Palestinian conflict continues to destroy human life, dignity – UN rights official

23 March - Violations of human rights “fuel and shape the conflict” in the occupied Palestinian territories, a senior United Nations official reported to the Human Rights Council today.

“Human rights violations in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are both cause and consequence of the military occupation and ongoing violence, in a bitter cyclical process with wider implications for peace and security in the region,” said Flavia Pansieri, the UN’s Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Ms. Pansieri presented a total of six documents to the Council, which is meeting in Geneva, including reports by the Secretary-General and High Commissioner for Human Rights on Israeli settlements and on the human rights situation in the territories occupied by Israel.

“Secretary-Generals and High Commissioners have over many years made numerous constructive recommendations to all duty-bearers to improve human rights and protect civilians from violence and insecurity,” she said. “Tragically, most of these recommendations have been ignored, and the conflict continues to destroy human life and dignity.”

The establishment and expansion of settlements in the context of the Israeli occupation are at the centre of many of the ongoing human rights violations in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Ms. Pansieri said, adding that they “fragment the Palestinian landscape and limit freedom,” while undermining Palestinians’ right to self-determination, which is “at the heart” of the two-State solution.
Settler violence had not been adequately addressed and it fostered a climate of impunity, she continued. A dramatic increase in Palestinian deaths and injuries because of Israeli security forces’ operations led both the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner to reiterate concerns about excessive use of force in law enforcement operations.

The official said events in Gaza between 12 June and 26 August 2014 were part of an “alarming” third escalation of hostilities in seven years, with Palestinians across the Gaza Strip continuing to feel their devastating consequences.

“They also raised serious questions regarding respect by Israel of its obligations under international humanitarian law,” she said, citing Israel’s obligations “to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives; its obligation to ensure that attacks are proportionate; and its obligation to maintain the principles of distinction and precaution.”

Palestinian armed groups in Gaza were also involved in “clear violations” of international humanitarian and human rights law, she added.

With the ceasefire having ended the fighting but not the suffering of the people in Gaza, she pointed to the Secretary-General’s repeated calls on the international community to meet commitments and pledges on Gaza’s reconstruction made at the Cairo conference. Without reconstruction, violations of core economic, social and cultural rights would continue.

“The current stand-off serves no one’s interests,” she said, noting that both Israelis and Palestinians live in fear of another escalation.

She underlined the importance of accountability to breaking the cycle of violence, human rights violations and impunity and to prevent future violations.

“Investigations carried out by Israel are a positive step, but they should not be limited to a few selected incidents,” she said, stressing that they should address failures to ensure respect for international law at the policy level. “In light of persistent impunity regarding past operations, doubts persist about the Israeli authorities’ willingness to ensure accountability.”

She added that the prospect of International Criminal Court involvement could prompt improvements in domestic accountability mechanisms in accordance with the Rome Statute’s provisions on complementarity.

Ms. Pansieri also underlined her concerns about ill-treatment and arbitrary detention by Palestinian security agencies but added that Palestine’s accession to several international treaties offered an opportunity for Palestinian duty-bearers to address human rights concerns.

**Central African Republic in ‘urgent need’ of agricultural assistance, warns UN agency**

Women process cassava for food preparation in Mbaiki, Central African Republic. $6.2 million is urgently needed to prevent further worsening of the food security situation. Photo: FAO/Riccardo Gangale

23 March - The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has launched an urgent appeal to help provide farmers in the Central African Republic (CAR) with seeds and tools for the country’s upcoming planting season, warning that without additional assistance vulnerable populations risked a further deterioration of their livelihoods.

In a news release issued today, the UN agency reported that some 1.5 million people in CAR remain food insecure amid ongoing hostilities throughout the country and cautioned that the figure was likely to rise should immediate support not be provided.

“The smooth implementation of the agriculture campaign activities is key to contribute to the decrease of political tensions, of which the main cause is extreme poverty,” said FAO’s Representative in CAR, Jean-Alexandre Scaglia. “Agriculture remains the most important source of income for the majority of the population in the country.”

More than two years of civil war and sectarian violence have displaced thousands of people in CAR. According to UN
estimates, nearly 440,000 people remain displaced inside the country while some 190,000 have sought refuge across the borders.

