FEATURE: Emerging from the Black Hole – the UN’s fight against youth radicalization

21 May - Djamel was still in high school when he was radicalized.

It was 1991. Algeria’s military had just annulled the country’s general election fearing the establishment of a theocratic state after the Islamic Salvation Front won the first round of voting. As violent protests erupted on the streets, the country steadily descended into civil conflict and slipped into insurgency. Twenty-five thousand rebels climbed into the mountains of Algeria’s north where they began a guerrilla campaign against the new government; terror attacks struck down civilians all over the country. According to terrorism experts, the majority of the young Algerians who chose the path of terrorism were no older than 25 years of age.

“They told us to launch a jihad against this infidel government and fight until the end of time,” Djamel told United Nations Television (UNTV) in an interview in 2010 for the documentary The Terrorist Who Came Home. “We wanted to completely overthrow the government.”

Algeria’s conflict raged for more than ten years and, during that time, claimed the lives of some 150,000 people, including Djamel’s brother. But as the war steadily ground down into a costly quagmire, questions began to arise regarding the efficacy and moral strength of the insurgents’ claims.

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“We started to doubt terrorism,” said Djamel. “At the beginning we had power. We had trucks, cars, groups and weapons, but after three and half years it all began to fall apart.”

Scholars of extremism generally agree that the history of international terrorism has unfurled along four specific currents, or waves: the Anarchist Wave, spanning the decades between the 1880s and 1920s and marked by so-called ‘propaganda of the deed’ acts of violence; the Anti-colonial Wave, which peaked between the 1920s and 1960s as empires crumbled and nations broke free from the yoke of imperialism; the New Left Wave of the 1960s to 1990s, which saw the rise of militant groups espousing extreme leftist and rightist ideals; and the current trend, the Religious Wave, giving birth to today’s religious fundamentalists and jihadists.

Nevertheless, following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, youth radicalism is an issue that continues to confound Member States as countless young people abandon their families or lives of seeming prosperity in the West to join the ranks of Islamist militant groups. In the Middle East alone, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Daesh, has benefitted from an influx of 4,000 European fighters, both young men and young women, while also recruiting heavily from the disenfranchised youth of the region.

The Terrorist Who Came Home.’ Credit: United Nations

The mass disaffection of modern youths, however, appears to have some common cause, according to Peter Neumann, the Director of the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation.

At a recent meeting of the Security Council on the role of youth in countering violent extremism and promoting peace, held at UN Headquarters in April, Mr. Neumann remarked that the foreign fighters joining ISIL were more diverse than any extremist population he had ever seen. So different in fact that, for the first time, the group of youth radicals included large numbers of women – reaching up to 20 per cent in some countries.

“However different the foreign fighters that my colleagues and I have found and spoken to; however different their profiles and characteristics; what many, if not most of them, had in common is that they didn’t feel they had a stake in their societies,” he told the meeting.

“And if you don’t feel you belong, if you don’t feel you’re part of your society, it becomes easier to leave – and it becomes easier to hate. It becomes easier to go against the very society whose passport you hold and whose language you speak.”

The radicalizing factors of young people in Europe and beyond, however varied, are nonetheless rooted in socio-economic stimuli or the lack thereof: a lack of social and cultural integration, a lack of economic opportunity, a lack of employment. When hope and opportunity are eclipsed, Mr. Neumann suggested, extremism will often feed off of the resulting despair.

Just last year, the UN International Labour Organization (ILO) pointed out in its Global Employment Trends report that global youth unemployment rates would remain on an upward trend through to 2017, according to projections.

Young people, the agency said, continued to be particularly affected by a weak and uneven recovery with some 74.5 million youth unemployed in 2013 – the last year for which data was available. In addition, as the recovery remained weak, the average length of unemployment spells increased considerably.

