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UNICEF welcomes final release of child soldiers by armed group in South Sudan

24 April - Militants in South Sudan have handed over to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) a final group of 283 children in what the agency described as “a small piece of good news in what is otherwise a terrible situation for children in other parts of [the country],” where many boys and girls have been abducted and forcibly recruited as child soldiers.

The release of 282 boys and one girl by the so-called 'Cobra Faction' took place in Labrab, a village in a remote corner of Jonglei state in South Sudan, bringing to 1,757 the number of children who have been released by the militant group this year.

During the release ceremony, the children handed in their weapons and uniforms in exchange for civilian clothes. The boys and the one girl will stay at the interim care centre where they will receive food, shelter, medical and psychosocial support until their families are traced and they can return home.

“It is the last chapter in a series of releases that have taken place since January and follows a peace agreement between the faction and the Government of South Sudan,” UNICEF said in a press release issued today in Juba, the capital of South Sudan.

Jonathan Veitch, UNICEF's South Sudan Representative, said: “We are very pleased to have seen this process through and that the final group of children has been released from the Cobra Faction.”
“But the work is far from over,” he continued. “These children must be reunited with their families and they must begin the long and difficult road towards rebuilding their lives.”

“UNICEF is extremely concerned about the welfare of children recently recruited around Malakal in Upper Nile state, given the recent upsurge in fighting in the area, the UNICEF representative said. “We again call for the immediate release of these children and we continue to stand ready to provide all necessary support for their demobilization,” he said.

The reintegration programme, which includes ongoing psychosocial support, costs an estimated $2,580 per child. UNICEF faces a funding shortfall of $11 million for the programme.

The conflict that began in December 2013 in South Sudan continues to affect the lives of millions of people. It has been marked by brutal violence against civilians and deepening suffering across the country. The major humanitarian consequences are widespread displacement due to the violence; high rates of death, disease, and injuries, severe food insecurity and disrupted livelihoods, and a major malnutrition crisis.

Some 5.8 million people are estimated to be in some degree of food insecurity as of September 2014. This number is projected to increase to 6.4 million during the first quarter of 2015. The people in need for the coming year include an anticipated 1.95 million internally displaced people and a projected 293,000 refugees. Within South Sudan, the most acute needs are found in Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile, the three states that have seen the most active hostilities.

**Mali: Ban voices concern over series of targeted attacks against UN mission and personnel**

24 April - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has voiced deep concern over a series of attacks targeting the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) which have resulted in numerous casualties, a statement issued by a UN spokesperson said today.

According to the UN, seven peacekeepers were wounded on 23 April in Mali's northeastern Kidal region when a MINUSMA vehicle struck an explosive device. The incident was preceded by two separate attacks – on 17 and 20 April – involving unidentified armed men killing the drivers of MINUSMA-contracted trucks outside the city of Gao.

And, on 15 April, a suicide vehicle detonated at the entrance to the MINUSMA camp in the town of Ansongo injuring nine peacekeepers.

“Attacks against civilians and UN peacekeepers constitute a serious violation of international law,” said the Secretary-General's statement, which also added Mr. Ban's appeal that those responsible for the attacks be brought to justice.

“This series of attacks highlights the urgency of finding a political settlement and re-establishing security in the north of Mali,” it added.

In the statement, the Secretary-General also expressed his “deepest condolences” to the families of the deceased and the Government of Mali while wishing a speedy recovery to those who have been injured.

In addition, Mr. Ban expressed his “profound gratitude” to the brave peacekeepers serving in Mali's war-torn region and to the troop-contributing countries.
Amid rising death toll in Yemen, UN urges humanitarian access, respect for international law

24 April - The United Nations human rights office said today that civilians are continuing to die in Yemen, with the total number killed between 26 March and 22 April now estimated at 551, including 31 women and at least 115 children.

“These are just the civilian casualties,” said Rupert Colville, the spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). “The total number of people killed is considerably higher. Another 1,185 civilians have been injured, including 35 women and 67 children.”

Mr. Colville said that at least 64 public buildings were either partially or completely destroyed by fighting, adding that several airstrikes hit military and civilian positions in a number of cities, killing 58 civilians including seven children.

