the conflict began in late March, nearly seven million people in Yemen have been supported by UN agencies and their partners, with food, water, shelter, health support and protection assistance, he recalled.

“But much more needs to be done, the Under-Secretary-General acknowledged, stressing that the humanitarian community continues to scale up the response to reach all those in need, including by positioning more international staff across the country and establishing operational hubs in Aden, Ibb, Sa’ada and Mukalla, “as soon as the security situation allows.”

But success will depend on sufficient resources. Today, noted Mr. O’Brien, the World Food Programme warned again that a lack of immediate and unhindered access to people who urgently need food assistance and the shortage of funding create the possibility of famine for millions of Yemenis.

“Right now, the conflict-driven convergence between the lack of staple food, access to clean water, and a diminished fuel supply create the dawn of a perfect storm for the most vulnerable Yemeni people,” explained Ertharin Cousin, WFP Executive Director.

To date, only 18 per cent, some $282 million, of the 1.6 billion dollars requested through the Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan has been received and UN agencies have still not received the funding from Saudi Arabia of $274 million pledged in April, emphasized the Under-Secretary-General.

“Even once these funds are received, the response plan will only be funded at 33 per cent. Substantial additional resources will be needed to support the Yemeni people through the rest of this year and beyond.”

This is why the international community must match its actions with its words and take immediate measures to end the violence which is destroying the lives of millions of people across the country, concluded Mr. O’Brien.

“We must get the parties to stop the fighting and return to the negotiating table, before it’s too late. Otherwise there will be nothing left to fight for.”
Half a million Palestinian children can return to UN-run schools this year thanks to ‘tireless’ fund-raising

19 August - The United Nations relief agency dealing with Palestinian refugees has declared the school year open will on time today for the 500,000 boys and girls in the increasingly unstable Middle East, where multiple crises and a major funding shortage nearly forced the delayed of the opening of 685 schools in the region.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he is “greatly relieved” that the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and stressed that education is a right, “and that rights delayed are rights denied.”

“This achievement cannot be underestimated at a time of rising extremism in one of the world’s most unstable regions,” said the UN chief, who has personally been involved in raising the issue of UNRWA funding at the highest political levels.

Declaring the school year open for the 2015-2016 academic year, UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl said Palestinian students will return to school according to plan in Palestine on 24 August, in Jordan on 1 September, in Lebanon on 7 September and in Syria on 13 September.

“Education is a fundamental right for children everywhere in the world, and it should never have come to the point where the UNRWA school year risked being delayed because of a funding shortfall for our core budget,” Mr. Krähenbühl said. “But it almost did.”

“For this reason we fought very hard to create a revival of solidarity for Palestine refugees and a renewed understanding of the importance of respecting their rights and addressing their needs adequately and predictably,” he said.

“I have taken this decision first and foremost because of how central education is to the identity and dignity of Palestine refugees and of the 500,000 boys and girls whose future depends on learning and developing skills in our 685 schools,” the agency chief said.

Mr. Krähenbühl noted that for months UNRWA has been drawing the attention of the international community to the risks of neglecting the fate and plight of Palestine refugees in an increasingly unstable Middle East.

“Faced with the multiplicity of crises in the region, many were on the verge of purely and simply overlooking or forgetting the humiliation and despair endured for decades by Palestine refugees,” he said.

He expressed his “profound appreciation” to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates “whose remarkable combined contributions cover almost half of the 2015 deficit,” and to the United States, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden and Slovakia, “who have together contributed generously to help address the funding shortfall.”

“Now we turn our energy and focus to ensure that we never again reach the stage where core UNRWA services are at risk,” Mr. Krähenbühl said. “It is a matter of dignity and respect for Palestine refugees and their children.”

Secretary-General Ban also underscored that “we must do all we can to protect UNRWA’s mandated core services until such times as the Palestine refugees have their plight resolved in the context of a just and durable solution, based on international law and UN resolutions.”

UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions, and financial support has not kept pace with an increased demand for services caused by growing numbers of registered refugees, deepening poverty and conflict.
Security Council warned that ‘risk of escalation in Israel and Palestine is palpable’

19 August - The top United Nations political official today warned the Middle East has recently witnessed “unconscionable” hate crimes, “reprehensible” retaliatory violence, provocations at Jerusalem’s holy sites, and a worrying increase in rockets launched from Gaza towards Israel, as he urged all sides to work together to reduce tensions and prevent extremist attacks.

“I address you at a time when the risk of escalation in Israel and Palestine is palpable,” said UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, in his briefing to the 15-member Security Council on the situation in the Middle East.

Saying that “in such a contentious environment, restoring confidence, before a return to realistic negotiations, is a must,” Mr. Feldman warned that while the goal of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is clear, more than “20 years of failed negotiations have bred mistrust and, worse, the slow and painful withering of hope.”

“What is needed now is a comprehensive approach on three levels – on the ground, in the region, and with the international community – to alter fundamentally the current negative dynamics and begin to shape a clear and positive pathway towards peace,” he said.

The top political official reiterated that in Syria, hostilities must end and the parties must show genuine commitment to resolving the conflict through an irreversible political transition.

And on Lebanon, Mr. Feltman called once more on the country’s leaders to act urgently and responsibly by filling the presidential vacuum without further delay.

“The past month has witnessed unconscionable crimes of hatred by extremist elements, reprehensible retaliatory violence, provocations at Jerusalem's holy sites, and a worrying increase in rockets launched from Gaza towards Israel,” he told the Council.

The recurrent violent incidents and radicalization in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem and Gaza threaten to further destabilize an already tense environment, which he said share a common thread that are “the inevitable product of the failure to make the tough choices necessary to resolve this conflict.”

“We can no longer accept this reality,” Mr. Feldman said. “It is time to reverse the perilous tide that we are now facing and restore, to Israelis and Palestinians alike, the hope that is in danger of being stifled by those promoting their hate driven agendas.”

Against this backdrop, the UN official noted that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was relieved by the announcement today by the UN agency responsible for Palestinian refugees in the Middle East that UN-run schools will open in time for some 500,000 boys and girls despite a funding shortfall.
UNESCO chief deplores killing of two leading scholars of Syrian antiquities

19 August - Within one week, the Syrian cultural heritage community suffered two immense blows with the murder of archaeologist Khaled Assad in Palmyra, and the killing of the Assistant Director of laboratories at the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, Qasem Abdullah Yehiya, in Damascus, according to the United Nations.

In a press release UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Director-General Irina Bokova said: “I am both saddened and outraged to learn of the brutal murder of Khaled Asaad, who oversaw antiquities at the UNESCO World Heritage site at Palmyra… I in no uncertain terms condemn the horrific act.”

According to news reports, militants apparently killed the 82-year-old Mr. Asaad yesterday at the legendary Palmyra site where he had worked for more than 50 years. Having been held for over a month, according to these reports, he was being questioned about the location of valuable artefacts.

“They killed him because he would not betray his deep commitment to Palmyra,” the Director-General said. “Here is where he dedicated his life, revealing Palmyra’s precious history and interpreting it so that we could learn from this great city that was a crossroads of the ancient world. His work will live on far beyond the reach of these extremists. They murdered a great man, but they will never silence history.”

Ms. Bokova was also saddened to learn of the killing of Qasem Abdullah Yehiya, who, according to the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), said the Assistant Director of laboratories died in a rocket attack on the Damascus Citadel and the National Museum last week. “The killing of Mr. Yehiya is a deplorable act, made all the more senseless that it was the result of an attack on the museum and ancient citadel,” she said.

The Director-General added that the untimely deaths of Mr. Assad and Mr. Yehiya “are a terrible loss to the cultural heritage community in Syria and globally.”