The data is particularly troubling when seen within the context of the largest youth bulge in human history. Today, half of the world’s population is under 25 years of age, and 87 per cent of those between the ages of 15 and 24 can be found in the developing world. Among them, 600 million youth live precarious existences in war zones, caught up in the fury of conflict and its offshoots of poverty and destruction.

“You’re dealing with a large population of young people who are suffering today from complex challenges, from failures in
development, from lack of peace and security,” the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, Ahmad Alhendawi, said in an interview with the UN News Centre. “And they are, of course, in a situation where they are vulnerable in every sense of the word.

“What’s happening in the Arab region?” he added. “A generation of young people are lacking prospects for the future.”

In the Arab world, noted Mr. Alhendawi, the employment and economic metrics describe a downward slope that only serves to push disenfranchised young people into the arms of recruiters for extremist groups who, with their promises of an ideological cause and hefty salaries, are increasingly successful in luring youths into their ranks.

“The average salary for ISIL fighters is three to four times higher than the average salary in the Middle East. You have a situation where the young person in the Middle East would need 16 visas to travel to 22 countries. So, no economic independence and no mobility,” he continued. “You have a situation in Syria today where the only vacancy for young people is to fight.”

Filling the ‘Black Hole’

The debate over the causes of extremism can appear to be an endless and nebulous one. But the solutions, according to Mr. Alhendawi, are brutally clear: the world’s youth must be treated as peacebuilders in a system of inclusivity which brings progressive youth policies and investment to the fore.

**How is the UN fighting terrorism?**

The Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) was set up immediately following the 9/11 attacks against the United States in 2001 to strengthen Member States’ ability to prevent and address terrorism. The Committee is assisted in this work by its Executive Directorate (CTED), which carries out the Committee’s decisions, conducts expert assessments of Member States, and facilitates counter-terrorism technical assistance. CTED helps identify best practices of Member States to counter terrorism – and assists in spreading these among the wider membership. CTED has also been tasked by the Security Council to work with international, regional, and sub-regional organisations, as well as with civil society, academia, and private entities to identify new trends and developments related to terrorism. Most recently, the Council in its resolution 2178 of September 2014 underlined the increasing threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters as part of emerging issues, trends, and developments in this regard.

“I don’t buy the argument that all the people with ISIL are ideologically motivated. There are many pull-and-push factors because the youth lack prospects and have a sense of hopelessness and are being offered a promise to be part of something,” he said. “That’s what I call ‘the Black Hole’ in our peacebuilding efforts.”

“We really have to address the core problems which are making a large generation of young people feel hopeless, marginalized, excluded from public life and we have to bring them back. I think, to this end, the UN has a role to play.”

Pointing to the UN’s work on women, peace and security, Mr. Alhendawi has argued that the time has come for the Security Council to pass a resolution and establish a mechanism devoted to youth and peacebuilding efforts which treats young people as participants in the international process and not simply as “troublemakers.”

You have the largest demographic, he says, but there is very little being done in terms of investments for them.

The quest for solutions for the worryingly global problem of youth extremism and terrorism appears to be uniquely suited for the UN – both as a venue for multilateral discourse and a wellspring of expertise and policy development.

Jean-Paul Laborde, the head of the UN Counter-terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED), has long called for a multifaceted approach in preventing the spread of radicalism across borders as part of his mandate to identify best practices of Member States in countering terrorism. Among these best practices, he says, are suggestions for the international community to adopt
comprehensive tools such as education in order to douse the flames of incitement and extremism before they become too wild to control.

“Lack of employment; very often exclusion; difficulties of comprehension – that’s what I think we have to look at. What, in the past, we have called the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism,” Mr. Laborde stated.

From its base in New York, Mr. Laborde’s team compiles exhaustive policy recommendations with which it hopes to boost the fight in countering the financing of terrorism, terrorist acts, and preventing the growth of violent extremism.

