Iraq: as Ramadi fighting intensifies, UN food agency rushes supplies to thousands displaced

22 May - As tens of thousands of people continue to flee fierce fighting in the Ramadi district of Iraq, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) is rushing food assistance there, a spokesperson confirmed in Geneva today, as she appealed for $108 million to continue operations in the country until October 2015.

Briefing reporters, WFP spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs warned that the agency could start running out of food and money for its voucher programme in areas with functioning markets in the coming months if no new contributions are received.

Almost 25,000 people have fled Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, following recent attacks by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and intense fighting in the city. Most of the displaced are heading towards Baghdad, with several thousands of families fleeing for the second time in a month.

Yesterday, some 25,000 people received emergency food assistance in Habbaniya, west of Baghdad, and supplies for 15,000 additional displaced people were en route for Amiriyat Al Fallujah, Ms. Byrs said.

Also yesterday, WFP completed distributions of monthly food rations to 28,500 people who had cooking facilities in Amiriyat Al Fallujah. Those family food parcels included wheat flour, sugar, cooking oil and rice.
Last week, WFP and its partners provided emergency supplies to more than 45,000 people in locations across the affected area. Since the Ramadi crisis started on 10 April, the WFP and its partners have assisted more than 208,000 people with three-day emergency food packages.

Ms. Byrs explained that the ‘three-day ready-to-eat’ rations are designed to meet the dietary needs of people on the move. Each ration includes canned meat, tahini, canned beans and fish, dates and bread. And WFP has pre-positioned emergency supplies with partners for distribution in order to assure a rapid response if needs should increase in the coming days.

WFP has carried out distributions to people fleeing the Ramadi conflict in Baghdad, Babil, Kerbala, Diyala, Wassit, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, as well as to the newly displaced in eastern Anbar governorate.

In 2014, the WFP reached 1.8 million displaced and conflict-affected people across Iraq’s 18 governorates and was aiming to provide monthly assistance to about the same number in 2015.

But due to significant funding shortfalls, WFP since April reduced the size of monthly family food rations it provided to displaced families outside camps, Ms. Byrs said.

Families who depended almost entirely on assistance because they live in camps would still receive full rations, she added.

As South Sudan fighting intensifies, UN rights chief warns of ‘persistent impunity’

22 May - The escalation of fighting in South Sudan has resulted in “alarming gross violations” of international human rights and humanitarian law as well as having exacted a terrible toll on the young nation’s civilian population, the United Nations human rights chief confirmed today.

South Sudan’s ongoing conflict began in December 2013 and has been marked by brutal violence against civilians and deepening suffering across the country. Some 119,000 people are sheltered in UN compounds there while the Organization estimates that the number of people in need for 2015 will include an anticipated 1.95 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and a projected 293,000 refugees.

In a press release, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein warned that for more than 17 months, millions of people across South Sudan had been “senselessly suffering through an entirely man-made catastrophe” which has robbed more than two million people of their homes and livelihoods and plunged and entire nation into violent instability.

“Over the past few weeks, the opposing parties have actually managed to make a terrible situation much, much worse,” Mr. Zeid declared. “I shudder to imagine how much more the humanitarian situation can worsen with the onset of the rainy season. The unrelenting, indefensible conflict in South Sudan should enrage the conscience of each and every one of us.”

In recent weeks, the fighting in the country has worsened considerably with reports of widespread killings, rapes, abductions and the burning and destruction of towns and villages throughout South Sudan’s Unity state.

In addition, UN human rights monitors have been denied access to various sites in the State by members of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLM/A) as they sought to verify the reports. Mr. Zeid urged the authorities to allow such access.

“Such persistent impunity has left many with unresolved grievances that are easily mobilized for renewed violence and revenge attacks,” the High Commissioner continued. “The fight against such impunity must be a priority if any peace in South Sudan is to hold.”

Mr. Zeid further warned the parties to the conflict that they must take all feasible measures to prevent harm to civilian lives...
and infrastructure, including personnel and premises of the United Nations and humanitarian agencies.