Mr. Colville pointed to specifically an attack on a bridge by aircraft after the official end of the coalition’s ‘Operation Decisive Storm’ on 22 April, which killed 40 civilians, including seven children, and to an airstrike the previous day in the capital, Sana’a, which killed 20 civilians and injured 120 others, and damaged several UN offices, including the OHCHR in Yemen.

“Violence has persisted across southern governorates due to street battles between groups supporting members of the popular committees affiliated with the Houthis and local armed groups in Abyan, Dhale, Aden and Lahj,” said Mr. Colville. “In Abyan Governorate on 21 April, at least 14 civilians were killed and another 14 injured, reportedly due to indiscriminate shooting. We have reports of killings by sniper of a child in Dhale and four civilians emerging from a mosque in Aden.”

He also pointed to reports of arbitrary detention and “disturbing” reports about the humanitarian situation in various parts of the country, particularly relating to healthcare, and he urged all sides to ensure that international human rights and humanitarian laws are respected, and to ensure that all measures are taken to ensure civilians are protected.

“All sides must ensure that the humanitarian aid – that is so desperately needed – can reach people in Yemen,” Mr. Colville said.

Also briefing journalists in Geneva this morning was Jens Laerke, a spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), who referred to the airstrike that damaged UN offices in Sana’a, saying windows in the offices of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), OCHA and Department of Safety and Security (DSS) were shattered by explosions.

Elizabeth Brys, a Spokesperson for the World Food Programme (WFP) said the agency is continuing its work in Yemen, despite violence and security problems, though it had been limited in its operations, reaching a total of 19,471 conflict-affected people, including only 8,700 persons in Aden.

WFP aims to increase operations, she said, with a plan to provide emergency food assistance to 2.5 million conflict-affected people throughout the country between May and July, though the agency and its partners would face challenges, such as lack of fuel which affected transport and the ability of families to cook food.

The number of food insecure people had risen from 10.6 million to 12 million as a result of fighting, with food prices increasing and affecting vulnerable families most strongly. Ms. Brys called for space in which humanitarian operations could be conducted and WFP staff could work safely.

A spokesperson for the World Health Organization (WHO) said that approximately $750,000 was needed every month to provide sufficient fuel to cover 100 ambulances and major hospitals in affected governorates as well as mobile teams, and a spokesperson for the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) gave new information on child casualties, saying at least 115 children...
had been killed and 172 maimed and adding that those figures were conservative.

The UNICEF spokesperson also confirmed that that at least 140 children had been recruited by armed groups in Yemen, 30 schools had been damaged or occupied by the warring parties and 23 hospitals had been attacked.

The children of Yemen, who were already vulnerable before fighting started, were even more so now and urgent actions were needed to end grave violations against children, including their recruitment and use by armed groups, and to meet obligations under international law.

**Mediterranean crisis: UN welcomes EU measures on migrants, urges more comprehensive action**

24 April - The United Nations refugee agency welcomed the European Union's (EU) mobilization of resources in response to the ongoing migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, while also urging increased efforts aimed at saving lives and integrating asylum seekers in accordance with human rights.

Briefing reporters in Geneva earlier today, Adrian Edwards, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), applauded the EU's tripling of funding for joint sea rescue operations following the maritime tragedy that claimed the lives of hundreds of migrants late last week.

“We appreciated the assurance given at the [Brussels] summit press conference [on Thursday] that this will mean an operation with similar capacity, resources, and scope to the Mare Nostrum operation,” Mr. Edwards said, referring to the Italian sea rescue operation begun in 2013 and which concluded last year.

“We look forward to working closely with the EU and its Member States in building on some of the measures that have been announced.”

Italy's 'Mare Nostrum,' a major search and rescue programme aimed at saving migrants in the Mediterranean, was replaced in December by the European Union's current 'Triton' operation amid an uptick in sea crossings in the region. Under 'Mare Nostrum,' 150,000 migrants were reportedly saved before it transitioned into its “less effective” substitute, according to UNHCR.

Meanwhile, 2015 has already seen some 40,000 people make crossings to Italy and Greece – the first and second largest countries of arrival respectively. UNHCR has reported that numbers have also been recently picking up as weather conditions in the Mediterranean improve.