But as the CTED experts probe the reports submitted by States in areas such as legislative drafting, the financing of terrorism, border and customs controls, police and law enforcement, refugee and migration law, arms trafficking and maritime and transportation security, Mr. Laborde observed that a number of necessary measures have inarguably come into focus.

I’ve always said that the terrorist organizations are equipped with Ferraris; we are equipped with not even a bicycle.

“Either [terrorism] will continue and will destroy our societies – something which is not acceptable – or we have to put in place all the elements,” he stressed. “We have to go back to what I said: education, development, law enforcement, borders, international vision, international policy, international cooperation. As long as the world doesn’t do that, then we will continue to have these problems.”

“We have to be quick,” he added. “I’ve always said that the terrorist organizations are equipped with Ferraris; we are equipped with not even a bicycle.”

The path back from radicalism

Meanwhile, back in Algeria, where the war of attrition had already dislocated society and planted the seeds that would soon grow into Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the country’s authorities were desperately seeking an alternative to the bloodshed that had cost so much in terms of human lives and development.

“There was a sort of complete exhaustion on both sides – an understanding that the horrific murders that were going on at that time were actually not leading to any future for anybody and that there had to be a real effort to bring society back together again,” explains former UN terrorism expert Richard Barrett in The Terrorist Who Came Home.

Indeed, the Algerian Government decided to act and launched a reconciliation process by announcing an amnesty for the young men in the mountains.

Hearing of the amnesty, Djamel and his fellow fighters, believing they had been misled about Islam, sought out religious authorities espousing a different view of their struggle.

“We got a fatwa on a tape from Mecca, from a scholar called El Sheikh Muhammed Salah El Woudhim,” Djamel recalled. “He said the following: ‘To my brothers-in-arms in the Algerian mountains: stop the killing.’ We realised religion was about good conduct, not violence.”

Djamel eventually left the mountains and relinquished his weapons – a first step on the path of recovery from the ‘Black Hole’ of the Algerian civil war. He rebuilt his life and started a family.

The international community has a tendency to blame young people for many problems, Mr. Alhendawi noted. And until this perception is jettisoned, freeing those from the clutches of radicalism will remain one of the world’s most pressing issues.

“Young people didn’t cause the problems,” he concluded. “They are the victims and the most to suffer from these conflicts.”
In Tanzania, UNICEF working to halt cholera outbreak among Burundian refugees

21 May - The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is rushing critical relief supplies to Tanzania’s north-western border with Burundi amid a devastating cholera outbreak affecting tens of thousands of refugees there.

In a press release issued earlier today, UNICEF confirmed it had dispatched cholera treatment supplies, as well as water, sanitation, health and nutrition items to stem the spread of cholera among 50,000 Burundian refugees living rough along the shores of Lake Tanganyika.

The influx of Burundian refugees into Tanzania has been steadily increasing since the 13th May declaration of a coup d’état against Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza.

Burundi’s unrest has forced more than 110,000 people to flee to neighbouring countries and the current cholera outbreak has already claimed 27 lives.

“Children constitute more than half of the population on the move and are particularly vulnerable to cholera,” said UNICEF Regional Director for Eastern & Southern Africa, Leila Gharagozloo-Pakkala. “Concerted action by the two counties has fast tracked the dispatch of lifesaving commodities to stem the spread of the outbreak.”

According to the UN agency, overcrowding and poor sanitation has resulted in a surge of confirmed or suspected cases of cholera and acute watery diarrhoea among the refugees. In fact, the number of refugees arriving in the small village of Kagunga has risen sharply – from a population of 10,000 to 90,000 – and the living conditions have become extremely dire.

UNICEF’s relief supplies include a cholera treatment kit for 100 cases, chlorine, soap, water purification tablets and plastic buckets as well as high-nutrition ready-to-eat food.

2015 ‘year of fear’ for children, UN education envoy says, urging schools funding in crisis zones

21 May - The United Nations education envoy told journalists in New York today that “shocking figures” relating to the position of children in emergency situations underlined the need for a new humanitarian fund to ensure the education of millions of children.

