Yemen: UN envoy optimistic for humanitarian truce amid ‘constructive political engagement’

24 June - Yemeni stakeholders remain on the path towards reviving a much-needed political transition despite the country’s ongoing hostilities, the United Nations Special Envoy for the Gulf state, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, said today as he urged all parties to observe a humanitarian truce aimed at helping the delivery of critical relief aid to Yemeni civilians.

Addressing reporters earlier this afternoon at a press stakeout in New York, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed applauded the efforts made by national stakeholders during the recent Geneva Consultations as they met amid an escalating conflict that has already cost thousands of lives and devastated large swathes of the country.

“Despite the raging battles, the ongoing violence and the dramatic humanitarian situation, Yemenis answered the Secretary-General’s invitation and participated in the initial consultations,” he declared. “The personal presence of the Secretary-General is an indication of the primary importance attached by the UN and the international community, and in particular the Secretary-General himself to the Yemeni situation. I deeply regret the deep division between the parties and lack of compromise which prevented an agreement that was within reach.”

The UN has been desperately seeking to facilitate a political solution to the Yemen crisis since fighting in the country began in March, leading to an increasingly desperate humanitarian situation on the ground.

According to a recent joint survey released by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP), six million people in Yemen are slipping towards severe hunger and now need emergency food and life-saving assistance, a sharp increase from the last quarter of 2014. In addition to the population facing a food security ‘emergency,’ over 6.5 million people are classified as facing a food insecurity security ‘crisis.’
Meanwhile, the study added, 10 out of Yemen’s 22 governorates are now classified as facing food insecurity at ‘emergency’ level. Millions more are highly vulnerable and could easily fall into emergency levels unless there is a dramatic improvement in the availability and access to food at prices that most people can afford.

The humanitarian stresses brought on by the conflict, however, have only compounded the already severe human toll of the fighting.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), has noted that thousands of people in the country have been killed and injured by airstrikes and ground fighting in the last three months alone while over 1 million people have fled their homes. In addition, a staggering 80 per cent of the Yemeni population currently need humanitarian assistance.

Finally, the dire situation has also aggravated the country’s health infrastructure as a recent World Health Organization (WHO) analysis reported over 3,000 suspected dengue cases across the country.

Nevertheless, the UN-facilitated consultations – which brought together stakeholders from across Yemen – concluded on 19 June with the UN envoy voicing some optimism that specific goals, including the imposition of a humanitarian ceasefire, could be achieved.

Reiterating that sense of hopefulness to the press this afternoon, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed noted that even though a concrete agreement had not yet materialized, both sides had showed signs of “constructive engagement” regarding the possibility of reaching a humanitarian truce.

“There is an emerging common ground up on which we can build to achieve an eventual cease-fire coupled with the withdrawal of combatants,” he continued. “While we pursue a sustainable long-term cessation of violence, I called on all the relevant parties to agree without delay to a humanitarian truce, especially during the holy month of Ramadan.”

“We should not forget that Yemenis are living under dire conditions and it pains me to witness this ongoing suffering,” concluded the UN envoy.

**Thousands of civilians fleeing ‘rule of fear’ in Eritrea, say UN experts, warning of gross rights abuses**

24 June - A United Nations-appointed commission of inquiry today warned that the dire situation in Eritrea can no longer be ignored and called on the UN Human Rights Council to maintain close scrutiny on violations committed in the Horn of Africa nation that may constitute crimes against humanity.

“The number fleeing such a small country – estimated at 5,000 people each month – is forcing the outside world to take notice,” Mike Smith, Chairperson of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, told the 29th session of Council, which is meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, upon delivering the nearly 500-page report.

“Eritrea’s dire human rights situation can no longer be ignored,” Mr. Smith said. “Imagine the impact of this uncertainty on young Eritreans who lose all control over their own futures. Is it any wonder that Eritreans – most of them young people – are the second largest nationality after Syrians to resort to seaborne smugglers to cross the Mediterranean to Europe?”