Mr. Edwards, however, noted that addressing the migrant crisis did not stop with the boosting of at-sea rescue operations as the Mediterranean boat crossings were not purely a migrant phenomenon but a refugee one as well.

“For refugees fleeing war, there has to be some alternative to having to cross the Mediterranean in smugglers boats,” he continued. “We know that without realistic and substantial alternative channels for people to reach safety, the much-needed increase in international efforts to crack down on smugglers and traffickers is unlikely to be effective.”

The UN refugee agency has long been advocating for a comprehensive and urgent response from the European Union and has shared specific proposals including the establishment of a possible scheme to compensate shipping companies involved in rescuing people at sea, increasing credible legal alternatives to dangerous voyages and a pilot relocation programme for Syrians refugees arriving in Italy and Greece.

The UNHCR spokesperson voiced hope that the new EU measures announced this week, including a 10-point plan of action, would be “an important first step” towards a trans-national approach in confronting the migrant crisis.
At the same time, he warned that there needed to be “further elaboration” of what the new measures would mean for resettlement and relocation and the facilitating of access to international protection in Europe through other legal channels.

“Ultimately, the test will be whether we see a reduction in lives lost, effective access to protection in Europe without having to cross the Mediterranean, and an effective Common European Asylum System, which truly lives up to its commitments of solidarity and responsibility sharing,” Mr. Edwards declared. “UNHCR is stepping up our own response to this crisis. And we stand ready to work collaboratively with our European partners.”

Against that backdrop, Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, and François Crepeau, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, expressed concern that the EU’s response focused “overwhelmingly” on the securitization of borders and increasing “the repression of survival migration.”

“The decision to strengthen the capacity of transit countries to stop irregular migration on their territory, without offering long-term solutions and without adequate human rights guarantees, will only compound the abuse of migrants,” they said in a statement today.

“The question remains: what happens once those lives are rightfully saved? What will be done about the lack of proper individual assessments of one’s protection needs, about the inadequate reception facilities and poor conditions for those rescued, about the lack of an agreed refugee resettlement policy, and about the forced returns of irregular migrants, which could also include potential victims of trafficking.”

The two UN experts called on the EU to “move beyond emergency mode” and on to pilot projects involving more comprehensive and innovative regulated avenues of mobility, including the establishment of a resettlement policy.

“Europe must bank on mobility across the Mediterranean and within its territory as a dynamic factor of economic and social development,” they concluded. “Only then will it be able to truly reclaim the control of its borders from criminal smuggling rings.”

Security Council must match scale of Syria crisis with 'bold response' – UN relief officials

24 April - The Syrian crisis is getting worse and civilians are paying the price, senior United Nations humanitarian officials said today as they called for an end to the “numbness to the senseless violence”, while the Security Council demanded parties to the conflict facilitate expanded aid operations and immediate delivery of life-saving supplies to hard-to-reach and besieged areas.

Addressing the 15-member body during an open briefing, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos said it is alarming that “people have become numb to figures that should, every day, shock our collective conscience.”

Over the tragic five-year arc of conflict, she continued, 220,000 people have been killed, more than one million have been injured, 7.6 million have been displaced and four million people have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. And the suffering continues to this day. In the past weeks alone, well over 100,000 people were displaced in a new wave of fighting in Idlib.

“Each time, I speak of atrocity after atrocity; violation after violation; misery after misery,” said Ms. Amos, who was joined in her plea for action by António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Angelina Jolie Pitt, UNHCR's Special Envoy, and Ertharin Cousin, Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme (WFP).

The Security Council adopted a Presidential Statement on the issue, demanding that all parties to the Syrian domestic conflict immediately put an end to all forms of violence. The Council expressed alarm that the Syrian crisis has become the...
largest humanitarian emergency crisis in the world today, threatening peace and security in the region with diverse implications on the neighbouring countries and the displacement of millions.

The 15-member body emphasized the strain placed on host country education systems by the inflow of refugees and that additional resources will be required to help the 600,000 children outside the school system. It also urged donors, international financial institutions, and UN agencies to consider financing instruments that effectively meet the “unique needs” of countries impacted by the conflict.