Earlier in the week, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon underscored that the renewed fighting between the SPLM/A and opposition and allied groups is unacceptable – part of a series of violations of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed by the parties on 23 January 2014, and undermines the ongoing Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) efforts to find a political solution to the conflict.

The Secretary-General called upon President Salva Kiir and former Vice-President Riek Machar to immediately cease all military operations and reminded them of their obligations to protect civilians under international human rights and humanitarian law, after two mortar bombs landed within the compound managed by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) on Tuesday.

**Boko Haram militants ‘must be brought to justice’ – UN chief**

22 May - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said he is deeply troubled by Boko Haram’s “continuing indiscriminate and horrific attacks” against the civilian populations of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, according to the United Nations.

In a statement released today, a UN spokesperson said Mr. Ban is appalled by the continued abductions and use of children as so-called “human bombs,” as well as by testimony that many of the girls and women held by Boko Haram are repeatedly raped while in captivity and compelled to marry their captors as part of the group’s ongoing campaign of forced imprisonment and sexual violence.

“The perpetrators of these despicable acts must be brought to justice,” the Secretary-General’s declared in the statement. “He regrets that in spite of the military gains made by the affected countries, Boko Haram continues its wanton destruction and killing of civilians.”

Sexual violence has been regularly employed by Boko Haram as a weapon against female populations. Some 276 girls were abducted by Boko Haram from their school in Chibok, located in Nigeria’s restive north-eastern Borno state, in April 2014, as the militant group ramped up brutal attacks targeting the African country’s children.

At the same time, Mr. Ban voiced deep concern over the further displacement of some 40,000 civilians in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria in the last three weeks and urged members of the Lake Chad Basin Commission and Benin “to create a secure environment for the safe and voluntary return, resettlement or integration of displaced persons and refugees.”

In addition, the statement said the Secretary-General urged the States involved in operations against Boko Haram to ensure that all measures taken to address the terrorist threat of Boko Haram are conducted in line with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law.

“To be remotely effective, the response to this threat has to go beyond a purely military one,” it continued. “Legitimate grievances, past and current human rights violations, and the root causes of the conflict must also be addressed.”
As thousands flee Syria’s besieged historic city of Palmyra, UN refugee agency readies response plan

22 May - The United Nations refugee agency and its partners are preparing aid for some 11,000 people fleeing the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra and surrounding villages which have been overrun by militant forces this week.

Situated in central Syria, Palmyra had been sheltering thousands of people forcibly displaced from other parts of Syria for the past three years. It was reportedly captured from the Syrian army on Wednesday, along with the nearby World Heritage-listed archaeological sites.

According to a news release issued today by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), about 8,000 people have found shelter in the village of Al-Qarayateen and a further 3,000 fled to nearby Furglus village.

“The displaced are staying with relatives or schools in the villages, which are located about 75 kilometres to the west of Palmyra,” Firas Al-Khateeb, UNHCR’s representative in Damascus said in the release.

He said that the Al-Birr Society, a local implementing partner, has started to distribute UNHCR aid and prepare reception centres and according to UNHCR, Al-Birr has reported that “people are arriving exhausted, scared and in increasing numbers.”

The refugee agency is now sending more relief supplies to Al-Qarayateen and Furglus to meet the rising needs, though UNHCR expects new arrivals will move further west towards the city of Homs. UNHCR teams in Homs first noticed an increase in the number of displaced people some weeks ago, when clashes began near Al-Sukhneh, about 70 kilometres north-east of Palmyra.

Last week, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, prepared two public buildings as shelters in Palmyra to host almost 1,000 people who had fled Al-Sukhneh. These people have since left Palmyra and moved to Al-Qarayateen.

UNHCR is working with sister UN agencies and NGO partners to deliver a response plan to the new displacement, expected to increase in the coming days.

Inscribed on the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List, the historic city of Palmyra contains the ruins of “one of the most important cultural centres of the ancient world.”

From the 1st to the 2nd century, the art and architecture of Palmyra, standing at the crossroads of several civilizations, married Graeco-Roman techniques with local traditions and Persian influences.

