Vanuatu: UN finds ‘extensive’ loss of agriculture; full scale of damage still to be revealed

20 March - The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) today called for emergency support for farmers in Vanuatu, where the vast majority of crops have been destroyed by Tropical Cyclone Pam.

“Supporting Vanuatu after the disastrous cyclone begins with emergency agricultural assistance that FAO will provide together with the Government of Vanuatu and other partners,” said the agency’s Director-General José Graziano da Silva.

In a news release issued by the Rome-based agency, Mr. Graziano da Silva underlined FAO’s readiness and commitment to work closely together with the Government to “help rebuild people’s lives and livelihoods, particularly in the rural areas.”

An initial assessment has found “extensive damage” to crops, livestock and fisheries as a result of the storm, which battered the Pacific archipelago last weekend. The banana crop was almost entirely destroyed by the storm, as have most coconuts and all of the inland cabbage plants and leafy vegetables. Root crops, which are an important local food source, have been uprooted and flooded in most areas, while the majority of fruit trees have been stripped and chickens and pigs have been killed.

As well as crops, most household food and seed stocks and garden production were also destroyed, leaving many families without food and income and increasing the need for imports. With the first harvest from replanted fast-growing food crops likely to be available only in mid-June, Vanuatu could be without locally produced food until then.
The cyclone hit Vanuatu at the same time as a high-level UN meeting on disaster risk reduction was taking place in Japan. In a report published at the meeting, the FAO said that agriculture bears the brunt of natural disasters, citing $70 billion in damages – some 22 per cent of the total – to the agriculture sector inflicted by natural hazards.

It will be some time before the full scale of damages and needs on Vanuatu’s more than 80 islands will be known due to a lack of functional communications and limited access following the destruction, says FAO. However, with 99 per cent of all households on the outer islands dependent on agriculture for consumption needs and income, and with 75 per cent of households in the capital, Port Vila consuming their own produce, the impact will be large.

“This underlines the fundamental importance of agriculture and fisheries to the livelihoods of communities and the impact Pam will have on the food security of the affected population,” said Gavin Wall, FAO Sub-Regional Coordinator for the Pacific. “We know that Vanuatu communities have long-standing traditional coping mechanisms to address immediate food needs and resume their agricultural production. FAO must ensure its interventions support their work and address the long-term rehabilitation of the agriculture sector.”

In the immediate term, international assistance is needed for seeds, farming equipment and technical expertise and the Government has asked for support from FAO to help the agriculture sector get back on its feet. At the same time, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is urging farmers to use still available materials to begin replanting immediately to ensure food security for future months.

They will need to act quickly, urgently planting the more perishable materials like kumala vines and banana suckers, while simultaneously preserving or storing any available foods using traditional or modern methods like drying, salting, slow cooking meat, and burying root crops in the sand.

**In call with Netanyahu, Ban urges renewed Israeli commitment to two-State solution**

*20 March* - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu today to congratulate him on his recent electoral victory, and urged him to renew Israel’s commitment to the two-State solution.

The United Nations chief also urged the Prime Minister to release the tax revenue currently held by Israel but owed to the Palestinian Authority.

Earlier this week, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told reporters that it is incumbent on the new Israeli Government, once formed, to create the conditions for a negotiated final peace agreement with the active engagement of the international community that will end the Israeli occupation and realize the creation of a viable Palestinian State living in peace and security alongside Israel.

This, he added, includes the cessation of illegal settlement building in the occupied Palestinian territory.

In his phone call today, Mr. Ban reiterated his view that the two-State solution was the only way forward.
Yemen: UN chief strongly deplores terrorist bombings, urges continued peace talks

20 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has strongly condemned the terrorist attacks against two mosques in Yemen today that have reportedly left dozens of people dead and wounded.

According to media accounts, two suicide bombers targeted the mosques in the country’s capital, Sana’a, during Friday prayers, killing at least 126 people and wounding scores of others. The terrorists also attacked a government building and mosque in Sa’dah, in the country’s northwest.

The Secretary-General, in a statement issued by his spokesperson, deplored the killing of civilians and called on all Yemeni sides “to immediately cease all hostile actions and exercise maximum restraint.”

Yemeni stakeholders are currently involved in UN-brokered talks to help facilitate peace in the country.

The statement said all sides must abide by their stated commitments to resolve differences by peaceful means, and should engage in good faith in the ongoing UN-facilitated negotiations in order to reach a consensus agreement.