In December, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous warned of a potentially explosive situation in CAR amid continuing violent clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka alliance and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian.

Mr. Scaglia noted that ensuring planting during the upcoming season, along with longer-term resilience activities, provided an opportunity to contribute to the country’s peace efforts and “should not be missed.”

Currently, FAO has secured funding to assist 86,400 households but it is appealing for an additional $6.2 million to support a further 63,600 households for the upcoming main planting seasons starting in April.

As a result of the effort, each family will receive critical agricultural aid such as seeds and farming tools to cover food needs for up to five months, reduce dependence on humanitarian assistance and stabilize their incomes.

The alternative, the agency said, would be a worsening of the country’s “significant food shortages” and population movements increasing latent tensions.

**New UN-backed report finds ‘far too high’ levels of elephant poaching across Africa**

23 March - An ongoing decline in overall elephant numbers remains likely as the poaching of African elephants continued to exceed population growth rates throughout 2014, a new United Nations-backed report warned today.

“African elephant populations continue to face an immediate threat to their survival from high-levels of poaching for their ivory, especially in Central and West Africa where the situation appears to have deteriorated,” said John E. Scanlon, Secretary-General of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The latest figures released by CITES’ programme for Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants, otherwise known as MIKE, show no increase in the overall poaching trends in 2014 with levels dropping and then levelling off since the peak in 2011. However, with overall killing rates exceeding natural birth rates, “poaching trends remain far too high and at a level that cannot be sustained,” said a CITES press release.

In its report, CITES identifies 22 countries that are most heavily implicated in the illegal trade in ivory, with areas such as Bangassou, in the Central African Republic; Garamba, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Niassa, in Mozambique; Pendjari, in Benin; and Selous-Mikumi, in Tanzania, remaining of “particular concern.”

“These poaching trends highlight the need to redouble efforts to mitigate the problem by addressing demand for illegal ivory, strengthening management and ensuring sustainable livelihoods for people who live with elephants,” said Julian Blanc, head of the MIKE programme.

Mr. Scanlon nonetheless admitted that despite the downbeat assessment, there were also some “encouraging signals” in parts of East Africa, where overall poaching trends appeared to have declined, indicating “what is possible through a sustained and collective effort.”

“The momentum generated over the past few years is translating into deeper and stronger efforts to fight these crimes on the front line, where it is needed most – from the field, to police and customs, to illicit markets,” he continued.

“And this enhanced front line effort gives us confidence that if we persist with, and deepen this collective effort, we will
reverse the devastating poaching trends of the past decade.”

**On World Meteorological Day, UN chief stresses need to mitigate climate change patterns**

23 March - With extreme weather and changing climatic patterns taking a heavier toll on the planet, mitigating and adapting to them remains “among the great tests of our time,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today, as he stressed the need for timely, reliable information to further strengthen resilience.

“Climate change is increasing the intensity and frequency of these extremes and threatening water and food security in many parts of the world,” Mr. Ban said in his message for World Meteorological Day.

“In the last three decades, floods, storm surges, droughts and wildfires have taken a huge toll in lives and caused massive economic losses. The devastation caused by Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu and other parts of Oceania is just the latest example of how catastrophic weather extremes can be,” he added.

World Meteorological Day commemorates the coming into force on 23 March 1950 of the convention establishing the UN World Meteorological Organization (WMO). This year’s theme for the Day, ‘Climate Knowledge for Climate Action,’ highlights both recent advances in climate science and the need for decisive measures to limit climate change.

Mr. Ban noted that over the last 12 months, thousands of lives have been saved around the world by improved weather forecasting, early warning systems and disaster readiness. The economic benefits of climate services such as seasonal outlooks have been worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Timely, reliable and accessible information for further decision-making and action remains critical and is the aim of the Global Framework for Climate Services, initiated by WMO to facilitate the use of climate information to reduce disaster risk, promote food and water security, and safeguard public health.

In conjunction with the Day, WMO released its report on the Status of the Climate in 2014, which provides details of weather extremes last year and the impacts of climate change. WMO has already said that 2014 was the hottest year on record, but only by a very small margin.