“This is not the year of the child but the year of fear, with 2015 already the worst year since 1945 for children being displaced, the worst year for children becoming refugees, the worst year for children seeing their schools attacked,” said Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education, “with rising numbers of girls and boys at risk from conflict in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Burundi, South Soudan, northern Nigerian and from natural disasters in Nepal.”

He outlined illustrative statistics, including the fact that over half of the world’s record 38 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) are children, and that a similar portion of the world’s 16.7 million refugees are children. In addition, he said over 825,000 children are trafficked each year, with 8.6 million in slavery, an estimated five million girls married off before the age of 15 last year, and about 168 million child labourers, 85 million of whom were engaged in hazardous work.

“We expect the figure to rise as in crisis zone after crisis zone even school age children who were once at school are being forced into child labour,” he said. “Today in some of the world’s most troubled spots it is open season for traffickers, with
girls snatched from the streets in Nepal to adolescents forced into marriage in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.”

Mr. Brown said children were the biggest victims of disasters, crises and conflicts and looked ahead to an upcoming visit to Jordan and Lebanon where he expected to see the worsening plight of Syrian refugees.

He also noted a litany of horrific situations faced by children in other parts of the world, including in South Sudan, where children were conscripted as soldiers, and in Nepal, where girls, already made homeless by the earthquake, found themselves at risk of traffickers.

“This week, Nepalese State radio messages are confirming what we already know,” said the envoy. “In the midst of the fallout from the earthquake, the Government is directly warning half a million girls – now on the streets – and their parents, to beware of suspicious gangs trying to recruit them and traffic them out of the country.”

He stressed that the best answer was education, restoring hope to those in dreadful situations.

“Not only does school offer opportunity and safety,” he said. “It restores hope that as children they can plan for a better future.”

He called on aid agencies and development partners to agree to a Global Humanitarian Fund for Education in Emergencies which he said could be launched later this year at the UN General Assembly, and which was designed to remove delays and prevarication when disasters strike.

“There will be the ability to act immediately and – as we would have wanted to see in Nepal, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan – without having to wait months while we hand round a begging bowl,” he said.

He pointed to a “bold plan” proposed by the UN alongside the Lebanese Government and international partners to get 500,000 Syrian children back into school through providing double shifts at a cost of just $500 per child.

“The evidence shows that when girls are at school, child marriage and child abuse are dramatically reduced,” he said. “Sadly, only one per cent of the humanitarian budget goes to schooling.”

**Saving lives of migrants stranded in Southeast Asian waters should remain a priority – UN experts**

21 May - A group of United Nations human rights experts today welcomed the Malaysian, Indonesian and Thai leaders’ decision not to pushback asylum seekers arriving in their territorial waters and urged the international community to assist those countries financially to protect the human rights of all migrants.

“This is an important and welcome step forward in recognition of the need to protect the right to life for all, regardless of their status,” said the UN Special Rapporteurs on migrants, François Crépeau; on trafficking in persons, Maria Grazia Giammarino; on torture, Juan E. Méndez; and on summary executions, Christof Heyns.

“Saving lives must remain a priority,” the Special Rapporteurs said in a statement.

“Pushbacks conducted against migrants and asylum seekers which may also include victims of trafficking are never a good option. They only end up perpetuating the suffering of children, women and men who are already risking death for a better life,” they added as well.

The independent experts noted that allowing migrants and asylum seekers to disembark reinforces the commitment of these three countries to their international human rights obligations. Malaysia and Indonesia agreed to offer shelter to 7000 asylum seekers and migrants stranded at sea.
“Once rescued, asylum seekers and migrants should be received in open centres offering adequate accommodation facilities and, where necessary, have access to medical care,” they emphasized.

“All those rescued should be individually assessed to establish their protection needs and ensure that the principle of non-refoulement is upheld by the three countries concerned, and that no person is returned to a State, where she or he might be in danger of being subjected to torture,” the experts stressed.