The number of Eritreans fleeing their country reached more than 400,000 – nearly doubling over the past six years, according to the UN refugee agency.

On the basis of this body of evidence, the Commission report, which was issued on 8 June, said it “found that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the
Mr. Smith told the Council that after more than two decades of independence, the dream of a democratic Eritrea now seems more distant than ever.

"Instead of a country ruled by law and good governance, the Eritrea we see today is marked by repression and fear," Smith said. "Since independence, ultimate power in Eritrea has remained largely in the hands of one man and one party. Those in control often rule arbitrarily and act with impunity... The Eritrean people have no say in governance and little control over many aspects of their own lives."

For example, the report notes that Eritrea has never held free elections, has no independent judiciary, arbitrary arrest is common – often ordered by anyone with de facto authority, with tens of thousands of Eritreans being imprisoned, often without charge and for indeterminate periods.

In addition, the Government has subjected much of the population to open-ended national service, either in the army or through the civil service, often for years in harsh and inhumane conditions.

Denied access to Eritrea, the Commission members conducted interviews with some 550 witnesses in eight countries and received 160 written submissions. On 9 June, the Eritrean Foreign Ministry issued a statement describing the Commission’s findings as ‘an attack, not so much on the Government, but on a civilized people and society who cherish human values and dignity.’

In response to that charge, Mr. Smith said: “With respect, we the commission are recording the voices of real Eritrean people as articulated in the 550 testimonies and 160 submissions received. We also reflect the silenced voice of the majority of Eritreans who have never been able to elect their own representatives in national, free, fair and democratic elections...and it is the voice of those who every day risk their lives to flee a government that has failed them and all of the others.”

Mr. Smith said the most urgent measure was for Eritrea to change political will and acknowledge the issues it faced, followed by the adoption and implementation of the constitution, which would include the rule of law and access to justice for victims. Eritrea also had to urgently demobilize its citizens and end indefinite military service, as well as release all political prisoners.

“It is high time that the Government of Eritrea truly endeavours to improve the human rights of its people,” Smith concluded. “We need to see real progress, not just words.”

Meanwhile, Sheila B. Keetharuth, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, also presented her report to the Council, which focused on forced evictions and demolitions as a violation of the right to adequate housing. She said that the figure of approximately 800 houses bulldozed in Asmara and several other villages in the vicinity represented conservative estimates collated from different sources, as no official statistics were available.

Ms. Keetharuth, who is also a member of the Commission, said in her capacity as an independent special rapporteur other issues in Eritrea that should remain on the agenda were: arbitrary detention, unaccompanied minors, migration, and economic and social rights.

The Commission was established by the Human Rights Council in June 2014 to investigate all alleged violations of human rights in Eritrea. In addition to Mr. Smith and Ms. Keetharuth, the third member is Victor Dankwa.
At Security Council, UN political chief warns of precarious situation in Middle East

24 June - During the past month, the security situation in the Middle East remained tense, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, today reported to the Security Council.

In the West Bank, “in three separate incidents, three Palestinian men were killed by the Israeli security forces,” he said, while a Palestinian shot at an Israeli vehicle travelling near a settlement close to Ramallah, killing one Israeli civilian and injuring another.

Reporting on events over the past few months, he said a total of 186 Palestinians were injured, including 28 children and two women, as well as five members of the Israeli security forces, and added that an Israeli policeman was critically wounded at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, while his attacker remains in critical condition after being shot in return.

Meanwhile, some 400 search-and-arrest operations were conducted, resulting in the arrest of 510 Palestinians, Mr. Feltman underlined, expressing the Secretary-General’s deep concern about the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israel, notably those in administrative detention.

While the demolishing of homes and structures in the West Bank continues, the planning and zoning system as it stands makes it “virtually impossible” for Palestinians to build or develop their land “in Area C,” he explained.