“The climate knowledge that has been built in the last decades is an invaluable resource and a prerequisite for decision-making and for climate action,” said WMO Secretary-General Michel Jarraud.

“Multiple lines of evidence – from mounting temperatures to shrinking glaciers, from sea-level rise to weather extremes – give us high confidence that the climate is changing and that this is largely due to human activities, in particular the emissions of greenhouse gases that every year reach record high levels,” he added, warning that the “cost of inaction is high and will become even higher if we do not act immediately and resolutely.”

The Day is being marked with ceremonies and events, including at WMO headquarters in Geneva, Argentina and France, to showcase the contribution of National Meteorological Services to safety, well-being and sustainable development.
In Brussels, UN envoy says continued dialogue critical for Libyan peacebuilding

23 March - Stakeholders must work together to take Libya out of its “mess of a war” and begin rebuilding the conflict-ridden country into a modern, democratic state, a senior United Nations official said today.

Speaking to the press following a series of meetings with Libyan officials, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Bernardino Léon, said that the time had come to transition from aspirations for a peaceful Libya to “real achievements,” adding that the international community was prepared to help Libyans with humanitarian assistance.

“We need you to tell us concretely what the needs are and how we can work together,” Mr. Léon recounted in his remarks to reporters in Brussels. “It is not going to be easy in some cases, but militias have to understand that they cannot take the country hostage forever. They have to leave room for the lives of the citizens to start again – for the normal life to come back.”

The meeting brought together representatives of Libyan municipalities and local councils and included Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as part of a “five track” UN-facilitated dialogue process aimed at bringing peace and stability to Libya.

The other four tracks, according to UNSMIL, include dialogues with tribal leaders, political parties, militias and armed groups, and the army and are currently ongoing.

Mr. Léon explained that among the challenges facing both Libyan stakeholders and the international community was how to reduce the fighting in the North African country in order to begin delivery of critical humanitarian aid.

At the same time, he said, the resurgence of terrorism in the country remained “a very serious threat” for Libya and he urged all national actors to “send a very strong message” against any and all terrorist groups operating inside the country.

Above all, the Special Representative noted that UNSMIL was prepared to advance a proposal that “might be the basis for the future governance of Libya” and would comprise the formation of a council of municipalities as one of several “key institutions” in a post-conflict Libya.

“All the people around this table, all the Libyans share essentially the same values,” continued Mr. Léon. “All of you want a democratic Libya. All of you want a united Libya. All of you want a Libya that is a modern state.”
UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Orlando Bloom sees Ebola response on Liberia visit

23 March - At the end of a four-day visit to Ebola-affected communities in Liberia, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Goodwill Ambassador and actor Orlando Bloom praised the efforts of people there who have been combatting the deadly virus.

“Everyone I met was determined to beat Ebola so that they can resume their normal lives,” said Mr. Bloom after meeting with religious and youth leaders in the capital, Monrovia. “Communities have been at the centre of the fight against Ebola and must continue to be supported because of their crucial role in getting to zero cases.”

Mr. Bloom met representatives of A-Life, a peer education project in a poor and densely populated neighbourhood in Monrovia. Representatives of A-Life explained how their volunteers had reached more than 25,000 people, including adolescent girls and boys, raising awareness on how community members could avoid getting ill and stop the spread of the virus.

He also visited a primary school in a severely affected community on the border with Sierra Leone, where he saw Ebola school safety protocols in action, having been introduced when schools reopened after a seven-month shutdown.

The protocols, introduced with UNICEF support, aim to reduce the risk of transmission of a disease that has infected more than 24,000 people – including over 5,000 children – and has killed nearly 10,000. They involve taking children’s temperatures when they arrive at school and making them wash their hands before entering the classroom.

While Ebola cases have been declining in the sub-region, the battle is far from over. As the fight to eradicate the disease continues, efforts to rebuild health, education and social protection systems are being prioritised.

“Because of this outbreak, a million children in Liberia have had their school year cut in half,” said Mr. Bloom. “They’re excited to be back in the classroom but the precautions that every single one of them must follow every day are a reminder of the need to remain vigilant.”