Earlier this week, UNESCO chief, Irina Bokova, reiterated her appeal for an “immediate cessation of hostilities” in the Syrian city, urging the international community “to do everything in its power to protect the affected population and safeguard the unique cultural heritage Palmyra.”

Some 12.2 million people, including 5.6 million children, need humanitarian assistance throughout Syria. And by conservative estimates, more than 220,000 Syrians have died in the conflict, but that number is likely much higher.
Marking International Day, UN urges world to seek end of obstetric fistula 'in our lifetime'

22 May - Obstetric fistula is a devastating yet completely preventable and, in many cases, treatable injury of childbirth, affecting at least two million women and girls worldwide and leaving them isolated from communities, the United Nations spotlighted ahead of the International Day to End Obstetric Fistula.

“The fact that fistula persists primarily among the poorest and most marginalized women and girls in the world is an egregious outcome of social, economic and gender inequalities, the denial of human rights and inadequate access to quality reproductive health services, including maternal and newborn care,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in his message on the Day, marked annually on 23 May.

“We have a moral obligation, as a global community, to complete the unfinished agenda of eradicating fistula,” he added.

Obstetric fistula is one of the most serious and tragic injuries that can occur during childbirth. It is a hole between the birth canal and the bladder or rectum caused by prolonged, obstructed labour without treatment. Sufferers often endure depression, social isolation and deepening poverty. Many women live with the condition for years – or even decades – because they cannot afford to obtain treatment. And up to 100,000 new obstetric fistula cases occur every year.

International Day to End Obstetric Fistula, marked worldwide on 23 May and with this year’s theme, ‘End fistula, restore women's dignity’ serves as an opportunity for world leaders to commit to ending the scourge of fistula in our lifetime.

Every fistula-affected nation needs to develop an inclusive and time-bound national strategy, Mr. Ban said, calling on the international community to significantly intensify support to nations with the greatest need.

An estimated 2 million women in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, the Arab region, and Latin America and the Caribbean are living with this injury, and some 50,000 to 100,000 new cases develop each year. Yet fistula is almost entirely preventable. Its persistence is a sign that health systems are failing to meet women’s essential needs.

Eradicating the scourge needs to be part of a far-reaching and inclusive sustainable development agenda to improve sexual and reproductive and newborn health, strengthen health systems, eliminate health inequities and increase levels and predictability of funding.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and its partners launched the global Campaign to End Fistula in 2003. In the 12 years since the effort began, UNFPA has supported over 57,000 fistula repair surgeries for women and girls in need, and Campaign partners have enabled many more to receive treatment.

Speaking on the ahead of the Day, UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin said that while significant gains have been made, many people, especially the poor and vulnerable, still lack access to quality sexual and reproductive health services, including life-saving emergency obstetric care.

“Women and girls living with fistula are among the most marginalized and neglected, and the persistence of fistula is a grave illustration of serious inequalities and the denial of rights and dignity,” he said.

As the world shapes a new development agenda, a new opportunity has presented itself to put the rights and dignity of women and girls – including the invisible, disenfranchised, and voiceless – at the heart of a people-centred and rights-based agenda, he said.

Dr. Osotimehin said that with the right combination of political will and leadership, financial commitment and scaling up of evidence-based, cost-effective, quality interventions, ending forced marriage and ensuring girls education as well as
voluntary family planning, it is possible to end the needless suffering of millions of women and girls.

“Let us decide, as a global community, that the world we want is one where fistula no longer exists,” he said, adding: “Let us, once and for all, put an end to this assault on women’s and girls’ health and human rights, which steals from them their very dignity and destroys the most fundamental of human qualities: hope.”

### Burundi: Ban applauds political dialogue as UN appeals for wider cholera relief efforts

22 May - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has voiced encouragement at the ongoing political dialogue in Burundi following weeks of tensions and a reportedly failed coup d’état in the country’s capital of Bujumbura, according to a United Nations spokesperson.

In a statement released earlier today, the UN spokesperson’s office said Mr. Ban applauded the dialogue participants – which includes representatives of civil society, political parties, religious organizations of the African Union, the East African Community, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region – for “the progress achieved so far in the discussions, especially on measures to reduce tensions and create propitious conditions for free, fair, inclusive and peaceful elections.”