“The Secretary-General urges all to remain fully engaged with his Special Adviser on Yemen so as to enable him to continue to exercise the Secretary-General’s good offices in close cooperation with the members of the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] and the Security Council.”

The Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, expressed his strongest condemnation of the attacks in a statement issued in Sana’a.

“The phenomenon of targeting mosques on sectarian grounds is a serious indicator of the deterioration of the security situation. This is also a sign that the current political impasse may cause a societal rift that threatens Yemen’s cultural fabric as well as its unity, security and stability,” he said.

“Such serious developments require everyone, primarily the political parties and constituencies, to bear full responsibility and to engage with seriousness, responsibility and good faith in the ongoing negotiations in order to save Yemen from the cycle of strife, sectarianism and disintegration it is currently descending towards,” Mr. Benomar added.

The Security Council, for its part, condemned “in the strongest terms” a series of recent airstrikes against the Presidential Palace in Aden and attacks at Aden International Airport.

In a press statement, the Council underlined that President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi is the legitimate authority based on election results. It also called for all parties in Yemen “to adhere to resolving their differences through dialogue and consultation, reject acts of violence to achieve political goals, and refrain from provocation and all unilateral actions to undermine the political transition.”

Moreover, the Council echoed the Secretary-General in calling on all parties to engage in “good faith” and accelerate the UN-brokered negotiations to continue the political transition in order to reach a consensus solution.
UN envoy says Libya on cusp of ‘decisive moment’ as parties resume peace talks

20 March - Negotiations between Libyan parties are entering a “decisive round” as continued fighting and the menace of terrorism cast a sense of urgency to the United Nations-facilitated talks, a senior official for the Organization said today.

The Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Bernardino Léon, warned that fighting and airstrikes in Libya and recent terrorist attacks elsewhere in the region had sounded “another alarm” regarding the delicate nature of the country’s peace-building process.

Mr. Léon was speaking in Morocco, where stakeholders resumed the political dialogue aimed at reaching an agreement to draw Libya out of its crisis and bring peace and stability.

“We have to praise them and praise those who are working for peace and to remind them that not only the United Nations team, not only the international community, all of us, all the world is expecting them to come in a spirit of compromise,” the UN official told reporters.

“They have to be ready, I insist, to agree with the other, and this means making concessions, not trying to get everything, not trying to win with 100 per cent the result in your favour but trying to understand that this is a give-and-take process.”

Mr. Léon explained that the stakeholders would discuss, over the following three days, a series of documents pertaining to security arrangements and a national unity government as well as a confidence building measures document which, he added, would be “ready and if possible, published” by 22 March.

On Monday, immediately after the talks, Mr. Léon would then fly to Brussels to attend the opening of the municipalities confidence-building measures meeting which would generate “a very important input” for all stakeholders.

“This should send a strong message to the Libyan people that the negotiators are not only here to talk, to meet, which is of course also important, but also to reach agreement,” he continued. “Only this agreement, only this unity government, these decisions taken by all the actors, the political and the military, the armed groups, will give a chance to Libya to get out of the crisis.”

Against that backdrop, Mr. Léon also cautioned about the growing terrorist threat in Libya and across the region amid deadly, sporadic attacks by militants associated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). He noted that the international community was following very closely and with “increasing concern” the situation of terrorism, adding that Libya, in particular, was “a critical case.”

While admitting that he is not normally a “very dramatic” person, the envoy said, “In this case, I think we are in the decisive moment. And parties should be aware that […] if they are not able to take the right decisions, Libya will go back to war again and we know this is a war that nobody can win. This is a war as we have seen in other countries in the region that may last for years and may produce suffering for years.”
UN officials stress investment, smart policies for sustainable future of world’s forests

20 March - The sustainable management and conservation of forests must be included in the sustainable development goals and climate change agreement to be adopted later this year, United Nations officials stressed ahead of the International Day of Forests, observed worldwide on 21 March.

“Forests are integral to the post-2015 development agenda,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in his message for the Day. “To build a sustainable, climate-resilient future for all, we must invest in our world's forests.”

At least 1.6 billion people directly depend on forests for food, fuel, shelter and income, but everyone benefits from the clean air, water, and climate regulation that forests provide, Mr. Ban said. Three fourths of freshwater, crucial for human survival, comes from forested catchments.

Healthy forests are also critical for building resilience – the ability to bounce back from storms and other natural disasters. Mangrove forests, when left intact, reduce loss of life and damage caused by tsunamis.

