UN report on 2014 Gaza conflict finds evidence of possible war crimes by both Israel and Palestinian groups

22 June - A new report released by a United Nations investigative panel on the possible commission of war crimes in Gaza during the 2014 conflict between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in the enclave, has gathered substantial information finding the allegations to be credible, the Organization’s human rights office announced today.

The report – issued today by the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza conflict – suggests that possible war crimes were committed by both Palestinian and Israeli armed groups during the 51-day conflict, which resulted in over a thousand deaths and the widespread destruction of the Gaza strip.

“The extent of the devastation and human suffering in Gaza was unprecedented and will impact generations to come,” Justice Mary McGowan Davis, the chair of the commission, told a press briefing held earlier today at the UN Office at Geneva. “There is also ongoing fear in Israel among communities who come under regular threat.”

According to the report’s findings, the 2014 hostilities saw a “huge increase” in the firepower used in Gaza with Israeli forces conducting more than 6,000 airstrikes and firing approximately 50,000 tank and artillery shells at targets within the enclave. The explosion of force used by Israel ultimately resulted in 1,462 Palestinian civilian casualties, a third of which were children.
Moreover, the fighting in Gaza also resulted in the massive destruction of civilian infrastructure with some 100,000 residents still homeless, according to recent UN estimates.

Much of the destruction, notes the UN report, could be blamed on Israel’s use of weaponry with a wide kill and injury radius, particularly in the densely populated areas of Gaza where destruction and casualties are very likely.

At the same time, the Commission reported that Palestinian militants had also fired 4,881 rockets and 1,753 mortars towards Israel in July and August of last year, killing 6 civilians and injuring at least 1,600 people.

As the fighting in Gaza raged throughout the summer of 2014, its impact also reverberated across the region, spreading terror among Israeli civilians and prompting outbursts of deadly violence in the West Bank, as well, where 27 Palestinians were killed and 3,020 injured in clashes with Israeli Security Forces.

In her summation of the report, Justice McGowan Davis observed that when the safety of an Israeli soldier is at stake, “all the rules seem to be disregarded.”

“Israel must break with its lamentable track record in holding wrong doers accountable,” the UN Commission of Inquiry’s assessment continued. “And accountability on the Palestinian side is also woefully inadequate.”

In addition, the UN inquiry said it remained “disturbed” by Israel’s decision to close a criminal investigation into the killing of four children on a beach in Gaza on 16 July. The Commission pointed out that international journalists and numerous Palestinian eyewitnesses were not interviewed by the Israeli authorities, raising further doubts about the thoroughness of their investigation.

“We were deeply moved by the immense suffering and resilience of the victims,” the UN Commission of Inquiry’s assessment concluded. “We just hope our report contributes in some small way to ending the cycle of violence.”

**If current trends hold, childhood obesity will hit 70 million by 2025, warns UN health agency**

22 June - Childhood obesity does not arise from lifestyle choices made by the child, the World Health Organization (WHO) said today, stressing that the huge problem, especially in developing countries on the marketing of sugar-rich non-alcoholic beverages, ultra-processed, energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods.

“Childhood obesity can erode the benefits that arrive with social and economic progress,” WHO Director General Dr. Margaret Chan told the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity, which is meeting in Hong Kong. “Childhood obesity must be accepted as a significant and urgent threat to health that is relevant in all countries. Governments must take the lead.”

Dr. Chan praised the interim report on the work carried out thus far by the Commission and commended the group’s warning that “voluntary initiatives are not likely to be sufficient.”

“To be successful, efforts aimed at reducing the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages need support from regulatory and statutory approaches,” she said.

She also noted that “perhaps most importantly, you defined a moral responsibility and stated where it must lie. None of the factors that cause obesity are under the control of the child.”

According to WHO, the number of overweight or obese infants and young children increased from 32 million globally in 1990 to 42 million in 2013. In Africa alone, the number of overweight or obese children increased from 4 to 9 million over the same period.
The WHO fact sheet on childhood obesity also said that the vast majority of overweight or obese children live in developing countries, and if current trends continue the number of overweight or obese infants and young children globally will increase to 70 million by 2025.

“Childhood obesity does not arise from lifestyle choices made by the child,” the WHO chief said. “It arises from environments created by society and supported by government policies. The argument that obesity is the result of personal lifestyle choices, often used to excuse governments from any responsibility to intervene, cannot apply to childhood obesity.”