In Gaza, a “desperate” situation was exacerbated by a number of security incidents, 12 Palestinians having been shot and injured by Israeli security forces. Ten rockets were fired by Palestinian militants from Gaza, “thankfully without casualties or damage,” while a further 11 rockets were test fired towards the sea, the Under-Secretary-General noticed. Israeli security forces responded by conducting eleven airstrikes on militant sites in Gaza.

Concerns are also mounting around internal divisions within Gaza, including a “potentially developing threat from militant Salafist individuals or groups.” On 2 June, the UN official reported, Hamas security forces reportedly killed a Salafist accused of firing rockets at Israel and arrested a number of others.

“The ever challenging circumstances in Gaza highlight the urgent need for strengthening Palestinian unity. Conflicts, poor governance and the closures have crushed Gaza’s economy. Unemployment spiked to 43 per cent at the end of 2014,” Mr. Feltman deplored.

Welcoming Prime Minister Hamdallah’s commitment to overcoming these obstacles, he emphasized how much the willingness and capacity of all Palestinian factions to resolve their differences is “integral to lifting the blockade of Gaza and advancing efforts to achieve statehood.”

Briefing the Council on the aftermath of the release of the Independent Commission of Inquiry’s report on Gaza, Mr. Feltman said that, while the Secretary-General does not comment “on the substance of such reports,” the UN hopes that it will contribute to “bringing justice to victims of last year’s war” and encourages the parties “to engage in serious and credible examinations of their own behaviour.”

Accepting a fatalistic narrative on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will only accelerate a deterioration of the situation,” he warned. “The risk of radicalization in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is heightened by the continued lack of a political horizon. Absent courageous leadership, a sustainable solution will remain a distant and unachievable goal.”

In that regard, the Secretary-General is encouraged, he said, by the recent recommitment of Prime Minister Netanyahu to “the idea of a sustainable two-state solution,” but notes “this must be translated into actions.”
He also warned against the current “vacuum” in Lebanon, which has been without a President for over a year, preventing the parliament from legislating on urgent issues, affecting the economy and the Government’s ability to function effectively. Another source of concern, Mr. Feltman outlined, is rising along the eastern Lebanese-Syrian border, where Hezbollah has fought armed extremist groups, including ISIL and the Nusra Front.

Finally, in Syria, while consultations continue with national, regional and international delegations on the operationalization of the Geneva Communique, civilians keep crossing borders, including with Turkey, approximately 25,000 of them seeking refuge in Turkey during the reporting period.

“It is neither just nor possible to expect from Turkey to continue to face the refugee pressures alone,” stressed the Under-Secretary-General.

South Sudan children at risk from cholera outbreak, warns UNICEF

24 June - A cholera outbreak is threatening South Sudan’s children in the latest blow to a country already teetering on the brink of all-out crisis amid incessant fighting and mass displacement, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has reported.

According to the UN agency, eighteen people, including two children under the age of five, have already died from the disease with the first case reported on 27 May at the Protection of Civilians (PoC) site in Juba, the young nation’s capital. Since then, 170 suspected cases have been reported inside the site and in villages across Central Equatoria State.

“Up to 5,000 children under five are at risk of dying from cholera unless urgent action is taken to contain this threat,” UNICEF Representative in South Sudan, Jonathan Veitch, warned in a press release issued yesterday.

South Sudan’s ongoing conflict began in December 2013 and has been marked by brutal violence against civilians and deepening suffering across the country. Some 120,000 people are sheltered in UN compounds there while United Nations estimates that the number of people in need for 2015 will include an anticipated 1.95 million internally displaced persons and a projected 293,000 refugees.

As the fighting has worsened and pushed increasing numbers of people out of their homes and into overcrowded camps and settlements, often without access to clean water and in poor hygiene conditions, the risk of disease and epidemics has only grown. A cholera outbreak in May 2014 already claimed 167 lives before it was brought under control by the Government and UN partners.