Next month, the UN Special Rapporteur on migrants will present reports on European Union border management and on his visit to Italy and Malta to the UN Human Rights Council. At the same session, the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons will present a report on the issues that she intends to focus on in the course of her tenure including further exploration between the link of mixed migration flows and trafficking.

Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, an independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanism that addresses specific country situations. They do not receive a salary for their work and are independent from any government.

**UN hails outcome of Incheon forum as ‘huge step forward’ for education**

21 May - The United Nations has hailed the “transformative” vision for education over the next 15 years that was adopted today at a global forum in Incheon, Republic of Korea, and which encourages countries to provide inclusive, equitable, quality education opportunities for all.

The Incheon Declaration, adopted at the World Education Forum, aims to underpin the education targets in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that will be adopted at the UN in September.

“This Declaration is a huge step forward,” said Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in a joint press release with other UN agencies.

“It reflects our determination to ensure that all children and young people gain the knowledge and skills they need to live in dignity, to reach their potential and contribute to their societies as responsible global citizens,” she added.

“It encourages governments to provide learning opportunities through life, so that people can continue to grow and develop. It affirms that education is the key to global peace and sustainable development.”

The Incheon Declaration builds on the global Education for All (EFA) movement that was initiated in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and reiterated in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. EFA – and the Millennium Development Goal on Education – resulted in significant progress, but many of its targets, including universal access to primary education, remain unfulfilled.

Currently, 58 million children remain out of school – most of them girls. In addition, 250 million children are not learning basic skills, even though half of them have spent at least four years in school. The Incheon Declaration seeks to finish the ambitious EFA and MDG agendas.

“If this generation of children is to someday reduce the inequalities and injustices that afflict the world today, we must give all our children a fair chance to learn. This must be our collective vision and commitment,” said Anthony Lake, Executive Director of the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

The Incheon Declaration will be implemented through the Education 2030 Framework for Action, a roadmap for governments to be adopted by the end of the year. Effective implementation will require strong regional coordination and rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the education agenda. It will also require more funding, especially for the countries furthest from providing inclusive, quality education, forum participants said.
Also today, the UN Special Rapporteur on education, Kishore Singh, called for strategies to address inequality by focusing on girls and women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities and children living in conflict-affected areas, rural areas and urban slums.

“It is the weakest among us who need education the most and we cannot stand by as they are being excluded,” he said in a news release.

“Governments must safeguard education as a public good, and urgently end the commercialization of education,” Mr. Singh added. “Disparities and inequalities in society must be reduced, not encouraged. Building an inclusive education system requires governments to strengthen public education, as is their obligation under international human rights law.”

Mr. Singh called on governments to fully fund and implement their human rights obligations and bring free, public education for all. “Free basic education is the cornerstone of the right to education and must not be undermined through privatisation,” the Special Rapporteur said.

In meeting with Republic of Korea President, Ban spotlights critical importance of post-2015 agenda

21 May - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is today wrapping up his visit to the Republic of Korea (ROK) following a meeting with the country’s president Park Geun-hye and an appeal for greater dialogue across Asia, the United Nations confirmed today.

The Secretary-General met with President Park and her cabinet ministers and senior advisors yesterday to discuss the “critical importance” of making progress on the post-2015 agenda, climate change, development assistance funding, protection of refugees and migrants, and other key global issues, according to a readout released by the UN spokesperson’s office.

In addition, Mr. Ban expressed his “deep regret” regarding the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s “unexpected decision” to reverse its invitation for him to visit the Kaesong Industrial Complex – a visit intended for earlier today. Nevertheless, he reiterated that he would “spare no effort” to continue supporting dialogue and reconciliation efforts on the Korean Peninsula.