A number of museum employees were also injured in the attack on the Damascus Citadel and museum. The Ancient city of Damascus, including the Citadel, was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979.

In May, the so-called Islamic State (Daesh) took control of Palmyra, which was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980, according to the agency.

Syria: UN agency reaches Yarmouk camp as typhoid outbreak hits Palestinian refugees

19 August - The United Nations relief agency responsible for the welfare of Palestine refugees across the Middle East announced today it has conducted its first humanitarian mission to the besieged Yarmouk camp in Syria, where six cases of typhoid have been confirmed.

“Amidst reports of a typhoid outbreak in the Yarmouk region, with at least 10 of cases credibly reported in Yarmouk, Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahem, UNRWA was authorized to provide limited health assistance,” reported the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

“Never has the imperative for sustained humanitarian access been greater,” UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness said.

He said the agency has had its first access since 8 June to civilians from the besieged Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk,
which is on the outskirts of the Syrian capital, Damascus, since typhoid broke out among this UN-assisted population. To date, there have been at least six confirmed cases in the camp, Mr. Gunness noted.

“UNRWA’s priority remains the delivery of humanitarian aid to civilians within Yarmouk itself and reiterates its strong demand for respect and compliance with obligations to protect civilians and to establish secure conditions under which UNRWA can deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance,” he said, emphasizing that the vulnerability of civilians in Yarmouk “remains of the highest severity.”

There are 560,000 Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA in Syria, with more than 95 per cent of them now relying on UNRWA to meet their daily needs of food, water and healthcare.

The capacity of the agency to sustain life-saving emergency interventions, whilst responding immediately to urgent developments such as the one impacting Yarmouk, is undermined by chronic underfunding for humanitarian interventions inside Syria.

**Killing or maiming an average of eight children a day, ‘brutal’**

**Yemen conflict must end – UNICEF**

19 August - An average of eight children are killed or maimed every day in Yemen as a direct result of the conflict that has gripping the country since April, according to a new report released today by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

“This conflict is a particular tragedy for Yemeni children,” said UNICEF Representative in Yemen, Julien Harneis. “They are being killed by bombs or bullets, and those that survive face the growing threat of disease and malnutrition. This cannot be allowed to continue,” he stressed.

Yemen: Childhood Under Threat reveals that nearly 400 children have been killed and over 600 others injured since the violence escalated some four months ago.

Disrupted health services, increased levels of child malnutrition, closed schools and higher numbers of children recruited by fighting groups are among the effects of the conflict now ravaging the Arab world’s poorest country, the study finds.

As devastating as the conflict is for the lives of children right now, it will have terrifying consequences for their future, it warns.

Across the country, nearly 10 million children – 80 per cent of the country’s under-18 population – are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. More than 1.3 million people have been forced to flee their homes.

UNICEF has been at the centre of humanitarian operations in Yemen since the beginning of the conflict, working across the country to respond to the critical needs of children by providing life-saving services, including safe water, as well as treatment against malnutrition, diarrhoea, measles and pneumonia.

Over the past six months, the agency has provided psychological support to help over 150,000 children cope with the horrors of the conflict, while 280,000 people have learnt how to avoid injury from unexploded ordnances and mines.

Yet despite the tremendous needs, UNICEF’s operations remains grossly underfunded. With only 16 per cent of the agency’s funding appeal of $182.6 million met so far, Yemen is one of the most under-funded of the different emergencies UNICEF is responding to around the world.

“We urgently need funds so we can reach children in desperate need,” Mr. Harneis said. “We cannot stand by and let children suffer the consequences of a humanitarian catastrophe.”
While emphasizing the urgent need to end the conflict once and for all, the Fund reiterated its call on all parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and to stop targeting civilians and crucial infrastructure like schools, water and health facilities.

**UN and partners urge resolution to crisis after Somali legislators approve motion to impeach President**

19 August - Envoys from the United Nations and other international organizations today joined to express deep concern that a parliamentary motion to impeach Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud would impede progress on the country’s peace and State-building goals.