The Secretary-General did, however, express concern about the ongoing humanitarian crisis involving the 200,000 Burundian refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries due to political turmoil and violence and who now appear to be caught in an emerging cholera outbreak.

In fact the head of the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, today warned that after the 12 year civil war that lasted from 1993-2005 and created hundreds of thousands of refugees, Burundi “does not need another crisis.”

“After the progress that had been made under the Arusha peace accords,” he said, “it is heart-breaking that people have to flee their country again.”

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

With the situation in Burundi remaining tense and with continued violence reported, aid agencies fear that the number of refugees may double over the next six months. And with the Tanzanian Government this week declaring a cholera epidemic in the Kigoma area of Lake Tanganyika where many of the refugees are, the situation has grown increasingly complicated and the urgency of implementing the response plan has increased.

Some 31 people have died from the disease so far, including 2 locals and 29 refugees. The deaths have been in the port town of Kigoma on Lake Tanganyika, in the nearby villages of Kagunga and Nyarugusu, and among people being transported by ferry from Kagunga to Kigoma.

Mr. Guterres praised the neighbouring countries for keeping their borders open and called on the international donor community to support the Regional Refugee Response Plan.

“The authorities and host communities have been very generous in welcoming the refugees and allowing them to share local resources,” he said. “I hope that the international community will match this generosity.”

Under the plan, participating agencies appeal for $207 million for basic protection and assistance activities until September 2015, when the plan will be reviewed. Providing clean water, sanitation and health services as well as shelter are the main priorities of the Regional Refugee Response Plan.
Yemen: UN rights office urges all parties to adhere to international law as civilian toll grows

22 May - As the number of civilian casualties in the Yemen conflict tops 1,000, the United Nations human rights office today urged all parties – coalition forces, the Yemeni armed forces, Houthis and other non-State armed groups – to adhere strictly to their obligations under international law and do all in their power to protect civilians.

At least 1,037 civilians, including 130 women and 234 children, lost their lives in Yemen between 26 March and 20 May, while at least another 2,453 civilians have been injured, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) announced today.

“There has also been massive destruction of civilian infrastructure, particularly in Aden and Sada‘ah,” Cécile Pouilly, OHCHR spokesperson told reporters in Geneva.

Ms. Pouilly said that while the five-day humanitarian pause between 12 May and 17 May provided some respite, there are still reports of ground combat and shelling, and millions remain in need of humanitarian assistance.

Following the pause, violence resumed in Yemen, including airstrikes in Aden, Ibb, Sada‘ah, Dhale, and Sana‘a. Reports suggest Sada‘ah and Sana‘a have been most affected by airstrikes while Taiz, Aden and Dhale are witnessing ground fighting.

She drew attention as well to the situation in prisons and rehabilitation facilities in Yemen.

“Many such facilities have been affected by airstrikes or by armed clashes. More than 4,000 inmates have fled while several have been killed or injured,” she added.

Conditions in correctional facilities in Yemen, many of which were chronically poor even prior to the current conflict, have deteriorated considerably.

“The general shortage of food and fuel means that prisoners lack access to sufficient food, electricity, water, proper sanitation facilities and necessary healthcare,” Ms. Pouilly said.

There has reportedly been an outbreak of diseases such as scabies and mycosis. Shortage of fuel has meant that waste management has been severely affected. Inmates have, in many cases, also been deprived of visits from lawyers or family members due to the ongoing conflict.

The OHCHR echoed UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s call for all sides to engage in the upcoming consultations in Geneva in good faith. It also urged an extension of the humanitarian pause, as a first step towards a permanent ceasefire and an end to all hostilities by all parties to the conflict.

The consultations, set to begin on 28 May in Geneva, will bring together a broad range of Yemeni Governmental and other actors, and follow extensive consultations by Mr. Ban’s Special Envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, together with strong expressions of support by the Security Council in several resolutions seeking a peaceful and Yemeni-led political transition process.