“There are fresh allegations that chemical weapons have been used again in Idlib, killing and injuring civilians,” Ms. Amos said in her remarks, emphasizing that the Council has been briefed on the situation in Yarmouk, the besieged, largely Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus, where today people have reached “new levels of despair.”

With hundreds of thousands of people in a “daily struggle for survival,” it is imperative to have full and unimpeded humanitarian access to populations in need. All aid, but particularly medical and surgical aid, must be allowed on convoys. Government security forces had again removed all surgical supplies from the trucks on their way to Homs governorate, depriving people of urgently needed treatments, she told the Council.

The people of Syria “rightly want more,” said Ms. Amos. They want an end to the war that has “destroyed their country and ravaged their lives…Stop the violations of international law, protect civilians and ensure humanitarian access,” she urged.

“The failure to stop the violence has undermined the credibility of this Council and eroded confidence in the international community to take its responsibilities seriously,” she continued.

She called on the Council to demand that attacks on education and cease; establish a fact-finding mission; mandate the negotiation of humanitarian pauses; send perpetrators a clear message that their crimes will not go unpunished; and enforce an arms embargo for violations of international law.

“There has to be massively increased support to the neighbouring countries,” he said, emphasizing the need for a “fundamental review of development cooperation policies.”

Because Lebanon and Jordan are middle income countries, the World Bank is not allowed to give them grants to help deal with the severe demographic shock they have endured. It is imperative to redress this and other “serious inadequacies” in the global aid architecture, he explained.

“With more support across the region, we could help turn refugees’ situation around from one of dependency and unsustainability to one where their economic self-reliance becomes an option, allowing them to also contribute to the development of their host societies,” Mr. Guterres added.

Adressing the Council next, Ms. Jolie Pitt said that since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, she has made 11 field visits to Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Malta.
“I wish that some of the Syrians I met could be here today, I think of the mother I met recently in a refugee camp in Iraq. She could tell you what it is like to try to live after your young daughter was ripped from your family by armed men and taken as a sex slave,” the Oscar-winning American actress said.

“Any one of the Syrians that I met would speak more eloquently about the conflict than I ever could,” she added. “I'm here for them because this is their United Nations. Here, all countries and all peoples are equal. The purpose of the UN is to prevent and end conflict. To bring countries together; find diplomatic solutions and save lives. We are failing to do this in Syria.”

The crisis is made worse by division and indecision in the international community preventing the Security Council from fulfilling its duty, Ms. Jolie Pitt emphasized.

“The people we met with trust that the truth alone would guarantee action,” she said, describing how throughout the years hope turned into anger and anger now into despair and hopelessness.

“On my last visit, in February, anger had subsided to resignation and misery…To be a Syrian caught up in this conflict is to be cut off from every law and principle designed to protect innocent life.”

The Security Council must address these threats to international peace and security but we are “standing by” in Syria, she added. “The problem is not lack of information. We know in excruciating detail what is happening.”

The problem is a lack of political will. All of the good the UN does worldwide is undermined by the message being sent in Syria — that hospitals can be bombed, aid can be withheld, and civilians starved with impunity, Ms. Jolie Pitt said, appealing for the Council to work as one and reach a settlement to bring justice and accountability for the Syrian people.

“I urge the Council to visit refugees and see their impact. Those refugees cannot come to the Council so please will you go to them,” Ms. Jolie Pitt said.

It is “sickening,” she said, how thousands of refugees are drowning on the “doorstep of the world's wealthiest continent,” and urged action to address the utter desperation that forces people to go on that deadly journey. She also urged the Council to take more serious action to combat sexual violence in conflict and called on Member States to begin preparations now so that Syrian women are represented in talks focusing on rebuilding their country.

Also addressing the Council, WFP chief Ms. Cousin recounted her most recent visit to a Syrian refugee camp, describing scenes of despair, anger and anguish as displaced families struggled to access food assistance.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Ms. Cousin said, WFP had been assisting 4 million people inside Syria and 1.9 million people outside the war-torn country. But, she warned, amid funding shortfalls that very same humanitarian aid was now in “jeopardy.”

“We have been forced to cut the family food basket inside of Syria by 30 per cent,” the WFP Executive Director continued. “I must warn this Council that when we reduce food access operations, we reduce stability.”