In a joint press statement, the UN, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the European Union (EU), the United States and the United Kingdom said, “while we fully respect the right of the Federal Parliament to hold institutions to account and to fulfil its constitutional duties, the submission of any such motion requires a high standard of transparency and integrity in the process and will consume extremely valuable time, not least in the absence of essential legal bodies.”

The organizations also recalled that Somalia and all Member States are bound by UN Security Council Resolution 2232, which set out the expectations of the international community on the security and political progress needed in Somalia, and the need for an electoral process in 2016 without extension of either the legislative or executive branch.

While recognizing the progress in recent years that Somalia has made, especially on federalism, and also recognising the important and courageous contribution made by the federal parliament, often at great human cost, the statement continued, the envoys said the remain concerned about progress on the legislative agenda and the need to pass key legislation including laws on elections, citizenship, political parties’ and the constitutional court.

“Emerging institutions are still fragile. They require a period of stability and continuity to allow Somalia to benefit from the New Deal Somali Compact and to prepare for a peaceful and legitimate transfer of public office in 2016,” says the statement.

In 2014 international partners consistently advocated for political stability and continuity; respect for institutional roles defined within the constitution and strong measures to tackle corruption; and improve public financial management, including in the security and defence sector. In 2015 this remained the organizations’ firm call.

“We are determined to assist the Somali people in preparing for an electoral process in 2016 that will not be dominated by any single institution or stakeholder. The exact choice of electoral process, will be made by Somalis following a national consultative process, in which the executive, legislative, regional administrations as well as civil society across the country will participate. We note that both the Executive and Members of Parliament have endorsed the proposed Action Plan for the national consultative process,” said the statement.

The international organizations believed the Somali people be given the opportunity in 2016 to hold their government and elected representatives to account through an inclusive and transparent electoral process.

Calling on Somali federal institutions to maintain their unity and cohesion during this challenging period, the envoys urged a focus on priorities Somalis have set for themselves: preparation of the electoral process in 2016; formation of federal member states and the constitutional review process, which are vital for stabilisation, governance and State-building; and: fight against Al Shabaab, which is at a crucial juncture, thanks to the support and sacrifice of Somali national security forces, the African Union and partners.
Libya: UN agency helps country upgrade response to boats in distress of its coast

19 August - Following a spate of deadly shipwrecks of the coast of Libya, the UN refugee agency has announced that it has set up a forum to improve the country’s response to boats in distress its waters by streamlining information sharing and coordination with international organizations.

“We hope the new contact group will boost Libya's ability to save lives, collect bodies at sea or along the coast and improve the humanitarian care of the rescued on disembarkation,” said Leo Dobbs, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at a Geneva press briefing on Tuesday.

The contact group – including Libyan officials responsible for search and rescue, border security and detention centres for rescued or intercepted boat people – was established at a recent workshop organized in Tunis by UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The group will convene at least three times over the coming nine months to discuss how to minimize refugee and migrant deaths during the Mediterranean crossing. Funded by the European Union (EU), it will also provide training in areas such as information management, body retrieval and identification of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants.

Among other things, the contact group will gather officials from the Libyan Coastguard, Port Security Department, Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration and Libyan Red Crescent (LRC) to improve maritime rescue coordination between them and international actors. Initial international members of the group include UNHCR, IOM, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Medical Corps. The EU border management agency attended the launch meeting.

According to Mr. Dobbs, however, challenges remained. “The Libyans have been criticized for not highlighting the dangers and rescuing more people in peril. But the coastguard, operating along the western shores used by smugglers, has rescued or intercepted more than 4,500 people so far this year with meagre naval resources.”

That figure compares to almost 100,000 rescued by other navies and area organizations.

Meanwhile, as more smugglers' boats leave from the Libyan coast, the odds of an accident increase – further accelerating the importance of body collection. On 5 August, an estimated 200 people drowned in Libyan waters when their vessel sank.