In addition, as many Yemeni parties as possible have been invited and Mr. Ban has urged participants to come without preconditions, according to the UN. The conference was expected to run for four to five days.
UN welcomes 200 people brought ashore but warns 3,500 more stranded in Southeast Asian waters

22 May - More than 200 people stranded off the Myanmar coast were brought to shore today, prompting the United Nations refugee agency to welcome the landing and appeal for the rescue of 3,500 others in distress at sea, saying “the priority is to save lives by getting people safely off these boats as soon as possible.”

The Office for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said it is working closely with partners to assist the Myanmar Government in ensuring that the needs of the 200 people who were taken to a reception centre – including water, food, medical assistance and protection – are immediately met.

“It’s estimated that up to 2,000 people are still stranded on boats in the Bay of Bengal, and a further 1,500 further to the south in the Andaman Sea area,” UNHCR said in a press release.

UNHCR said it has been in discussion with governments about the support it can provide since the announcement on May 20 by Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand that they would work together to assist people in the region in distress at sea.

The refugee agency said it had already beefed up its response in Indonesia’s Aceh and North Sumatra provinces, where most of the rescues had taken place. More than 1,800 Rohingya and Bangladeshis have arrived since 10 May.

In Malaysia – where over 1,100 people have arrived since 10 May – UNHCR has offered its assistance to the Malaysian authorities and is awaiting a response.

And in Thailand, UNHCR is distributing relief items to recent boat arrivals and others found after their jungle camps were abandoned by smugglers.

Refugee agency spokesperson Adrian Edwards, in response to a question earlier today at the UN press briefing in Geneva, Switzerland, about efforts to arresting the smuggling networks, explained that it was not a country-by-country based problem, but an international issue since those networks were transnational organizations and international criminals that could be defeated only through cooperation.
On International Day, Ban says biodiversity is essential to sustainable development, eradicating poverty

22 May - Variety of life on Earth is essential for the welfare of current and future generations, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today on the International Day for Biological Diversity, as he called on the international community to recommit to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss particularly as the United Nations prepares to adopt a new set of development goals.

“Protecting ecosystems and ensuring access to ecosystem services by poor and vulnerable groups are essential to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger,” Mr. Ban said in his remarks on the Day, marked around the world every year on 22 May, with the 2015 theme focusing on ‘Biodiversity for Sustainable Development.’

“The sustainable development goals and the broader post-2015 development agenda, which are under negotiation now, will provide an opportunity to mainstream biodiversity and promote transformational change in how economies and societies use and regard biodiversity,” he added.

Later this year, the post-2015 development agenda will be adopted by the world’s Governments at a high-level United Nations summit taking place during the opening of the substantive session of the General Assembly this coming September.

Mr. Ban said that reducing deforestation and land degradation and enhancing carbon stocks in forests, drylands, rangelands and croplands generate significant benefits and are cost-effective ways to mitigate climate change.

Hence, any sustainable development framework must provide conditions for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity for more equitable sharing of benefits.

The globally adopted Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and its Aichi Biodiversity Targets provide a model that Member States can use in considering how to implement the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. Meeting these targets and addressing biodiversity loss more generally can contribute significantly to the post-2015 development agenda.

Also speaking on the Day, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Braulio F. Souza Dias, said biodiversity serves as a critical foundation of the Earth's life support system on which the development and welfare of current and future generations depend.

“Biodiversity underpins all those ecosystem functions and benefits essential to human well-being, not only in terms of our economies, but also for our health, food security, prevention of natural hazards, and our cultural roots,” he added.

Mr. Souza Dias said that in the 21st century, conserving, restoring, enhancing and using the components of biodiversity sustainably can provide solutions to a range of challenges to sustainability and human well-being, including poverty eradication, food security, sustainable production and consumption, water security, disaster risk reduction and climate change.

Echoing the UN chief, Mr. Souza Dias said that reducing deforestation and ecosystem degradation, promoting ecosystem restoration and enhancing carbon stocks in forests, wetlands, drylands, rangelands and croplands are cost effective ways to mitigate climate change that generate other social and economic benefits.