“Sustaining healthy forests and mitigating and adapting to climate change are two sides of the same coin. Forests are the largest storehouses of carbon after oceans,” the UN chief said, stressing that forests are on the “front lines” of climate change.

Forests can absorb and store carbon in their biomass, soils and products, equivalent to about one-tenth of carbon emissions projected for the first half of this century. At the same time, deforestation and land-use changes account for 17 per cent of human-generated carbon dioxide emissions.

A special event on the occasion of the International Day was held at UN Headquarters today with Manoel Sobral Filho, Director of the UN Forum on Forests Secretariat, delivering opening remarks. In the ensuing discussion, three films ranging on topics from the green economy to sustainable development were screened and a panel discussion was held on ‘Forest-based solutions for climate mitigation and adaptation.’

“As the world’s population grows, demand for forest goods and services continues to increase. The dividends from forest stewardship will benefit us, and future generations,” Mr. Filho said.

In a news release, Wu Hongbo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said the benefits that forests provide are incalculable. “Forests drive economic development and prosperity, provide jobs and livelihoods, and at the same time, promote health and well-being. Proven solutions exist to create the future we want; investing in our forests is a pathway to transformative sustainable development.”

“Forests are central to the global effort to meet the climate change challenge, eradicate poverty and realise a sustainable century,” said Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

“The new universal climate agreement to be inked in Paris at the end of the year needs to put in place a swift peaking of global emissions, a deep decarbonisation of the world-wide economy and climate neutrality in the second half of the century,” she stated. “This will not be possible without smarter and more sustainable ways of managing existing forests and the restoration and expansion of many lost and degraded ones.”

The International Day of Forests is dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of all types of forests and trees outside forests. Global celebrations will range from community-level tree-planting events, to publication of new forest data and analysis, as well as cultural activities featuring art, photographs and film festivals.
More aid needed for 120,000 displaced by clashes in southern Philippines – UN agency

20 March - Intensifying armed conflict in the southern Philippines island of Mindanao has displaced some 120,000 people since late January, the United Nations refugee agency said today, expressing particular concern for the safety of women and children who could be exposed to exploitation and abuse.

“UNHCR [Office for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees] appeals to all parties of the conflict to ensure the safety of civilians while the law and order operation is underway,” the agency’s spokesperson, Babar Baloch, told reporters at a press briefing in Geneva.

The agency and its partners estimate that 13 municipalities in the areas of Maguindanao and North Cotabato in central Mindanao have been affected in eight weeks of clashes between the military and police on one side, and the non-State armed group, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, on the other.

An estimated 120,000 displaced people are now sheltering in schools, public buildings and madrasas, it said, adding that the estimate does not include people hosted by relatives and friends, and the numbers are expected to grow as the fighting extends to the local communities that are already hosting many of the displaced, Mr. Baloch said.

UNHCR cannot access many of the affected areas and relies on information provided by local authorities, civil society organizations and partners, he said.

Humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR, in Mindanao are working closely with the local authorities to monitor the conditions of displaced people inside and outside the shelters.

“We have provided some blankets, jerry cans, sleeping mats, mosquito nets and plastic sheets, but more aid is needed urgently,” Mr. Baloch said.

“UNHCR is particularly concerned about the safety of civilians, including women and children who are caught up in the conflict areas,” he said. “It is unclear how long or widely the ongoing law and order operation will extend and this is hindering the safe and dignified return of the displaced people.”

He went on to say that “women and children could potentially be exposed to exploitation and abuse, given their lack of income and community protection. The limited provision of food, medicine, water and temporary shelter could exacerbate these vulnerabilities.”
'We have to move from climate change to climate action,’ Pharrell Williams says at UN event

20 March - Singer-songwriter Pharrell Williams and environmental advocates Philippe Cousteau and Sylvia Earle joined local students at an event held at United Nations Headquarters today to celebrate the International Day of Happiness and highlight the importance of tackling climate change.

At the event, held in the iconic General Assembly Hall in partnership with the UN Foundation, Mr. Williams also launched the world’s largest online ‘Happy Party,’ inviting everybody to log onto globalhappyparty.com and upload their own photos that will then be transformed into an animated gif to the tune of his Grammy Award-winning song, ‘Happy.’

“Happiness for the entire human family is one of the main goals of the United Nations,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the audience in a video message. “Peace, prosperity, lives of dignity for all – this is what we seek.”

Mr. Williams spoke to the children gathered, telling them that happiness is their “birthright.”