Currently, when national UNHCR staff in Libya hear coastguard reports of sinkings or body sightings, as in the 5 August tragedy, they alert the LRC. The coastguard’s aged small vessels collect the dead and transfer them to the LRC for transportation to hospitals before burial. The contact group agreed that Libyans can do more in this area.

“Future training could include corpse retrieval and storage and the provision of body bags, other equipment and medical supplies as well as trying to identify the dead in the hope of alerting families,” the spokesperson explained.

The training would also include receiving and questioning the rescued before their transfer to UNHCR’s detention centres.

"This information will help us and our partners identify who is coming ashore and which of the 18 operational detention centres they are being taken to, allowing us to start the process of getting them released, especially women and children," Mr. Dobbs concluded.
UN reports new allegations of sexual misconduct by peacekeepers in Central African Republic

19 August - A series of new “disturbing” allegations of misconduct in the Central African Republic were announced today by the Deputy Special Representative and Deputy Head of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the country (MINUSCA).

“These new allegations relate to a case where three young females – including one minor – were victims of rape by members of a MINUSCA military contingent. The Mission was informed of these allegations on August 12 2015 by the families of the three women,” explained Diane Corner during a press conference from Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR).

These allegations come on the heels of a case reported on 11 August by the human rights group Amnesty International, also regarding MINUSCA “blue helmets.” The day after the incident was revealed, MINUSCA chief General Babacar Gaye, resigned at the request of the Secretary-General.

Mrs. Corner said upon learning of the charges, the Mission immediately informed the UN Headquarters in New York, which notified the UN Office of the Internal Oversight Services and the relevant troop-contributing country. Per procedure, within 10 days, the country should notify the Organization whether it intends to investigate these allegations itself.

“If the country fails to open an investigation or does not respond to the request of UN Headquarters, the Organization will launch its own investigation,” explained the Deputy Special Representative.

Last week, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that it was critical that troop contributing countries take swift action to appoint national investigation officers, conclude investigations and hold perpetrators accountable, UN spokesperson, Vannina Maestracci said today.

MINUSCA, assured Mrs. Corner, will make sure to preserve all available evidence related to the allegations. Assuming the penal responsibility, the contributing country is ultimately responsible for the good conduct of his own peacekeepers. The Mission and the agencies it partners with provide assistance to victims of such claims, added Mrs. Corner.

Reiterating MINUSCA’s firm commitment to fight all forms of misconduct by its personnel, she called for anyone with some information in this regard to share it with the Mission, which will guarantee anonymity and protection.

Deployed in early 2014, MINUSCA is currently aiming to defuse sectarian tensions across the country. More than two years of civil war and violence have displaced thousands of people amid ongoing clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka alliance and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian. In addition, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) continues to operate in the south-eastern part of the country.

The situation of deep instability is further exacerbated by a growing humanitarian crisis. The UN estimates that some 450,000 people remain displaced inside the country while thousands of others have sought asylum across the borders. Meanwhile, overall some 2.7 million people in the CAR remain in direct need of urgent humanitarian assistance.
Security Council strongly condemns seizure of United Arab Emirates embassy in Yemen

19 August - The United Nations Security Council today condemned “in the strongest term” the storming and seizure of the United Arab Emirates embassy in Sana’a, Yemen, by the Houthis on the 17 August 2015.

“The members of the Security Council demanded an immediate withdrawal of all Houthi elements from the premises and condemned all the acts of violence against diplomatic premises,” said the Council President for the month of August, Joy Ogwu, in a statement issued to the press.

Council members, she added, also recalled the fundamental principle of the inviolability of diplomatic and consular premises, and the obligations on host Governments, including under the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.

Per these two instruments, countries must take all appropriate steps to protect diplomatic and consular premises against any intrusion or damage, prevent any disturbance of the peace of these missions or impairment of their dignity, and prevent any attack on diplomatic agents and consular officers.