“We will not be able to achieve sustainable development and the goals established in the post-2015 development agenda if we do not effectively respond to the objectives of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity and fail to achieve the Aichi Biodiversity Targets,” he emphasised.

Likewise, we will not achieve these internationally agreed goals for protecting and restoring biodiversity and using it sustainably and equitably if we fail to mainstream biodiversity firmly into the broader policies for sustainable development and in the implementation of those policies.
“The time for global action is now, by Governments, businesses, civil society, indigenous peoples, and by individuals. We owe it to future generations to ensure that biodiversity will provide them with the same benefits that we enjoy. That is truly the future we want, a future of life in harmony with nature,” he added.

**In Hanoi, UN chief lauds Viet Nam’s ‘impressive progress’ and leadership in field of development**

22 May - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today began a two-day visit to Viet Nam and commended President Trương Türk Sang for the “increasingly important role” his country is playing at the United Nations, including his efforts to combat climate change and in helping shape a new development agenda.

Mr. Ban also said the two leaders discussed regional security concerns, including the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea, “or East Sea as you call it here” and drew attention to the importance of all parties concerned to resolve their disputes through dialogue and in conformity with international law.

“It is important to avoid actions that would provoke or exacerbate tensions,” he said at a joint press encounter after meeting with the Vietnamese President.

“I hope the ongoing consultations between ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian States) Member States and China on the proposed Code of Conduct under the Framework of the ‘Declaration on the [Conduct] of Parties in the South China Sea’ will lead to increased mutual understanding between all parties.”

Mr. Ban also that tomorrow he will inaugurate the “Green One UN House,” which he said “is an example of how the UN and Viet Nam can work together to combat climate change and deliver as one for the people of Viet Nam.”

Saying he had a “very productive” meeting with the president, Mr. Ban commended Viet Nam for the “impressive progress” towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and “displaying leadership in the development of a set of holistic sustainable development goals (SDGs) to be adopted by the [UN] General Assembly in September.”

“We agreed that ensuring a smooth transition from the MDGs to the new sustainable development goals, SDGs, is a high priority for both the United Nations and Viet Nam,” he said.

The Secretary-General also said he discussed Viet Nam’s efforts to combat climate change, including Viet Nam’s efforts to move down a low-carbon pathway.

Saying that Viet Nam is vulnerable to the effects of climate change, he drew attention of the importance of submitting its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution as soon as possible.

“These plans,” he said, “will form the foundation of the climate agreement that we need to reach in Paris this December.”

Mr. Ban told reporters that Viet Nam served as a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 2008 to 2009 and is currently serving on the Human Rights Council for 2014 to 2016, reflecting “the increasingly important role it is playing in the United Nations at the global level.”
Nepal: UN health agency marks one month since devastating earthquake as it ramps up aid

22 May - Nearly one month after a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal, flattening large swathes of the country’s Kathmandu valley and affecting millions of people, the United Nations health agency is continuing its emergency response aimed at saving lives and addressing the urgent health needs of the Himalayan nation.

Marking the sombre milestone in a newsletter today, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that even though the initial tremors had subsided, the threat of disaster is far from over as monsoon season fast approaches.

“There are more challenges ahead – to urgently restore primary health care services, even temporarily, provide water proof medical tents, essential medicines and keep a strict vigil to rapidly respond to any disease outbreak,” Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh declared in the WHO circular.

“As media attention fades away, this is the time for WHO and partners to stand with Nepal and help the country build back a more resilient health system,” she added.

The 25 April earthquake, and its 7.3 magnitude follow-up on 12 May, damaged 26 of Nepal’s hospitals and over 1,100 health facilities while affecting some 5.6 million people, half of whom have been displaced. In addition, an estimated 8,500 people were killed by the two quakes.

Working closely with the country’s Government, the WHO has ramped up critical medical and health assistance across the devastated areas, enhancing disease surveillance through the creation of early warning response and alert systems and prioritizing assessment and outreach efforts to reach remote areas.

According to Dr. Khetrapal Singh, much of the WHO’s success in providing immediate relief has been down to the decades-long emergency preparation the UN agency has been engaged in with the Government of Nepal.