The actor, well-known for roles in blockbuster films such as “The Lord of the Rings” and “Pirates of the Caribbean,” became a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador in October 2009, and his trip to Liberia follows a visit to Jordan in 2014, where he met children and families impacted by the Syrian crisis.
UN offers condolences on death of former Singaporean leader
Lee Kuan Yew

23 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has expressed deep sadness at the passing of Singapore’s former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, praising his “strong leadership and statesmanship” and describing him as “a legendary figure in Asia,” according to a United Nations spokesperson.

“During his three decades in office, he helped Singapore to transition from a developing country to one of the most developed in the world, transforming it into a thriving international business hub,” Mr. Ban’s spokesperson said in a statement released on Sunday.

“As Singapore marks its 50th anniversary of independence this year, its founding father will be remembered as one of the most inspiring Asian leaders.”

Mr. Ban offered his condolences to the family of the former Prime Minister, the Government and the people of Singapore and voiced his gratitude “for the strong cooperation between the Government of Singapore and the United Nations.”

In a separate statement, the President of the General Assembly, Sam Kutesa, said the former Prime Minister’s passing was “a great loss for Singapore.”

“Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew will be remembered as a remarkable man of peace who transformed his country from third to first world status,” said the statement, adding that he had left “a memorable impact on world affairs.”

“At Security Council, UN envoy says Yemen on 'rapid downward spiral' as tensions rise

22 March - Yemen stands on the brink of civil war amid deepening political tensions and an uptick in sectarian violence, United Nations Special Adviser Jamal Benomar warned today as he explained that only through dialogue could the country achieve a peaceful political transition.

Briefing the Security Council via video conference in a rare Sunday session, Mr. Benomar told the UN body that Yemen was on a “rapid downward spiral” as the conflict took on “worrying sectarian tones and deepening north-south divisions.”

“Emotions are running extremely high and, unless solutions can be found, the country will fall into further violent confrontations,” Mr. Benomar declared. “Events in Yemen are leading the country away from political settlement and to the edge of civil war.”

The situation in Yemen has been rapidly deteriorating since the country formed a new Government in November 2014 aimed at ending a period of political turbulence and bringing about a full transition towards democracy. Nonetheless, the country has continued to be plagued by violence and mass political demonstrations despite UN efforts to bring about a peaceful political resolution.

Just over a month ago, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon voiced serious concern about developments following the abduction by the opposition group Ansarallah of President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi’s chief of staff and the resignation of the President and Prime Minister amid a takeover of the capital, Sana’a by secessionist Houthi militants. This followed a steady deterioration since the beginning of the year as Government forces clashed with militant groups throughout the
capital.

At the same time, the Secretary-General has recently warned that “widespread and lethal” attacks by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and escalating hostilities between AQAP and the Houthis have also pushed the country to the edge of civil war. These developments, coupled with a burgeoning humanitarian crisis which has enveloped an “astounding” 61 per cent of the population, now threaten regional and international peace and security, according to Mr. Ban.

The effects of this continuing instability have transformed Yemen into a patchwork of simmering feuds – an explosive mix of unresolved grievances which risk inundating the entire peace-making process. In the oil-rich province of Mareb, for instance, the situation has become very tense with many locals fearing an imminent confrontation between Houthis and tribesmen. Meanwhile, in the South, the situation remains volatile with Southerners, long marginalized and excluded from Yemeni political life, now demanding full separation.

Most recently, on 20 March, two suicide bombers targeted the mosques in the country's capital, Sana'a, during Friday prayers, killing at least 126 people and wounding scores of others. The terrorists also attacked a government building and mosque in Sa'dah, in the country's northwest.

In today's Security Council briefing, Mr. Benomar added that the ongoing instability would only serve the interests of AQAP which, in turn, he said would “cause further chaos” throughout the country, transforming it into a “Libya-Syria combined scenario.”

Meanwhile, pre-empting criticism of the UN-brokered political talks, the UN envoy also admitted that the international community had no other alternative but to continue in its calls for restraint, de-escalate the situation, and engage all sides, including Yemen's 12 political parties and the Houthis, in the political process.

“I urge all sides in this time of rising tension and inflammatory rhetoric to appreciate the gravity of the situation and deescalate by exercising maximum restraint,” Mr. Benomar concluded. “Peaceful dialogue is the only way forward.”