Moreover, he commended the ROK’s financial and medical assistance toward fighting Ebola in Western Africa while noting the UN’s efforts to improve to continue enhancing global capacity to respond to epidemics. In his meeting with President Park, Mr. Ban also noted that climate change, countering terrorism and violent extremism, and issues pertaining to refugees and migrants would “greatly benefit” from the ROK’s “continued strong commitments and contributions.”

At the same time, the Secretary-General also addressed the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity in a video message in which he said that 2015 presented both “grave threats but also enormous opportunities,” particularly for Asia.

“We are forging a new set of sustainable development goals and aiming for a new, universal agreement on climate change,” he told an audience composed of local officials, dignitaries and members of the ROK’s diplomatic corps.

Pointing to the need for greater dialogue across Asia, especially among the ROK, Japan and China, Mr. Ban added that lasting security in the region would ultimately promote “even greater development.”

“With boldness and creativity, with trust and harmony, Asia can continue to lead the world to a new and better future,” concluded the Secretary-General.
Nepal: UN underscores need to act now before monsoon rains risk further disaster

21 May - As Nepalese communities devastated by two major earthquakes struggle to restore and rebuild, United Nations humanitarian workers and their partners are in a fierce race against time to reach survivors in the remote mountains before the monsoon rains hit and further complicate logistics.

“The monsoon is just four weeks away, and will bring with it a high possibility of increased landslides, making it extremely difficult – if not impossible – to bring timely relief aid and recovery support to communities in rural areas,” said Magdy Martínez-Solimán, Director of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) Bureau for Policy and Programme Support.

“These areas are in dire need,” he stressed, noting that 85 to 90 per cent of houses have been destroyed or are unsafe.

The second earthquake of a magnitude of 7.3 on the Richter scale that struck Nepal on 12 May has worsened the living conditions of the survivors of the first quake that struck on 25 April, particularly in the severely-affected districts.

Some humanitarian agencies like the UN World Food Programme (WFP) say they are turning to a team of elite mountain climbers to help reach earthquake survivors in some of Nepal’s toughest mountain terrain, where helicopters and trucks cannot go.

“As part of WFP’s Operation Mountain Express, the mountaineers abandoned plans to climb one of the Himalaya peaks and instead have undertaken a relief mission by using their skills and training to help get food and other supplies to people in need,” according to WFP.

Meanwhile, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said “the psychological impact of these two major earthquakes in less than three weeks cannot be underestimated, with increasing needs for psychosocial interventions and safe spaces for children to be together, feel supported and receive psychosocial support.”

“Road travel is threatened by landslides and unstable buildings,” UNICEF said, adding that “this threat has an emotional impact on field staff while also challenging relief operations.”

The World Health Organization, in its latest update, reported some 8,500 deaths from the quakes. In addition, more than 25 hospitals and over 900 smaller facilities, predominantly village health posts which supply basic medicines and other routine services in remote communities outside the Kathmandu valley, were completely or partly damaged.

WHO also warned that the security of health workers remains an issue in the remote villages where landslides have been reported.

With the annual monsoon season a month away, Nepalese communities in remote areas are now facing a new challenge – isolation from desperately-needed aid and assistance to restore and rebuild their homes and livelihoods.

Mr. Martínez-Solimán, who saw first-hand the levels of destruction caused by the earthquakes in a country that was fragile and vulnerable even before the disaster, likened the fallen houses and heaps of rubble to a war zone.

The coming monsoon risked a secondary disaster for the many Nepalese living in remote, inaccessible communities in this rugged, mountainous country, he said.
Mr. Martínez-Solimán’s visit, involving meetings with the Nepalese Government, international development partners and affected communities, is part of UNDP’s push to hash out a robust recovery plan for the country that protects and restores infrastructure, services and livelihoods, even as immediate efforts to meet people’s most basic needs continue.

As the lead UN agency on disaster recovery, UNDP works in crisis situations to minimize the longer-term impacts on affected communities, whether caused by natural disasters or manmade conflict.