Against that backdrop, she noted that as WFP response teams work feverishly across the five host nations harbouring thousands of refugees, many of the displaced remain at risk of malnutrition and stunted development, particularly with food prices surging. Some 4 million Syrian women and children, she added, had been plunged into “a serious nutritional crisis” and urgently required preventative nutritional services.

The length and complexity of this crisis means we must increase not reduce, food and nutritional assistance, Ms. Cousin concluded.

“We cannot ask parents to raise their children in a region without food and without peace.”
UN resumes vaccination drive for three million children in West Africa

24 April - For the first time since the start of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, thousands of health workers are fanning out across Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone in nationwide immunization campaigns with an aim to protect three million children against preventable but potentially deadly diseases such as measles and polio.

“While the effort to get to zero cases of Ebola continues, it’s critical that basic health services are restored,” said Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF’s Regional Director for West and Central Africa.

“Stepping up immunisation programs that were disrupted by the epidemic will save lives and prevent a reversal of the health gains that were made in these countries before the outbreak.”

As the campaigns are taking place at the start of World Immunization Week 2015, while the threat of Ebola remains, vaccinators are following strict protocols including the use of protective wear, such as gloves and aprons, as well as regular hand washing, according to a press release issued today.

More than 26,000 cases of Ebola and over 10,000 deaths have been reported across the three countries where the outbreak has weakened already fragile health systems while disrupting routine health interventions.

In Sierra Leone, where mass immunization campaigns were suspended from October 2014 because of the Ebola outbreak, a ‘mother and child health week’ begins today with the provision of Vitamin A, de-worming pills and screening for malnutrition, according to UNICEF.

“At least 10,000 vaccinators and distributors will be going door-to-door across the country to deliver the interventions, which also include updates for those aged 0-23 months who have missed routine vaccinations,” UNICEF said.

In May, an immunization drive for 1.5 million children under five will cover measles and polio, according to UNICEF and the World Health Organization.

Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of infant and maternal mortality in the world with a maternal mortality ratio of 1,165 per 100,000 live births and under 5 mortality at 156 per 1,000 live births, according to WHO.

In Guinea, UNICEF reported that a nationwide measles campaign got under way in Guinea on April 18 to vaccinate 1.3 million children aged six months to nine years.

In Liberia, a campaign to provide measles and polio vaccinations to over 700,000 children under five years old is planned for May 8-14, it said.

UNICEF said it has supplied over 750,000 doses of measles vaccines, and, together with its partners is training more than 3,000 vaccinators and county health officials. It is also working with the Government of Liberia on nationwide social mobilization efforts to raise awareness of the campaign.
Libya: UN condemns ‘horrific’ week of human rights violations amid country’s rising violence

24 April - The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) today condemned the “successive horrific incidents” in Libya this past week – ranging from the appalling loss of life in the Mediterranean of those escaping violence, the execution of Christians and the killings of several members of a prominent family by the so-called ‘Islamic State in Libya.’

“We have been shocked by the appalling loss of life in the Mediterranean Sea, following the reported deaths of several hundred individuals seeking to escape the violence in Libya,” OHCHR Spokesman Rupert Colville told the bi-weekly UN press briefing in Geneva.

“Many of those fleeing Libya are migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in an extremely vulnerable situation in Libya. Amidst the violence and breakdown in law and order, they are at risk of killings, torture, abduction, and physical assault,” he explained.

Mr. Colville said that following visits to a number of detention centres inside Libya, the human rights division of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) had reported conditions of grave concern including chronic overcrowding, poor sanitation, health care, and insufficient food.

“The division also received consistent reports of physical or verbal mistreatment, labour exploitation, sexual violence, and confiscation of identity documents,” he said.

The human rights spokesman also noted that reports were received of the death of several members of the prominent Al-Harir Al-Mansouri family by individuals affiliated with the so-called ‘Islamic State in Libya.’

“It was reported that armed men attacked the family’s residence after Ibrahim Al-Harir al-Mansouri resisted arrest,” he explained, adding that “three members of the family were publicly hanged in the city” in an apparent bid to send a message to those challenging the group.