She urged the Commission to turn its findings and new thinking into further recommendations and menus of policy options.

“Industry must have no say on the technical guidance issued by WHO,” she said. “And industry cannot participate in the formulation of public health policies. Both areas are prone to conflicts of interest. Both must be protected from influence by industries with a vested interest.”

And she flagged that “the biggest harm comes from the marketing of sugar-rich non-alcoholic beverages and ultra-processed, energy-dense, and nutrient-poor foods, which are often the cheapest and most readily available, especially in poorer communities.”

Dr. Chan said she looked forward to receiving the Commission’s next report, which will form the basis of a final round of consultations during the second half of this year.


The action plan will contribute to progress on nine global NCD targets to be attained in 2025, including halting of the global obesity rates in school-aged children, adolescents and adults.

**General Assembly awards first-ever UN Nelson Mandela Prize to nationals of Namibia and Portugal**

22 June - The President of the United Nations General Assembly announced today that the first-ever United Nations Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela Prize will be awarded to Dr. Helena Ndume, of Namibia, and Jorge Fernando Branco Sampaio, of Portugal.

“The prize recognizes the achievements of those who dedicate their lives to the service of humanity by promoting UN purposes and principles while honouring Nelson Mandela’s extraordinary life and legacy of reconciliation, political transition and social transformation,” said Sam Kutesa, President of the 69th session of the General Assembly, which established the prize on June 2014.

The entrusted Selection Committee decided that the inaugural award would be given to two laureates. The Nelson Mandela Prize is an honorary award that will be presented once every five years as a tribute to the outstanding achievements and contributions of two individuals (one female and one male).

According to the Assembly, Dr. Ndume is an ophthalmologist whose life’s work has been devoted to treating blindness and eye-related illnesses in Namibia and throughout the developing world.

Mr. Sampaio led the struggle to restore democracy in Portugal – including throughout his tenure as Lisbon’s Mayor from 1989 to 1995 and as the 18th President of the Republic from 1996 to 2006.

Nominations were received from a broad variety of sources – including UN Member and Observer States, entities and intergovernmental organizations.
On behalf of Member States and of himself, President Kutesa warmly congratulated the co-laureates and thanked the Selection Committee for its hard work and dedication.

Chaired by the Assembly President, the UN Selection Committee was composed of the Permanent Representatives of Algeria, Latvia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Sweden – representing the five UN geographical regional groups. The Permanent Representative of South Africa was an ex-officio member of the Committee and the UN Department of Public Information served as the secretariat.

The award ceremony will take place on 24 July 2015, at UN Headquarters in New York as part of the annual UN commemoration of International Nelson Mandela Day. The Day is typically celebrated on the late South African leader’s birthday, 18 July, when the UN joins a call by the Nelson Mandela Foundation to devote 67 minutes of time to helping others.

For 67 years Nelson Mandela devoted his life to the service of humanity — as a human rights lawyer, a prisoner of conscience, an international peacemaker and the first democratically elected president of a free South Africa.

**In the face of growing insecurity, Afghanistan still needs support, Security Council told**

*22 June* - It is absolutely clear that Afghanistan continues to need the support of the international community, as well as the sustained attention of the Security Council, Nicholas Haysom, the head of the UN mission in the country said today, warning the Security Council that there is no room for “complacency.”

“Since my last briefing, there has been progress in meeting Afghanistan’s challenges in three distinct but interrelated areas: economic, security and political,” Mr. Haysom reported, stressing that failure in any one of these areas would have consequences for the overall success of the Afghan transition.

Just, this morning, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), which Mr. Haysom heads condemned an attack in which a large car bomb, which detonated outside the Afghan Parliament buildings in Kabul, allowed gunmen to enter the compound.

As parliament members were meeting to vote on a new Afghan defense minister, a gunfight with police killed at least eight attackers and left a number of civilians injured. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

In a statement issued by his spokesperson, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon strongly condemned the assault on parliament “as yet another unacceptable attack on civilians in Afghanistan.”

In addition, just two days ago, 16 civilians, mostly women and children, were killed when a bus hit an improvised explosive device.

“Tragic though this is, sadly it was not an isolated incident, rather a typical event,” the Special Representative acknowledged, noting that intensification of the conflict was as predicted. There has been higher attrition on both sides, but the most tragic index of this intensification, he explained, is the toll on civilians – so far this year 4,216 civilians have been killed or injured.