“We have to move from climate change to climate action,” he said. “We’re in trouble but we can change.”

The aim of the Happy Party is to drive supporters to sign the Live Earth Petition, rallying 1 billion people to demand world leaders commit to tackling climate change at the summit to be held in Paris in December and make climate action a global priority.

The voices of Philippe Cousteau and Sylvia Earle, who also spoke, amplified Mr. Williams’s message. Mr. Cousteau showed films about his conservation work and Ms. Earle urged the audience to take advantage of the knowledge available to them in the modern world.

“Individually, one of the things that kids can do, [is say] I am going to think happy thoughts, [and] do what I can do to make the world a happier, better place,” she said. “We have come along at maybe the most important time in all of history. Never before have we known what now is known about the planet.”

Ebola-affected countries need to intensify routine immunization services – UN

20 March - The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) is appealing for the “urgent scaling up” of routine immunizations services and distribution of anti-malaria medicines in countries most affected by Ebola in West Africa to counter a growing risk of outbreaks of measles, pertussis, and other vaccine-preventable diseases.

“We are calling for the intensification of routine immunization services in all areas, and for mass measles vaccination campaigns in areas that are free of Ebola transmission,” Dr. Jean-Marie Okwo-Bele, Director of Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals at WHO, was quoted as saying in a news release.

The Ebola outbreak in West Africa has reduced routine vaccination coverage in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, as health facilities and staff focus on halting the epidemic, which has infected more than 24,000 people with over 10,000 deaths.

In addition, “People infected with malaria have been unable to get treatment, either because they have been too afraid to seek help at health centres or because such facilities have been closed,” according to WHO.
In a guidance note sent out this week, WHO warned: “Any disruption of immunization services, even for short periods, will result in an increase in the number of susceptible individuals, and will increase the likelihood of vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks.”

“The new guidance for immunization programmes in the African Region in the context of Ebola to help countries maintain or restart immunization services includes infection control precautions for health workers,” according to WHO. “The document notes that for countries not affected by Ebola, routine immunization and surveillance should continue using the normal safe injection and waste disposal practices.”

Mass vaccination campaigns for measles in areas that are free of Ebola transmission should be implemented to reduce the risk of significant outbreak of one of the leading causes of death among young children globally, the guidance note says.

And to rapidly reduce the malaria burden and the number of people with malaria presenting at Ebola evaluation facilities, WHO also recommended mass drug administration of anti-malarial medicines to all eligible people in areas heavily affected by Ebola.

Liberia has carried out two rounds of immunization against several diseases, and Guinea carried out similar activities in Ebola-free provinces in October and November 2014. Sierra Leone has put in place infection prevention precautions, and supported health facilities to scale up their routine service delivery.

Liberia and Guinea have carried out outbreak response vaccination activities for measles, targeting under-five children in outbreak districts, and Guinea is putting together an outbreak response plan targeting 10 additional districts.

Before widespread vaccination, measles caused an estimated 2.6 million deaths each year. More than 145,000 people died from measles in 2013 – mostly children under the age of 5, which translates into about 400 deaths every day or 16 deaths every hour.

“This focus on vaccinations and malaria is part of WHO’s efforts to support countries in early recovery, including infection prevention and control in non-Ebola health care settings, strengthening of the health workforce, disease surveillance, and safe essential health services,” said Dr. Edward Kelley, WHO’s Director of Service Delivery and Safety.

**UN rights experts urge Pakistan not to execute juveniles**

20 March - A group of independent United Nations human rights experts welcomed the last-minute decision by the Pakistani authorities to postpone the hanging of Shafqat Hussain, who was convicted as a minor, while calling on them to halt the execution altogether.

Mr. Hussein, who was convicted and sentenced to death for kidnapping and involuntary manslaughter, was due to be hanged on Thursday, but the authorities decided just hours before to grant a stay of execution, according to a news release issued by the experts.

The authorities also announced an inquiry into his age at the time he was convicted, and on the alleged torture he suffered during his interrogation. Mr. Hussain was 14 years old when he was arrested in connection with the disappearance of a young boy. His confessions were obtained after he was reportedly tortured over nine days by police officers after his arrest in 2004.

“We welcome the decision delaying Mr. Hussain’s execution, but we continue to call on the Pakistani authorities definitively to halt his execution,” said the experts, which include Christof Heyns, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Juan E. Méndez, the Special Rapporteur on torture; and Kirsten Sandberg, the current Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of Child.