In a Presidential Statement, the Security Council, for its part, reaffirmed its “strong commitment to the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity” of Yemen, adding that it supported the “legitimacy” of President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi and condemned the “ongoing unilateral actions” taken by the Houthis which are undermining the country's political transition.

“The Security Council deplores that the Houthis have not implemented its demands in resolution 2201 (2015) to withdraw their forces from government institutions, including in the capital Sana'a, and normalize the security situation in the capital and other provinces, and relinquish government and security institutions,” the Statement continued while also reiterating the Council's “concern” at the ability of AQAP “to benefit from the deterioration of the political and security situation” in Yemen.

“The Security Council reiterates that the solution to the situation in Yemen is through a peaceful, inclusive, orderly and Yemeni-led political transition process that meets the legitimate demands and aspirations of the Yemeni people for peaceful change and meaningful political, economic and social reform.”
World Water Day 2015: UN calls for global unity in pursuit of better water access for all

22 March - As the perils of climate change increasingly threaten the planet, the international community must unite in “a spirit of urgent cooperation” to address the many water-related challenges facing humanity, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared today.

In his message marking the 2015 edition of World Water Day, observed annually on 22 March, the Secretary-General warned that access to safe drinking water and sanitation was among “the most urgent issues” affecting populations across the globe.

“The onset of climate change, growing demand on finite water resources from agriculture, industry and cities, and increasing pollution in many areas are hastening a water crisis that can only be addressed by cross-sectoral, holistic planning and policies – internationally, regionally and globally,” Mr. Ban affirmed.

Despite progress under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), some 750 million people, or more than 1 in 10 of the world's population, remain without access to an improved water supply, the UN has reported.

Mr. Ban added that women and children are particularly affected, compromising their overall health and exposing them to numerous hazards during the “unproductive and sometimes dangerous business of collecting water.”

Moreover, the statistics on sanitation remain “even less encouraging” as some 2.5 billion people around the world still live without improved sanitation while another one billion practise open defecation.

In his message, the Secretary-General also warned that the gains made by the international community in working towards a sustainable future were “jeopardized” by climate change – an imminent threat that Member States were prepared to tackle head-on in December when they gather in Paris to draft “a meaningful, universal climate agreement.”

“To address the many challenges related to water, we must work in a spirit of urgent cooperation, open to new ideas and innovation, and prepared to share the solutions that we all need for a sustainable future,” Mr. Ban stated. “If we do so, we can end poverty, promote global prosperity and well-being, protect the environment and withstand the threat of climate change.”

The dire straits facing the world’s water situation were further amplified in the UN’s 2015 World Water Development report, released by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and in time for today’s World Water Day celebrations.

According to the report, the planet will face a 40 per cent shortfall in water supply in 2030 unless the international community “dramatically” improves water supply management. Demand for water is slated to skyrocket 55 per cent by 2050 while 20 per cent of global groundwater is already overexploited.

As a result, the report has urged the international community to devote an entire sustainable development goal to water itself – from issues of water governance and quality to wastewater management and the prevention of natural disasters.

Sanjay Wijesekera, head of the UN Children Fund’s (UNICEF) global Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene programmes, similarly cautioned about the dangerous disparities in water access around the globe, noting that despite “tremendous progress in the face of incredible odds,” there was still more to do.

“Water is the very essence of life and yet three-quarters of a billion people – mostly the poor and the marginalized – still today are deprived of this most basic human right,” Mr. Wijesekera said in a press release.

On average, nearly 1,000 children die every day from diarrhoeal disease linked to unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation, or poor hygiene. In addition, in three countries – the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique and Papua New Guinea
– more than half the population do not have improved drinking water.

In an effort to raise greater awareness about the importance of improving water quality and access, UNICEF has launched a social media campaign with the hashtag #wateris, the agency’s press release added.

Also marking the Day, the Special Rapporteur on the human right to water and sanitation, Léo Heller, called for the UN’s post-2015 development agenda to boost incentives for governments, providers and donors to expand their reach to those still struggling with water access.

“We need to aim for a higher rate of progress for disadvantaged groups, otherwise we will not achieve access for all in the foreseeable future,” Mr. Heller stated. “The world will see real achievement and 'leave no one behind' only when the efforts of the post-2015 agenda reach and impact the lives of the most disadvantaged groups.”