“The onset of the monsoon has sounded an alarm,” he said. “We must act now.”

**UN chief appoints expert panel to address humanitarian funding shortfalls**

21 May - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has appointed a high-level United Nations panel to address the yawning gap between resources and financing for the world’s ever-pressing humanitarian efforts.

In a statement released by his spokesperson’s office earlier today, the Secretary-General observed that over the last decade, the demand for humanitarian aid had risen “dramatically” amid an uptick in water scarcity, food insecurity, demographic shifts, rapid urbanization and climate change.

“All these and other dynamics are contributing to a situation in which current resources and funding flows are insufficient to meet the rising demand for aid,” Mr. Ban’s statement declared. “Humanitarian actors expected to stay longer and longer in countries and regions impacted by long-running crises and conflicts.”

Over the past 10 years, the global demand for humanitarian aid has, in fact, risen precipitously. The number of people requiring critical relief has more than doubled since 2004 to over 100 million today and current funding requirements for 2015, according to the UN, stand at $19.1 billion, up from $3.4 billion in 2004.

As a result, Mr. Ban has launched his High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing with Vice President of the European Commission, Kristalina Georgieva of Bulgaria, and Sultan Nazrin Shah of Malaysia as co-chairs of the Panel.

The Panel, which will examine humanitarian financing challenges and identify ways in which the gap between rising needs and the resources available to meet them can be closed, will also work on generating solutions around the issues of more timely and predictable funding, as well as ways in which resources can be used more effectively, according to the statement.

The Panel will also include Hadeel Ibrahim of the United Kingdom; Badr Jafar of the United Arab Emirates; Trevor Manuel of South Africa; Linah Mohohlo of Botswana; Walt Macnee of Canada; Margot Wallström of Sweden; and Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah of Sri Lanka.

It is expected to submit its recommendations to the Secretary-General in November 2015 which will help frame discussions at next year’s World Humanitarian Summit.
On World Day, UN warns global cultural diversity ‘under attack’

21 May - As the planet’s cultural diversity comes under continued attack from militant groups espousing virulent forms of intolerance, the international community must fight back through openness and acceptance of the world’s myriad traditions, the United Nations cultural agency declared today.

In a statement marking the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), reiterated the importance of cultural diversity as humanity’s “shared heritage,” adding that it holds “the promise of renewal and dynamism, and an engine of innovation and development.”

According to Ms. Bokova, however, this promise is under increasing threat. In fact, with conflict engulfing both Syria and Iraq and Islamist extremists fanning across a region rich in archaeological and cultural heritage, the UNESCO chief has increasingly voiced outrage over the practice of cultural cleansing which, she says, risks destroying millennia of history.

Just yesterday, she voiced deep concern over reports that militants from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) had breached the perimeter of the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, “putting at risk one of the most significant sites in the Middle East and its civilian population.” The extremist group has been blamed for numerous acts of cultural cleansing in Iraq where they reportedly devastated relics at Mosul’s museum of archaeology.

“Today again, cultural diversity is under attack by violent extremists who lay waste to the heritage and persecute minorities,” said Ms. Bokova. “These crimes confirm still further our conviction that the enemies of human dignity will always seek to destroy cultural diversity, because it is the symbol of free thought and the infinite creativity of the human being.”

“It is this link that we must defend,” she continued. “We must respond to all those who seek to proscribe difference and the plurality of ideas, opinions and beliefs by protecting freedom through the wealth of our cultures and creative expressions.”

The World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in December 2002 and celebrated annually on 21 May, provides an opportunity for mobilization on the part of governments, policy makers, civil society organizations, communities and cultural professionals to promote culture in its diversity and in all its forms, according to UNESCO.

Special attention is given to national cultural policies that recognize the contribution of traditional knowledge, particularly when it comes to the protection of the environment and the management of natural resources.