“Our pre-positioned essential medicines and medical supplies were made immediately available. Emergency funds were sanctioned almost immediately – within six hours of the earthquake – to meet the immediate financial needs and fill critical gaps in the aftermath of the disaster,” she continued.

“We are committed to support Nepal’s health system to deliver life-saving and essential services to its people and build back resilient health facilities that will be safe in emergencies.”
UN envoy continues Syria consultations, seeking views on launching political process

22 May - The United Nations Special Envoy for Syria has said today that consultations on the future of the country continued today, as he shared perspectives with several interested parties, according to a UN spokesperson.

Among those who met with Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura was the Islamic scholar Muhammad Al Habash, who shared his thoughts on methods and processes to facilitate a peaceful solution to the conflict, based on religious perspectives and traditions, according to UN spokesperson Farhan Haq.

Mr. Haq said the Special Envoy also met with Hind Kabawat and Asma Kftarou from a civil society organization called ‘Tastaqil,’ discussing the unacceptable suffering of the Syrian people and the urgent need to end violence and reach a political solution, and he also received a delegation from the Kurdish National Council, with whom he shared views on ways to end the conflict, with due respect for Syrian diversity while maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria.

The Spokesman said that Mr. de Mistura also met with Najla Riachi Assaker, the Permanent Representative of Lebanon to the UN in Geneva. They discussed ways to support Syria in launching a political process, as well as the urgent need to alleviate the humanitarian suffering and its impact on the neighbouring countries.

Mr. de Mistura also received with deep sadness news of the kidnapping of a priest, Father Jacques Mourad, yesterday in Homs, describing the “grave act” as being unfortunately not the first of its kind and “one of the sad consequences” of the raging conflict.

Adopting resolution, Security Council urges broader global cooperation to tackle illicit transfer of small arms

22 May - The United Nations Security Council today adopted a resolution urging stronger cooperation in stemming the “illicit transfer, destabilizing accumulation and misuse” of small arms and light weapons, underlining the suffering they caused to civilians.

The Council adopted the resolution by a vote of nine in favour to none against, with six abstentions. The text recognizes the importance of preventing the illicit transfers and sales of weapons and ammunition, including small arms and light weapons, to armed groups and criminal networks that target civilians and civilian objects.

As such, it identifies a wide range of areas in which international cooperation could be bolstered, recognizing the importance of well-targeted and monitored sanctions regimes, appropriate UN peacekeeping mandates, effective reintegration and demobilization programmes and security sector reform in that regard.

In the resolution, the members of the Council advocate the establishment or strengthening, as appropriate, of subregional and regional mechanisms for cooperation, coordination and information sharing, particularly cross-border customs cooperation and information exchange networks “in order to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit transfer, the destabilizing accumulation and misuse of small arms and small arms.”

The Security Council also considers it necessary that Member States put in place, if it does not exist, laws, rules and administrative procedures to allow them to effectively control the production of small arms and small arms within their jurisdiction and the export, import, transit or retransfer of such weapons.
It also urges Member States, relevant United Nations entities and intergovernmental organizations, regional and subregional organizations in a position to do so to cooperate and exchange information on persons suspected of trafficking.

Council members also strongly urge Member States that have not yet done so to take measures to regulate small arms brokering of small arms.

At a meeting of the Security Council on this issue last week, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons, and their ammunition, is the common factor in over 250 conflicts witnessed across the globe in the last decade, and pointed to 50,000 deaths along with displacement levels unseen since the Second World War as direct consequences of such violence.

“The recent entry into force of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) laid the foundations for a global framework of arms transfer controls, including for small arms and light weapons and ammunition,” said Ban Ki-moon. “A universal ATT, adequately implemented, is critical to removing the tools for armed conflict.”

In its resolution adopted today, the Security Council called on States to consider ratifying the Treaty or accede without delay.

UN rights expert urges Nauru to revoke measures that could ‘muzzle’ dissent

22 May - Voicing concern over recent amendments to the Criminal Code in Nauru which “unduly restrict” freedom of expression in Nauru, a United Nations expert on the issue today urged the Government to revoke such measures to fulfil its human rights obligations.