**UN official urges continued international support as Vanuatu recovers from Cyclone Pam**

**21 March** - The international community must ramp up financial and humanitarian support for Vanuatu's most vulnerable communities as they begin to rebuild and recover from the devastation wrought by Cyclone Pam, a senior United Nations humanitarian official said today.

“As we scale up the aid effort, and as basic services are being rehabilitated and people get back to work, we must ensure that no second emergency develops in Vanuatu from food and water shortages or disease outbreaks,” the UN's humanitarian coordinator for the archipelagic nation, Osnat Lubrani, said in a statement issued earlier today.

The Category 5 tropical cyclone descended upon Vanuatu, Tuvalu and a number of other Pacific islands one week ago battering them with 250kmph winds and 320kmph gusts which caused widespread damage to infrastructure, impacting services such as electricity.

Ms. Lubrani explained that in Vanuatu the storm had left 17 people dead and some 65,000 people homeless.

A UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team arrived in the Pacific Ocean archipelago on 16 March and began its work in supporting the Government of Vanuatu in coordinating the humanitarian response, providing some 166,000 people with recovery support.

Nevertheless, Ms. Lubrani continued, Cyclone Pam's impact had caused significant damage to the country's food and water supplies as well as sanitation and health facilities.

“Water is a serious problem, with the contamination of water sources a grave health threat, particularly to children. Food stocks are limited as vegetable gardens have been wiped out - a concern for food security and as a source of livelihoods. Several of the health centres and schools have been severely damaged,” she said.

Along with the tragic loss of life and severe infrastructure damage, Cyclone Pam has also heavily impacted Vanuatu's economy which is heavily dependent on agriculture.

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

As well as crops, most household food and seed stocks and garden production were also destroyed, leaving many families without food and income and increasing the need for imports. With the first harvest from replanted fast-growing food crops...
likely to be available only in mid-June, Vanuatu could be without locally produced food until then.

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

Ms. Lubrani admitted that the widespread disruption of communication and roads would also impact humanitarian efforts and had transformed the UN's relief efforts into “a very challenging logistical operation.”

“Communication within and between the islands is a major challenge, while access to affected areas remains restricted because debris and fallen trees are blocking roads,” she added. “It is also going to be very expensive due to the costs of getting to remote islands and the damage caused to transport infrastructure.”

As a result, she called upon the international community to boost aid and humanitarian efforts for Vanuatu as the country emerges from the disaster.

“We must support the people and Government of Vanuatu as they continue to help the most vulnerable communities and start to recover and rebuild,” concluded Ms. Lubrani. “The United Nations and our partners are ready to continue to help in this effort.”

**UN chief welcomes key meeting between foreign ministers of China, Japan, Republic of Korea**

21 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has welcomed the opening of the seventh Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Meeting which brings together the foreign ministers of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea to discuss key regional issues, the United Nations spokesperson said today.

In a statement, Mr. Ban's spokesperson said the Secretary-General hoped that the meeting, which opened today in Seoul, Republic of Korea, would provide “momentum to reinforce the trilateral cooperation mechanism” between the three countries.

“The Secretary-General also expects that the Trilateral Summit would be held at an early date as agreed by the three ministers,” the statement declared.

“He further encourages the concerned parties to promote mutual trust and future-oriented cooperation for peace and prosperity in the region.”

Mr. Ban has long urged Asian leaders to resolve all differences through dialogue and build upon the promotion of cooperation and common interests in order to tackle the spread of deadly weapons, address local territorial disputes, and fully heal the rifts of a region which he once described as the scene of some of the “most worrying tensions in the world today.”
UN's Ban welcomes Tonga ratification of key gender equality convention

21 March - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has commended the Government of Tonga for its decision to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, otherwise known as CEDAW.

In a statement issued earlier today, Mr. Ban's spokesperson said the Secretary-General applauded Tonga's announcement as the Pacific island nation would soon join “the global movement to empower women and achieve gender equality” while holding itself to the UN-backed universal standards.

Often described as an ‘international bill of rights for women’, CEDAW defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.