“While the Government has repeatedly stated its readiness to engage in direct talks with the Taliban, what is still missing is a clear indication from the Taliban that they are ready to engage directly with the Government.”

It is thus critical, he underscored, that the international community as a whole, and the regional neighbors in particular, send the same message to all involved, unambiguously and forcefully: “the time to begin direct peace and reconciliation talks is now.”
The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have been undeniably stretched as they take on full security responsibilities, the UNAMA chief noted. While they face operational challenges, their commitment is beyond question and they are demonstrating resilience in the face of insurgent efforts to take and hold ground, he assured.

Foreign fighters from Afghanistan’s northern neighbors and elsewhere present a particular challenge. There also remains considerable concern that Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is seeking to establish a foothold, he underlined.

“This demands greater regional involvement and collaboration to address this shared threat. It seems inequitable that Afghanistan should be shouldering the burden of taking on terrorists whose point of origin and eventual destinations are its neighbors.”

The economic contraction that followed the withdrawal of international military forces also presents a continuing challenge to the Government to meet the fiscal gap; “the gap between the resources it can muster and the monies it must spend”, the UN official continued.

“At this time of continued low economic growth, we must also guard against the danger of an increasing shift into the illicit economy, particularly so in the case of burgeoning narcotics production,” he added.

On the political front, Mr. Haysom also reported modest progress, notably the appointment of 21 provincial governors, with an agreement secured on other significant appointments.

But the lack of clarity on the future of the current Wolesi Jirga [the lower house of the National Assembly] had caused “consternation”, he said, with the potential for “public discord”. Thankfully, the UNAMA chief highlighted, just three days ago, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani decreed an extension of the Wolesi Jirga until elections can be held.

**Security Council has ‘obligation to act now’ to protect civilians from ISIL – UN rights expert**

22 June - A United Nations expert appointed by the world body’s Geneva-based Human Rights Council appealed today for the Security Council to take immediate action to enforce international law and protect civilians living “in daily fear for their lives” in areas controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant group (ISIL) where “shocking crimes are being committed on an industrial scale.”

“The Security Council has an obligation to act,” Ben Emmerson, the Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of human rights while countering terrorism, was quoted as saying in a press release on the presentation of his latest report on the gross violations committed by ISIL and the pressing need for accountability.

“Given the reports of genocide, all members of the Security Council may now have a specific responsibility to take action to prevent this most serious of international crimes,” Mr. Emmerson said.

As a Special Rapporteur, Mr. Emmerson is independent from any Government and serves in his individual capacity, works on a voluntary basis, is not UN staff and does not receive a salary for their work.

He noted that, so far, the UN Security Council has only determined that ISIL represents a threat to international peace and security and it has stressed the need to bring perpetrators to justice. “But the Council has conspicuously failed to either authorise military action under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, or to refer the situation in Iraq and Syria to the International Criminal Court,” he said.

“States are under an obligation to take measures to protect civilian populations from widespread and systematic acts of violence and terrorism,” Mr. Emmerson concluded. “It is essential that any response be grounded in respect for international law, including international humanitarian law, international human rights law and refugee law.”
He went on to say that “whether these dreadful crimes qualify as genocide or not, the time has come to recognize that permanent members [of the Security Council] have a responsibility to refrain from using their veto powers to block action aimed at ending atrocity crimes.”

“This approach now has the support of many States, civil society organisation and entities of the UN,” he noted, adding that “this mandate also unequivocally supports efforts to bring about this desperately need reform.”

Mr. Emmerson described in his report how different entities have found clear evidence of persecution and summary execution of religious and ethnic minority communities on a mass scale, arbitrary execution of community leaders, journalists, intellectuals and others, mass disappearances, forced religious conversions and systematic torture.

“As many as 700 people were reportedly murdered in one such massacre,” according to the press release on the report.

According to the report, the enforcement of summary justice in areas under ISIL control includes public beheading, shooting, stoning, lashing and amputation.

“Mutilated corpses are put on public display as a deterrent,” it said. “Systematic gender-based violence, rape and sexual slavery are a part of everyday life. Homosexual men are routinely targeted on grounds of their sexuality.”