For this year’s celebration, UNESCO has urged participants to engage in ten simple activities which, it says, can help boost appreciation for the world’s cultural diversity, including visiting art exhibits and museums devoted to other cultures, engaging in cultural activities from other countries, and experiencing the wealth of diverse religious traditions.

“In a diverse world, the destruction of cultures is a crime, and uniformity is a dead-end: our aim must be to enhance, in one movement, the diversity that enriches us and the human rights that bring us together,” concluded Ms. Bokova.

“This is what the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development means. It is an opportunity to unleash the creative potential of our different languages and traditions – and to ensure that these differences enrich and strengthen us, instead of dividing us.”
Canada’s deportation of Jamaican man with mental disability ‘cruel treatment’ – UN experts

21 May - After examining the case, a United Nations Committee has found that Canada’s deportation of a Jamaican man with a mental disability who had spent much of his life in Canada amounted to cruel and inhuman treatment, effectively leaving him without medical and family support.

The man, known by his initials A.H.G., 52, immigrated to Canada when he was 18 years old and was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in 1993. He was deported to Jamaica on 29 August 2011, after Canadian authorities ruled that he was not eligible to be in the country on the grounds of serious criminality, as a result of his conviction in 2005 of assault with a weapon.

In a statement released today, the Geneva-based Human Rights Committee said Canada should allow A.H.G. to return to Canada if he wished, and also give him adequate compensation.

In its findings, the 18-member Committee recognized Canada’s legitimate interest in protecting the public but highlighted that A.H.G.’s criminal offences were recognised to be related to his mental illness. The Committee experts noted that in 2005, after A.H.G. was evicted from his home and started living in shelters, he had difficulty taking his medication and experienced psychotic relapses.

The deportation of A.H.G., “a mentally ill person in need of special protection who lived most of his life in Canada, on account of criminal offences recognized to be related to his mental illness, and which has effectively resulted in the abrupt withdrawal of available medical and family support on which a person in his vulnerable position is necessarily dependent, constituted a violation by the State party of its obligations under article 7 of the Covenant,” the Committee deemed.

Today’s statement cited Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which states: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.” The Committee highlighted that that the aim of article 7 is to protect both the dignity and the physical and mental integrity of the individual.

The Canadian authorities had argued that A.H.G.’s removal was “reasonable in the circumstances and proportionate to the gravity of the crimes committed, and the danger posed to the Canadian public.”

The Human Rights Committee monitors implementation of the ICCPR by States parties. It considered this case under the First Optional Protocol to the Covenant which gives the Committee competence to examine individual complaints.
UN agency brings relief supplies to people displaced by conflict in western Libya

21 May - Ten trucks carrying vital relief supplies have crossed the border between Tunisia and Libya, as the United Nations hunger relief agency said today that it has resumed providing assistance in support of displaced people affected by the ongoing conflict in Libya.

“The violence and insecurity in Libya is continuing unabated and has led to massive population displacements and an increase in humanitarian needs,” said Wagdi Othman, World Food Programme (WFP) Emergency Coordinator for Libya. “As thousands of vulnerable people are displaced now, WFP is doing its utmost to support those people who have been left without sufficient access to food supplies.”

The trucks brought pasta, couscous, rice, and other food items to a warehouse operated by WFP’s partner, Shaikh Tahir Azzawi Charity Organization (STACO), as the UN agency begins assisting 51,000 vulnerable Libyans displaced in the west of the country.

The agency aims to provide life-saving assistance to a total of 243,000 internally displaced people in the country over the next six months and has established a partnership with another Libyan charity to start food distributions in the coming days to families who have left their homes the country’s east, especially Benghazi, which is the second largest city, and which has been hit hard by violence.

Since the beginning of this year WFP has reached 75,000 people throughout Libya with food assistance, but distributions were suspended in March and April due to lack of funding. With WFP’s emergency operation in Libya only 33 per cent funded, the organization needs to raise an additional US$14 million to ensure that its operation inside Libya continues uninterrupted.