The UN spokesperson said Mr. Ban also lauded civil society organizations for their “tireless efforts” in sustaining the momentum and advocating on behalf of the Convention and urged authorities to follow through in rolling out CEDAW's provisions.

“The Secretary-General encourages the Government of Tonga to start undertaking concrete steps for implementing CEDAW,” the statement continued. “He affirms the continuous support for its efforts to improve the position of women in Tonga.”

Ban, on World Down Syndrome Day, applauds all who champion rights of disabled

21 March - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today urged everyone to “make every effort” to ensure that the new sustainable development goals address equality and help build a life of dignity for all, including people with Down syndrome and other persons with disabilities.

Mr. Ban's call came in his message for this year's World Down Syndrome Day, which is observed on 21 March and aims to raise public awareness of the genetic disorder.

The UN chief applauded all those who champion the rights and lives of persons with disabilities, and urged others to support them. He also noted that this year's Day “falls as the international community is striving to create a universal, transformative agenda for sustainable development.”

“Every year on this observance, we reaffirm that persons with Down syndrome are entitled to the full enjoyment of all human rights,” he said. “This year, we must make every effort to ensure that the new sustainable development goals address equality and help build a life of dignity for all, including people with Down syndrome and other persons with disabilities.”

He also noted the role of families as central to supporting persons with Down syndrome.

“At the same time,” he noted, “we must recognize our collective responsibility to create conditions for all persons with disabilities to make valuable contributions to our shared future. We must promote inclusive policies and raise awareness about social justice for people with Down syndrome and do everything possible to enable them to live where they want and with whom, to form their own families, to administer their own assets and to pursue their own happiness.”
“Let us use this World Down Syndrome Day to advocate for a more socially just and inclusive world,” he urged.

### Syria: UN chief deplores deadly attacks on Nowruz celebrations

**21 March** - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has strongly condemned a series of targeted attacks against Nowruz celebrations in Syria which left scores of people dead and wounded, the United Nations spokesperson's office has announced.

According to reports, two separate bombings killed and injured up to 100 people, including women and children, in the Syrian city of Al-Hasakah, in the country's northeast, as revellers celebrated Nowruz – a holiday marking the first day of spring and the renewal of nature.

Initial reports also link the attacks to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has been operational in the region.

“These heinous attacks took place during a holiday that is customarily a time for Kurdish communities to come together to share their hopes for the new year,” the statement declared.

“The terrorist organization's despicable agenda includes efforts to incite sectarian and ethnic division among Syria's diverse communities. It must not be allowed to succeed.”

In the statement, released late yesterday evening, the Secretary-General also extended his deepest condolences to the bereaved families and wished a speedy recovery to the injured.

“The Secretary-General reiterates his condemnation of all acts of violence against civilians in Syria, and his demand that all sides in this brutal conflict stop the use of indiscriminate weapons in populated areas,” it concluded.

### On International Day, UN says learning lessons of intolerance critical to eliminating racism

**21 March** - Marking the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the United Nations today urged Member States to boost efforts towards ending discrimination around the world and ratify a critical international convention aimed at abolishing racism in all its forms.

“We have seen the end of colonialism, the dismantling of apartheid and the rise of a global movement for equality,” United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared in his message for the Day.

“Yet, as history and current events attest, racial discrimination still presents a clear danger to people and communities in all regions.”

The UN General Assembly, in a show of solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement, established this Day to commemorate the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, when 69 people were killed and many others injured as police opened fire on a peaceful protest against South Africa's appalling pass laws.

This year's theme – “Learning from historical tragedies to combat racial discrimination today” – aims to explore the root causes of racism and racial discrimination and will stress the essential need to learn the lessons history has provided in order to combat racism and racial discrimination today.

In his message, Mr. Ban observed that 2015 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the launch of the International Decade for People of African Descent.
He added that learning the lessons of history was critical to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past and an opportunity to renew a commitment “to building a world of justice and equality where xenophobia and bigotry do not exist.”

“Lasting peace can only be built on the premise that all people have equal rights and dignity – regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, social or other status,” the Secretary-General continued.

“To that end, I urge all nations to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, to promote historical accuracy and put in place robust policies and laws that will end all forms of discrimination as enshrined in the Convention.”