Also this week, Mr. Colville said, a group affiliated with the Islamic State in Libya released a video showing the execution of at least 28 Christians in two separate incidents.

“We condemn the brutal killings of these individuals who we understand are mostly Ethiopian nationals and who appear to have been targeted on the basis of their religion,” he said.

“In February of this year, the High Commissioner condemned the beheading of 21 mostly Egyptian Coptic Christians, and further urged Libyans to unite against extremists launching attacks based on religious, ethnic, national, racial, or political grounds and we reiterate that call today.”

Mr. Colville urged all parties in Libya involved in talks facilitated by the UN to redouble their efforts to reach an agreement as soon as possible so as to begin the process of rebuilding institutions that would ensure the rule of law and the protection of human rights for all those residing in Libya.
UN rights chief urges UK to curb tabloid hate speech, end ‘decades of abuse’ targeting migrants

24 April - After decades of “sustained and unrestrained anti-foreigner abuse,” and in the wake of a recent article in the Sun newspaper calling migrants ‘cockroaches,’ the United Nations human rights chief today urged British authorities and media to take steps to curb incitement to hatred by tabloid newspapers, in line with the country’s obligations under national and international law.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, also called a firmer line on racism to be taken by European countries, which, he said, “under the guise of freedom of expression, are being allowed to feed a vicious cycle of vilification, intolerance and politicization of migrants, as well as of marginalized European minorities such as the Roma.”

“The nasty underbelly of racism that is characterizing the migration debate in an increasing number of European Union countries, has skewed the EU response to the crisis,” Mr. Zeid said in a statement released by OHCHR.

The Sun article that Mr. Zeid is referring to was published 17 April and began with the words “Show me pictures of coffins, show me bodies floating in water, play violins and show me skinny people looking sad. I still don't care.” Elsewhere in the article the columnist described migrants as “a plague of feral humans,” and said some British towns were “fostering sores, plagued by swarms of migrants and asylum seekers shelling out benefits like Monopoly money.”

The Sun columnist also advocated using gunboats to stop migrants, threatening them with violence, and said “drilling a few holes in the bottom of anything suspiciously resembling a boat would be a good idea too.”

Mr. Zeid said that in language very similar to that employed by Rwanda’s Kangura newspaper and Radio Mille Collines during the lead up to the 1994 genocide, the columnist said “make no mistake, these migrants are like cockroaches.” Leading figures in both Rwandan media organizations were later convicted by an international tribunal of public incitement to commit genocide.

In this regard, Mr. Zeid urged the UK authorities to closely examine the broader issue of incitement to hatred by the tabloid press and other sectors of society. “This vicious verbal assault on migrants and asylum seekers in the UK tabloid press has continued unchallenged under the law for far too long.”

“The Nazi media described people their masters wanted to eliminate as rats and cockroaches. This type of language is clearly inflammatory and unacceptable, especially in a national newspaper. The Sun’s editors took an editorial decision to publish this article, and – if it is found in breach of the law – should be held responsible along with the author,” the rights chief added.

Mr. Zeid noted that the Sun article was simply one of the more extreme examples of thousands of anti-foreigner articles that have appeared in UK tabloids over the past two decades. Asylum seekers and migrants have been linked to rape, murder, disease, theft, and almost every conceivable crime and misdemeanor in front-page articles and two-page spreads, in cartoons, editorials, even on the sports pages of almost all the UK’s national tabloid newspapers.

“Many of these stories have been grossly distorted and some have been outright fabrications. Elsewhere in Europe, as well as in other countries, there has been a similar process of demonization taking place, but usually led by extremist political parties or demagogues rather than extremist media” he said.

The High Commissioner noted that while migration and refugee issues are completely valid topics for public debate, “it is imperative that migration policy decisions that affect people’s lives and fundamental human rights should be made on the basis of fact – not fiction, exaggeration or blatant xenophobia.”
UN mission peacekeepers repel two attacks in South Darfur

24 April - Peacekeepers with the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) have repelled two attacks by unidentified armed men in Kass, 85 kilometres north-west of Nyala, the capital of South Darfur.

The exchange of fire resulted in at least four attackers killed and six peacekeepers and one assailant injured, according to a statement released by the Mission today.