In addition, children have been subjected to summary execution, arbitrary detention and torture, and forced to take part in military training, and significant religious and cultural sites have been systematically destroyed.

“In short, those living under the terror of ISIL are in daily fear for their lives,” Mr. Emmerson said. “These shocking crimes are being committed on an industrial scale and amount to an affront to the conscience of the entire international community.”

**In Europe, UN chief praises Luxemburg’s commitment on development issues**

22 June - Currently in Europe, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon made an official visit to Luxembourg, where he met with a number of Government officials, including the Prime Minister, Xavier Bettel.

The UN chief conveyed to Mr. Bettel his appreciation for Luxemburg’s important commitment to development aid and the European Union's leadership towards reaching a meaningful agreement on climate change in Paris.

“In addition to exchanging views on efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Ukraine, both men had an in-depth discussion on the priorities for Luxemburg’s upcoming Presidency of the EU Council,” according to a readout made available by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson in New York.

Mr. Ban also took the opportunity to emphasize the importance of ensuring a success at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, set to take place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in July, a subject he also discussed with the President of Parliament of Luxembourg, Mars Di Bartolomeo.

Both men had an “in-depth” discussion on the negotiations on the UN post-2015 development agenda and the role of national parliaments in that context, the Secretary-General expressing appreciation for Luxemburg’s “strong and continuous commitment” to development aid.

In addition to discussing climate change, Mr. Ban raised with his interlocutors the issue of migration through the Mediterranean, as well as the European Union’s response to the crisis.
Later in the day, Mr. Ban had an audience with the Grand Duke Henri of Luxembourg, during which both men reviewed the state-of-play in the negotiations on the UN post-2015 development agenda, along with other issues.

The UN chief thanked Luxembourg for its assistance to Mali and to the Central African Republic, where the UN is actively involved through its peacekeeping operations and, more generally, the “positive and sustained contribution” Luxembourg has made to the UN since its foundation.

The Secretary-General also met today with Jean Asselborn, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Luxembourg, Romain Schneider, Minister of Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Affairs, and Carole Dieschbourg, Minister of Environment.

Central African Republic: Ban appoints panel to investigate UN response to sexual abuse allegations

22 June - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has appointed a panel to investigate the response of the United Nations to allegations of sexual abuse surrounding a deployment of foreign military forces in the Central African Republic (CAR), a spokesperson for the Organization has announced.

In a statement issued earlier this afternoon, the UN spokesperson confirmed that the Secretary-General remains “deeply concerned” by the allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse of children committed by foreign military forces not under UN command, as well as the Organization’s own response to the allegations.

The three-member panel – which will include Marie Deschamps of Canada; Hassan Bubacar Jallow of Gambia; and Yasmin Louise Sooka of South Africa – will aim to review both the allegations and the UN response and any shortcomings in existing procedures covering serious crimes by the Organization and related personnel, host State forces and non-State actors that it may become aware of during its review.

The panel will also conduct its work independently and will receive unrestricted access to all UN records and full access to staff members and other UN personnel, the statement added.

“The UN will make its best efforts to facilitate the access of the panel to non-UN personnel,” the spokesperson’s statement continued. “In addition to those that the panel may reach out to, any person who wishes to provide information relevant to the External Independent Review is encouraged to contact the panel directly through an external email address that will be announced shortly.”

The three panel members will begin their work in July and aim to submit a report within ten weeks and will operate with the mandate to make recommendations on how the UN should respond to similar allegations in the future.
South Sudan: UN mission reports five people injured in shooting at Juba marketplace

22 June - The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) today reported that five internally displaced persons (IDPs) – four women and one man – were shot during an incident early Saturday evening.

That shooting took place at a market area adjacent to the site where the UN provided civilians protection in Juba, the capital.

Seriously wounded, four of the victims were taken to a clinic inside the UN site for medical treatment.

“Another two displaced people were injured as they fled the scene of the shooting. UNMISS is investigating the incident,” stressed the UN Spokesperson during a press briefing today.

Meanwhile, for the 6th consecutive day, UN aircrafts have been denied permission to land at the Mission’s county support base in the Upper Nile State town of Nassir by armed opposition forces.

The amount of supplies for the UNMISS personnel stationed at the Nassir base is reaching critically low levels as a result of the inability to operate flights into Nassir, warned the Spokesperson.