“Putting him through the ongoing agony of not knowing whether he may be executed in the next few days is cruel and one cannot help but wonder why a – seemingly – rushed inquiry into his age is only now being conducted,” they noted.
“Pakistan should carry out serious investigations into all cases of children in death row across the country.”

According to human rights groups, more than 8,000 people are on death row in Pakistan. Out of this number, several hundred may have been sentenced for crimes they committed as children.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the experts noted, guarantees the inherent right of every child to life, and provides that neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by minors.

“This execution, if carried out, will be clearly contrary to the Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention against Torture, which Pakistan has accepted as binging law,” the experts stressed.

Since reversing the death penalty moratorium in December 2014, 48 people have been executed across Pakistan.

“We reiterate our recommendation to the Government of Pakistan reinstate the death penalty moratorium. In the meanwhile, it would be a blot on the name of the country to execute Shafqat Hussein or anyone else who are accused of having committed a crime as a juvenile,” said the experts.

**Afghanistan: UN condemns brutal killing of mentally ill woman**

**20 March** - United Nations officials in Afghanistan have strongly condemned the brutal killing of a 27-year-old mentally ill woman, who was attacked yesterday by an angry crowd accusing her of burning a copy of the Quran.

In the incident, which took place near the Shah-e-Do Shamshera mosque in Kabul, the crowd beat the woman and then burned her body.

“We are particularly worried by reports that the woman had suffered from mental illness for many years,” Elzira Sagynbaeva, the Country Representative for UN Women in Afghanistan, said in a statement released to the press.

“We are encouraged by initial reports of the arrest of several suspects, but call on the authorities to investigate this incident fully and bring to justice all persons who actively participated in the killing, or aided and abetted it,” Ms. Sagynbaeva added.

The continued increase in the number of cases of violence against women and girls in Afghanistan has become a source of major concern, she noted, and must not be tolerated. Afghan women’s rights to safety and security have to be ensured and the survivors of violence supported and perpetrators brought to justice.

Mark Bowden, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and acting head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), also condemned the attack. “The burning of the Quran contradicts the efforts of the United Nations to promote tolerance, intercultural understanding and mutual respect between cultures and religions,” he said.

“However, the brutal murder of this woman is an unspeakably horrendous act that should result in those responsible being prosecuted, to the fullest extent possible, under Afghan law,” he added.

Ms. Sagynbaeva and Mr. Bowden also extended their deepest condolences to the family of the victim.
On International Day, UN chief calls for efforts to 'fill world with happiness'

20 March - Happiness for the entire human family is one of the main goals of the United Nations, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared, as the Organization kicked-off its global celebrations marking the annual observance of the International Day of Happiness.

“Peace, prosperity, lives of dignity for all – this is what we seek. We want all men, women and children to enjoy all their human rights. We want all countries to know the pleasure of peace,” the Secretary-General said in his message for the Day.

“We want people and planet alike to be blessed with sustainable development, and to be spared the catastrophic impacts of climate change.”

In April 2012, the UN held a high-level meeting on “Happiness and Well-Being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm” at the initiative of Bhutan, a country which recognized the supremacy of national happiness over national income since the early 1970s and famously adopted the goal of Gross National Happiness over Gross National Product (GDP).

In July of that year, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 20 March the International Day of Happiness, recognizing the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal goals and aspirations in people's lives and the importance of their recognition in public policy objectives.

As part of its effort to emphasize the importance of happiness in daily life, the UN along with global music streaming service MixRadio has launched the #HappySoundsLike campaign, appealing to the global citizenry “to nominate a song that brings a smile to your face.”

The campaign seeks to seize the power of music and “inspire hope for a better tomorrow” as it encourages people to suggest songs that best represent the feeling of happiness.

Mr. Ban nominated his Messenger of Peace Stevie Wonder's song “Signed, Sealed, Delivered” to the playlist, adding that to him #HappySoundsLike a new climate deal and an agreed set of sustainable development goals, both on the agenda of world leaders for later this year.

Celebrity advocates including Charlize Theron, Lang Lang, Michael Douglas, Angelique Kidjo, along with internationally-acclaimed artists such as James Blunt, Idris Elba, David Guetta, John Legend, Cody Simpson and Pharrell Williams, will also contribute to create the world’s happiest playlist, which will be launched today.

“Let us give thanks for what makes us happy,” Mr. Ban stated. “And let us dedicate our efforts to filling our world with happiness.”