“I condemn the attacks on the peacekeepers and reiterate the Mission's resolve to continue to respond decisively and robustly to any acts of this kind,” said African Union-United Nations Acting Joint Special Representative for Darfur, Abiodun Bashua, in the note.

The Head of the Mission also wished the injured a full and speedy recovery.

The first attack took place yesterday April around 6:00 p.m., when some 40 gunmen on horses and camels opened fire on Nigerian troops protecting a water point. The attackers made off with one of the Mission's vehicles after shooting the driver. The peacekeepers pursued and recovered the vehicle.

Four attackers were killed and two peacekeepers and one assailant injured during the exchange of gunfire. The Mission handed over the corpses of the four attackers and the injured person to the Government of Sudan Police. The wounded peacekeepers were evacuated to Nyala for medical treatment.

This morning, a UNAMID patrol travelling from Nyala was attacked near the Mission's base in Kass. Four peacekeepers were injured during the exchange of fire.

Mr. Bashua called on the Government of Sudan to speedily investigate the incidents and bring the perpetrators to book, noting that “the continuing climate of impunity and failure to prosecute those who attack peacekeepers and humanitarian workers have to end.”

During Azerbaijan visit, UN experts welcome 'unhindered access' to places of detention

24 April - A United Nations human rights body has welcomed the decision by the Government of Azerbaijan to allow it “unhindered access” to places of detention across the Central Asian country while also urging authorities to do more to protect the rights of people in custody.

In a press release issued today, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) announced that the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT) delegation had succeeded in visiting sites of interest during its most recent visit to Azerbaijan – conducted from 16 April to 24 April – just months after its previous visit was suspended due to a lack of official co-operation.

“The Azerbaijani Government this time enabled unhindered access to places of deprivation of liberty,” confirmed Aisha Shujune Muhammad, head of the SPT delegation.

“However,” she added, “the State party has yet to guarantee all fundamental legal and procedural safeguards to persons deprived of their liberty, including access to a lawyer, a medical doctor, and to contact his or her family.”

According to the OHCHR, the four-member SPT delegation presented their confidential preliminary observations to the State authorities earlier today with suggestions on how to strengthen the protection of persons deprived of their liberty against torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
During their trip, the UN experts visited police stations, pre-trial and temporary detention centres, investigative isolation units of the Ministry of National Security, prisons, psychiatric hospitals and social care institutions and also carried out confidential interviews with authorities at each of these locations.

“We hope, and expect, that the Government of Azerbaijan will use our report to enhance prevention of torture and other ill-treatment, as well as to further improve conditions in which people may be deprived of their liberty,” Ms. Muhammad continued.

The SPT Delegation to the Republic of Azerbaijan comprises the following members: Ms. Aisha Shujune Muhammad, Mr. Milos Jankovic, Ms. Margarete Suzuko Osterfeld, Mr. Miguel Sarre-Iguiniz, and Mr. Victor Zaharia (Focal Point for Reprisals).

On eve of Togo national election, Ban calls for calm and transparency

24 April - On the eve of the presidential election in Togo, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is calling on all national stakeholders to recommit themselves to ensuring that the election is conducted in a peaceful, free and transparent manner and reflects the will of the people of Togo.

“The Secretary-General calls on all political leaders and their supporters to resolve any disputes that may arise from the electoral process through constitutional and peaceful means,” Mr. Ban Ki-moon’s spokesperson said in a statement released in New York.

“The Secretary-General reiterates the commitment of the United Nations to support the electoral process and the efforts of the Togolese to strengthen democratic order in their country,” the statement added.

Ban appoints new deputy head of humanitarian operations in Lebanon

24 April - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has announced the appointment of Philippe Lazzarini of Switzerland as his new Deputy Special Coordinator for Lebanon, a spokesperson for the Organization said today.

Mr. Lazzarini will succeed Ross Mountain of New Zealand.

The Secretary-General expressed his gratitude to Mr. Mountain for “his leadership and distinguished service” in coordinating UN humanitarian and development efforts in Lebanon, particularly in response to the Syrian crisis, the UN spokesperson continued.

Syrian refugees have settled in all parts of Lebanon, putting a huge strain on already-stretched services and infrastructure.