Since the beginning of the year, some 60,000 civilians have fled the country, mostly to Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda bringing the total number of people who fled since the start of the conflict December 2013 to 555,000. Some 1.5 million are internally displaced and more than 3.8 million – a third of the country’s population of 11 million – do not have sufficient food.

Nepal: in earthquakes' wake, UNICEF speeds up response to prevent child trafficking

22 June - At least 245 children have been intercepted from being trafficked and unnecessarily or illegally placed in children's care homes since the first earthquake hit Nepal almost two months ago, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has reported.

The children's agency is working with the Government and the Nepal Police to reduce the risk of trafficking through targeted action and policy measures.

“UNICEF feared a surge in trafficking cases after the two earthquakes”, said Tomoo Hozumi, a UNICEF representative in Nepal over the weekend. “Loss of livelihoods and worsening living conditions may allow traffickers to easily convince parents to give their children up for what they are made to believe will be a better life.”

The traffickers, he stressed, promise education, meals and a better future. But the reality is that many of those children could end up being “horrendously exploited and abused”, Mr. Hozumi warned.

Trafficking was rife in Nepal even before the 25 April earthquake, with an estimated 12,000 children trafficked to India every year, according to a 2001 International Labour Organisation (ILO) study.

Girls not recruited into prostitution could be also sold as domestic slaves in India and other countries and boys taken into forced labour. After disasters such as earthquakes, there is a risk that trafficking will increase.
Families may also be more easily convinced to send their children to orphanages in Kathmandu and Pokhara, UNICEF noted, a trend that began following the civil war with promises of safety and education.

Prior to the Nepal earthquake, approximately 15,000 children lived in child care homes in Nepal, and were potentially at risk of poorly-regulated adoption, exploitation and abuse. More than 85 per cent of these children had at least one living parent.

UNICEF has been working closely with the Nepalese government – who has suspended international adoption right after April 25 – and other partners to speed up and bolster the response on child trafficking prevention, including by supporting the police to establish or strengthen almost a hundred checkpoints and police stations throughout the country and the earthquake affected districts.

The Funds is also providing support to national NGOs, as well as all relevant actors, to confirm that all alleged cases of trafficked are verified and all children accounted for through the strengthening of information management and coordination systems.

In addition, UNICEF has spearheaded an awareness and public information campaign on child protection in Nepal following the earthquakes. To date, 40,000 flyers on prevention of family separation and trafficking have been distributed in all 14 affected districts, including to police stations, IDP camps, communities and local organisations.

To raise awareness on the negative consequences of ‘Orphanage Voluntourism’, UNICEF has been working closely with the tourism and volunteering sectors. Forty national and international agencies that recruit volunteers for orphanages in Nepal have been identified and encouraged to discontinue their orphanage volunteering programmes, eight of them already having suspended their volunteering programmes in Nepal.

“To re-build damaged rural communities and keep families together is the best way to help children in Nepal to recover from the earthquake,” Mr Hozumi concluded.

As Burundi elections draw near, Ban sends Special Envoy in support of regional efforts

21 June - Concerned by the political crisis in Burundi, “which threatens to undo more than a decade of work to consolidate peace and reconciliation in the country”, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced today the arrival in Bujumbura of his Special Representative and Head of the UN Regional Office for Central Africa, Abdoulaye Bathily.

“The Secretary-General has requested [Mr. Bathily] to offer good offices in Burundi in support of regional efforts to reduce tensions and help Burundians peacefully settle their differences. Special Representative… will work closely with the African Union, the East African Community and the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region. He will arrive in Bujumbura on Sunday, 21 June”, reads a statement from the UN Spokesperson.

The UN Chief also welcomed the communiqué of the meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Council, held on 13 June, at the level of Heads of State and Government, which provides “a clear way forward towards peaceful and credible elections in Burundi.”

Mr. Ban expressed deep gratitude to his Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Said Djinnit, for his “tireless efforts” “impartially” facilitating the dialogue among Burundian stakeholders during May and June of this year.

As elections draw near, the Secretary-General called on all Burundian political leaders to address the current political crisis with the highest sense of responsibility, urging them to resume political dialogue “earnestly”, with a view to creating an environment conducive for peaceful, credible and inclusive elections.

Burundi’s elections are scheduled for July 15.
Afghanistan: UNAMA condemns killing of 16 civilians by improvised explosive device

21 June - The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has condemned today the killing of 16 civilians, and injuring of several others, when their minibus hit an improvised explosive device (IED) on Saturday.