“These new laws could be used to muzzle dissenting opinions and deter human rights defenders, academics, journalists, students, politicians and civil society members”, David Kaye, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, warned today in a news release.

Ambiguous and imposing harsh penalties, the amended Criminal Code also includes up to seven years in prison for a wide range of legitimate expression, according to Mr. Kaye.

“Nauru should allow free space for expression without fear of criminal prosecution,” he said, adding that “it should lift all restrictions to access internet and social media, and facilitate access to the media in the country.”

Since April, the authorities have blocked access to social media and internet to prevent pornography and “cyberbullying” and to protect the national culture.

These restrictions, however, are “designed to prevent asylum seekers and refugees in the country from sharing information on their situation,” stressed the independent expert.

Mr. Kaye therefore called on the Government to revise norms to fulfil its human rights obligations.

Nauru has also curtailed the freedom of press. It imposed a prohibitive $6,500 fee for a single entry visa for foreign journalists in 2014.

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.
Funding shortage forces UN agency to halt housing allowance for Palestine refugees in Lebanon

22 May - A $100 monthly housing stipend per family for Palestine refugees who have fled war-torn Syria for Lebanon will be suspended because of lack of funds, prompting the UN agency assisting those refugees in the Middle East to urgently appeal to donors “to provide the bare minimum assistance” to protect Palestinians from “disastrous” risks such as detention, abuse and deportation.

“Starting July 2015, more than 43,000 Palestine refugees from Syria in Lebanon who receive monthly cash assistance of $100 per family towards housing and $27 per person towards food will stop receiving the cash assistance towards housing,” the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) said in a press release issued in Beirut, Lebanon.

UNRWA said cash assistance for food will continue for the coming few months, but the agency has exhausted all funding to support housing assistance for Palestine refugee families in Syria.

“This assistance is the main source of income for over 95 per cent of those refugees who have little access to livelihood opportunities or any public services,” said Matthias Schmale, UNRWA Director in Lebanon.

“Among all the refugees fleeing Syria to Lebanon, Palestinian refugees are particularly vulnerable, as they have very few alternatives for service provision and suffer from restrictions on their access to the job market,” Mr. Schmale said. “Moreover, because of their uncertain legal status they are at risk of detention, abuse and deportation. The suspension of the housing assistance will be disastrous for this already vulnerable community.”

He appealed to the donor community to mobilize resources to protect Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon from “unacceptable risks.”

“Faced with the reduction in humanitarian assistance, the living conditions of the Palestine refugees from Syria are likely to become even more volatile,” the UNRWA official said.

Mr. Schmale also warned that “we might see more and more Palestine refugees fleeing this harsh reality and trying to make their way across the Mediterranean to reach Europe.”

“I appeal to the international community to enable UNRWA to provide the bare minimum assistance so the Palestine refugees can live in dignity while they await a just solution for their plight,” he said.

UNRWA, which provides direct relief and works programmes for some 5 million Palestine refugees in the Middle East region, works closely with partners to mobilize resources for a scaled up humanitarian response in support of Palestine refugees from Syria in Lebanon as well as the Palestinian communities who were already in Lebanon before the Syria crisis.

The agency has appealed to donors to increase support through its Call for Funds seeking an immediate injection of $30 million. So far, the UNRWA Syria Crisis Appeal has received only 21 per cent of the funds needed for 2015 and chronic underfunding for humanitarian interventions in Syria continues to undermine the agency’s capacity to sustain life-saving emergency interventions.
Ban condemns deadly terrorist attack on Shia mosque in Saudi Arabia

22 May - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has strongly condemned the terrorist attack earlier today on a Shia mosque in the town of al-Qudaih in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

“The attack caused many deaths and injuries as people were gathering for Friday prayers,” a statement from Mr. Ban’s spokesman’s office confirmed.

“The Secretary-General stresses that such attacks on places of worship are abhorrent and intended to promote sectarian conflict. He hopes that the perpetrators will be swiftly brought to justice,” the statement added.

The Secretary-General also extended his sincere condolences to the families of the victims and expresses his sympathies to the Government and people of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.