Almost a fifth of the 1.2 million Syrians who have sought refuge in Lebanon live in informal settlements like Debane, a huddle of 23 makeshift shelters built from wooden planks and plastic sheeting and currently home to 30 Syrian families. Located on a strip of public land, the refugees are not allowed to make permanent constructions, with the result that living and sanitary conditions remain basic.

Mr. Lazzarini brings with him “extensive experience” in humanitarian assistance following UN roles in Iraq, Angola, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In his latest assignment in Somalia, he also served as the UN’s Deputy Special Representative, Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in the country.
Welcoming Myanmar’s visible strides, Ban says ‘much more hard work lies ahead’

24 April - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, convening a meeting on Myanmar today, welcomed the positive direction of its reform process as it continues on its “path of historic transition”, but emphasized that more work remains to be done to address the country’s myriad challenges.

“The country has taken visible strides in many areas of socio-economic development, national reconciliation and democratization,” Mr. Ban said at the Partnership Group on Myanmar, emphasizing that the reform process initiated by the Government of President U Thein Sein continues to progress steadily.

The general elections due to be held by year’s end will be an important milestone and conducting them in a credible and inclusive manner, will require long-term engagement by all. In that regard, the Government must ensure free assembly, an open atmosphere for the media and the protection of civil and political rights for all.

“President Thein Sein’s efforts to engage in political dialogue with other leaders on key issues –including constitutional reform -- have been encouraging,” the UN chief said, adding that the Government has shown “exemplary resolve” in striving to achieve peace.

After 16 months of negotiations, on 31 March, the Government and ethnic armed groups reached agreement on the text of a nationwide ceasefire accord, which can bring to an end more than sixty years of conflict, Mr. Ban pointed out.

“However, much more hard work lies ahead. It will be important that the ceasefire agreement is signed and sealed without delay,” he said, emphasizing that the agreement is only a first step towards a broader national dialogue on important issues such as the role of military and constitutional reform.

Mr. Ban said that ongoing clashes in Kachin and Northern Shan States have caused immense suffering to civilians. The clashes in Kokang are also deeply disturbing in terms of the toll of lives and destruction as well as their implications for the longer term stability of the region.

“Humanitarian actors will need unimpeded access to provide much needed aid in a timely fashion. The tensions arising from these clashes must not jeopardize the larger peace process,” the Secretary-General said.

The continued animosity between the communities in Rakhine could be “seriously destabilizing,” said Mr. Ban, pointing out there are “already troubling signs of ethnic and religious differences being exploited in the run-up to the elections.” He also warned that the reform process could be jeopardized if the underlying causes of tensions are left unaddressed.

Meanwhile, the conditions of the vulnerable populations especially in the internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps remain a matter of “profound concern”. Many people have risked their lives to flee the country by sea and others have become prey to trafficking rings. While the Government has taken steps to stabilize the situation, long-term stability remains “unattainable without addressing the issue of status and citizenship of the Muslim populations”.

A statement released by the Secretary-General’s spokesperson later in the day said that Member States during the meeting voiced their continued support to the reform efforts of the Government in the areas of democratization, socio-economic development, and national reconciliation.

“They underlined the importance of the upcoming elections as a decisive phase in the reform agenda,” the statement added.

Participants commended the resolve shown by Myanmar’s President Thein Sein’s Government and the ethnic armed groups in reaching a nationwide ceasefire accord of 31 March. They also expressed hope that early agreement would be reached on the framework for political dialogue that met the expectations of all stakeholders.
Referring to the ongoing communal tensions in Rakhine and elsewhere, Member States emphasized the need for firm and decisive action by the Government to prevent further conflict by resolving the substantive issues affecting those displaced by outbreaks of communal violence and addressing the underlying issues pertaining to status verification and citizenship for all the affected communities.

Member States welcomed recent positive initiatives to address the humanitarian concerns. On the larger issues of citizenship and status, they hoped the Government would urgently undertake new measures in line with its national laws as well as international standards.

While recognizing the complex ethnic and religious fabric of the country and its history, Member States also called upon Myanmar to remain committed to international humanitarian and human rights standards as it moves forward on its democratic reforms.