Mostly women and children, the victims were members of three families returning to their village, having fled violent clashes between anti-Government elements and Afghan National Security Forces earlier the same day.

“It's an outrage that explosive devices continue to be planted in areas where the likelihood of civilian death and injury is high,” said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan.

“Yesterday's incident shows how those who flee violence, especially women and children, are particularly vulnerable. Parties to the conflict must ensure the safe passage of civilians fleeing the fighting and immediately cease the use of indiscriminate weapons.”

The explosion, which occurred in the Marja district of the southern province of Helmand, killed 11 women, three children and two men, with an additional four children and three men sustaining injuries.

IEDs were the second leading cause of civilian casualties in Afghanistan in 2014. Next month, UNAMA will release its 2015 mid-year report on the protection of civilians, including detailed reporting on civilian casualties.

UNAMA emphasizes that international humanitarian law explicitly prohibits the use of weapons whose effects may not be limited, and obliges parties to the conflict to ensure the safety of civilians fleeing violence.

Celebrating first International Day, UN says Yoga can boost public health and promote peaceful relations

21 June - The first International Day of Yoga is being celebrated around the world today following recognition by the United Nations General Assembly that the holistic benefits of the ancient Indian practice and its inherent compatibility with the principles and values of the UN.

The inaugural Day has been be marked this morning with an outdoor event at UN Headquarters in New York that was webcast to thousands in New York's Times Square.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who has praised yoga for promoting respect for one's fellow human beings and for the planet we share, spoke this morning at the event, which also featured a yoga demonstration.

“I am hoping that if yoga promotes physical dexterity, it can also promote diplomatic dexterity. In my job as Secretary-General of the United Nations, I have to be agile all of the time!” he said in front of the crowd.

Quoting Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, he stressed that “yoga is not just about exercise; it is a way to discover the sense of oneness, with yourself, the world and nature”.

Also attending the UN event was the President of the 69th session of the General Assembly, Sam Kutesa.
In a message issued in advance of the International Day, Mr. Ban recalled how he had had the opportunity to practice yoga during a visit to India this year.

*Produced by UN Radio. Photos by Stephanie Coutrix, Mark Garten and Victorine Sandkuyl. Credit: UNTV*

His first 'asana', or pose, he said was the tree pose, “suited to beginners.”

“It took a moment for me to gain my balance but once I did, I appreciated the simple sense of satisfaction that yoga can bring,” the Secretary-General said.

“Yoga offers a simple, accessible and inclusive means to promote physical and spiritual health and well-being,” he said. “It promotes respect for one's fellow human beings and for the planet we share. And yoga does not discriminate; to varying degrees, all people can practice, regardless of their relative strength, age or ability.”

“On this first-ever International Day of Yoga, let us see the benefits of this practice in terms of individual well-being as well as our collective efforts to improve public health, promote peaceful relations and usher in a life of dignity for all,” the UN chief said.

The annual day was established in 2014 by the UN General Assembly, which recognized “that yoga provides a holistic approach to health and well-being.” The draft resolution establishing the day world was proposed by India and endorsed by a record 175 member states. The proposal was first introduced by Prime Minister Modi in his address during the opening of the 69th session of the General Assembly.

The resolution notes “the importance of individuals and populations making healthier choices and following lifestyle patterns that foster good health.”

On the eve of the International Day of Yoga, the Secretary-General met with the Minister for External Affairs of India, Ms. Sushma Swaraj. They both noted the broad support and appeal for this particular event.

The UN Chief and the Minister discussed the challenges of climate change and sustainable development, and the need for India's strong leadership in these fields. They also talked about the newly released Report of the High-Level Panel on Peace Operations, with the Secretary-General noting India's generous contributions in this area.

Mr. Ban and Ms. Swaraj then exchanged views on a number of regional issues, including Nepal, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Pakistan.

And today, the Secretary-General met with Yang Jiechi, State Councilor of the People's Republic of China. Their discussion touches a number of key issues, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, climate change, and the financing for development agenda.

Mr. Ban commended China's "constructive role" around the reducing tension in the Korean Peninsula and encouraged the country to support United Nations humanitarian work in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Mr. Jiechi and Ban also exchanged views on the critical situation in Yemen and Syria, as well as on the Iran nuclear issue and on the need to counter violent extremism.
Mali: Ban welcomes signing of peace agreement by remaining parties

20 June - UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed Saturday the signature, earlier today, of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali by the Coordination coalition of armed groups in Bamako.