In a statement delivered by the Permanent Representative of Tajikistan, Mahmadin Mahmadaminov, the President of the General Assembly, Sam Kutesa, similarly extolled the importance of learning from “the profound and lasting impacts of historical human rights tragedies” such as slavery, the slave trade, and the oppression of institutionalized racism.

“We should draw important lessons from these past tragedies, so that we may use this knowledge to address contemporary manifestations of racism and racial discrimination,” said Mr. Kutesa. “Prejudice must not be allowed to rake root in our societies. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Calling upon all Member States and global citizens “to continue to reject and prevent discrimination” in all its forms, the General Assembly President urged the international community to do its best in preventing the growth and spread of xenophobia, stereotyping, hatred and marginalization which, he said, have “the potential to compromise peace, stability and development around the world.”

On World Day, UNESCO chief hails role of poetry as 'fundamental expression of peace'

21 March - In today's uncertain and turbulent world, the power of poetry can help bring women and men together to craft new forms of dialogue, the head of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared today, as she marked the annual observance of World Poetry Day.

“Poetry is the universal human song, expressing the aspiration of every woman and man to apprehend the world and share this understanding with others, through the arrangement of words in rhythm and meter,” Director-General Irina Bokova said in her message for the Day.

“There may be nothing more delicate than a poem and, yet, it expresses all of the power of the human mind, and so there is nothing more resilient.”

UNESCO proclaimed 21 March as World Poetry Day in 1999, with the aim of supporting linguistic diversity through poetic expression and offering endangered languages the opportunity to be heard within their communities.

The Day is also meant to support poetry, return to the oral tradition of poetry recitals, promote its teaching, restore a dialogue with other arts such as theatre, dance, music and painting, support small publishers and create an attractive image of poetry in the media so that the art will no longer be considered an outdated form.

Citing renowned Scottish poet, John Burnside, Ms. Bokova noted that the power of poetry lay in its ability “to inspire our thoughts with something more inventive than dismay” while reflecting the universal in human experience.

“Poetry is intimate expression that opens doors to others, enriching the dialogue that catalyses all human progress, weaving cultures together and reminding all people of the destiny they hold in common,” she continued. “In this way, poetry is a fundamental expression of peace.”
**In turbulent times, Nowruz carries forward message of peace, harmony: UN**

**21 March** - Nowruz takes place this year as the United Nations works to shape a new vision for a sustainable future and adopt a meaningful universal climate agreement, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, calling the ancient celebration of spring “a moment of unity and solidarity, within and among societies, that is all the more important at times of strife and division.”

“The annual observance of Nowruz is a wonderful opportunity for people to join together to celebrate cultural diversity, dialogue and mutual respect,” the UN chief said in his message for the International Day of Nowruz.

“These priorities for 2015 are in line with the spirit of Nowruz, which promotes harmony with nature and all peoples to foster cooperation for lasting peace,” Mr. Ban added.

Nowruz, which marks the first day of spring and the renewal of nature, is celebrated by more than 300 million people all around the world and has been celebrated for over 3,000 years in the Balkans, the Black Sea Basin, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East and other regions. It promotes values of peace and solidarity between generations and within families as well as reconciliation and neighbourliness, thus contributing to cultural diversity and friendship among peoples and different communities.

The International Day was proclaimed by the General Assembly in 2010, at the initiative of several countries and in 2009, Nowruz was inscribed on the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

“Nowruz plays a significant role in strengthening the ties among peoples based on mutual respect and the ideals of peace and good neighbourliness,” said Mr. Ban.

“This age-old celebration of diversity, dialogue and solidarity brings together peoples of many different cultures, religions and languages, joining families and communities together,” said Irina Bokova, UNESCO’s Director-General.

“Nowruz has given rise to a rich horizon of customs, rituals and festivities that are often associated with nature and fertility. The songs, dances, festive meals and other social practices that form an integral part of Nowruz provide vivid demonstration of the creative diversity that UNESCO seeks to promote in all of its work,” Ms. Bokova added.

“In these uncertain and turbulent times, let us all embrace the values of Nowruz and carry forward its message of peace, harmony, tolerance and reconciliation.”