“The Secretary-General notes that signature by all parties paves the way for the full and timely implementation of the Peace Agreement. The ultimate responsibility for peace lies with Mali and the Malians, and [he] urges all parties to continue to work in good faith to advance progress, and to fully implement the provisions of the ceasefire,” reads a statement made available by the UN Spokesperson.

Mr. Ban congratulates the Malian parties and the Algeria-led Mediation team for their efforts “to bring the signing process to a successful completion.” The Agreement had already been signed by the Government of Mali and the Platform coalition of armed groups on 15 May.

The statement reiterates that the United Nations stands ready to support the parties in the implementation of the Agreement, in close cooperation with the Government and members of the international Mediation team.

“The Secretary-General encourages all partners of Mali to assist efforts to bring about a just and lasting peace in the country, including through the provision of support for the implementation of the agreement.”

Despite positive developments on the ground, the situation in Mali has long remained a challenge. The country's Government has been seeking to restore stability and rebuild following a series of setbacks since early 2012, including a military coup d'état, renewed fighting between Government forces and Tuareg rebels, and the seizure of its northern territory by radical Islamists. In addition, the country has been consumed by a series of humanitarian crises.

Throughout much of this time, Mali's north has remained restive and, in recent months, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) and its “blue helmets” have come under repeated violent attack.

Yesterday, the Platform armed groups announced their decision to withdraw from the town of Menaka, in the region of Gao, in accordance with the arrangements for a cessation of hostilities.
On World Refugee Day, UN chief appeals for hearts to be open to refugees everywhere

20 June - With one in every 122 human beings a refugee, internally displaced or seeking asylum United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is marking World Refugee Day by calling urgently on “governments and societies around the world to recommit to providing refuge and safety to those who have lost everything to conflict or persecution.”

Meanwhile, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has launched a social media campaign urging people to get involved on the Day, marked annually on 20 June, to introduce individual refugees such a Syrian saxophonist in Thailand to an Afghan architect in Greece to give a face to the millions of families who have fled their homes to escape war or human rights abuses.

In his message on the Day, The Secretary-general noted that at the end of 2014, 59.5 million persons, the highest number on record, were forcibly displaced around the globe.

“The ongoing conflict in Syria, as well as crises in Iraq, Ukraine, South Sudan, Central African Republic, north-eastern Nigeria and parts of Pakistan, have led to a staggering growth and acceleration of global forced displacement,” he said.

“In 2014, 42,500 people became refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced every single day, a rate that has quadrupled in only four years,” he said. “At the same time, many long-standing conflicts remained unresolved and the number of refugees who were able to return home last year was the lowest in over three decades.”

The UN chief reminded the world that many of those displaced have had “no choice but to try and reach safety using dangerous means, such as has been demonstrated by the sharp increase in irregular boat movements in the Mediterranean, South-East Asia and elsewhere. “

“At times like these, it is essential that Governments and societies around the world recommit to providing refuge and safety to those who have lost everything to conflict or persecution,” he said.

Saying “refugees are people like anyone else, like you and me,” Mr. Ban said, “on this World Refugee Day, let us recall our common humanity, celebrate tolerance and diversity and open our hearts to refugees everywhere.”

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Syria is the world's biggest producer of both internally displaced people (7.6 million) and refugees (3.88 million at the end of 2014). Afghanistan (2.59 million) and Somalia (1.1 million) are the next biggest refugee source countries.

Ahead of the Day, UNHCR released its latest Global Trends: World at War, which revealed that one in every 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. If this were the population of a country, says UNHCR, it would be the world's 24th largest.

“We are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres declared in a press release issued Thursday on the report's release.

“It is terrifying that on the one hand there is more and more impunity for those starting conflicts, and on the other there is seeming utter inability of the international community to work together to stop wars and build and preserve peace,” he added.

“With huge shortages of funding and wide gaps in the global regime for protecting victims of war, people in need of
compassion, aid and refuge are being abandoned,” Mr. Guterres continued.

“For an age of unprecedented mass displacement, we need an unprecedented humanitarian response and a renewed global commitment to tolerance and protection for people fleeing conflict and persecution.”