Currently, UNICEF is engaged in a series of urgent interventions aimed at increasing awareness on how to prevent, detect and treat cholera while social mobilizers are conducting a door-to-door campaign to provide lifesaving information to vulnerable communities. In order to maintain these efforts, the agency is appealing for $4.6 million to fund an emergency cholera response for the next six months.

“It is deplorable that such an easily preventable disease could destroy so many young lives,” Mr. Veitch continued. “UNICEF is working with communities and health facilities to prevent further loss of life but we are running out of funds to stop this.”
Nepal: two months on, UN agency shifts post-quake focus from emergency response to recovery

24 June - Thousands of porters are carrying food and other relief high into Nepal's mountains, and repairing trails as they go, as part of a shift by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) from emergency response to longer-term recovery, after the 25 April earthquake.

“We have started the difficult transition from the emergency period to the early recovery phase – providing cash, employment and rebuilding opportunities for people heavily impacted by the disaster,” today said Richard Ragan, WFP’s Emergency Coordinator in Nepal, where the Programme has managed to feed nearly 2 million people.

In addition, a cash-for-work programme in areas with access to markets has already allowed 9,000 households to build transitional shelters and to work on their fields, which in turn have revitalized local markets, highlights a press release.

Up to 20,000 porters, who lost their livelihoods because of the abrupt end to the trekking season, now receive income for repairing vital trails blocked by the quake and for bringing essential supplies to communities that have been cut off.

However, on the eve of the international donor community meeting in Kathmandu, WFP is warning that it is running out of funds. WFP's operation in Nepal is 38 percent funded and US$74 million is needed to keep providing assistance until the end of the year.

As the lead UN agency for logistics, WFP also needs to continue providing essential logistics and telecommunication services, including maintaining a fleet of trucks to transport relief items and building materials on behalf of the entire humanitarian community.

“The hard work begins now”, stressed Mr. Ragan. “People need to urgently build temporary shelters against the monsoon rains. The heavy downpours risk causing more landslides on land already unsettled by scores of aftershocks. To maintain and expand an operation of this scope and logistical complexity, sustained financial support is required.”

WFP is the world's largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger worldwide, delivering food assistance in emergencies and working with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience. Each year, WFP assists some 80 million people in around 75 countries.
UN envoy on Ebola travels to Guinea Bissau after new cases reported in bordering Guinea

24 June - The United Nations envoy for Ebola response has begun a visit to take stock of prevention and preparedness efforts in Guinea Bissau, which remains at high risk given its proximity to Guinea where new cases of the virus were reported in an urban area bordering the two countries.

To date, no confirmed cases of Ebola disease has been reported in Guinea-Bissau.

Acting Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and head of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), Peter Graaff, met with Guinea-Bissau’s Prime Minister, Domingo Simoes Pereira, and also with Minister of Health Valentina Mendes, to discuss preparedness measures.

Mr. Graaff is on a two-day official visit to “to take stock of the current Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) prevention and preparedness efforts in the country and see with government how the UN can further mobilize support,” according to a press release from UNMEER.

In addition to meeting with top Guinea-Bissau officials and partners, the UN envoy plans to visit the EVD isolation and treatment site at the Simao Mendes National Hospital in Bissau.

“He will also travel to Contabane border post with Guinea Conakry,” UNMEER said, adding that “the country remains at high risk given its proximity to Guinea, and the recent new cases in the Guinean Prefecture of Boké, bordering Guinea-Bissau.”

According to the World Health Organization’s (WHO) latest update, there were 20 confirmed cases of Ebola virus disease reported in the week to 21 June, compared with 24 cases the previous week.

“Weekly case incidence has stalled at between 20 and 27 cases since the end of May, whilst cases continue to arise from unknown sources of infection, and to be detected only after post-mortem testing of community deaths,” the update said.

Regarding Guinea, it noted that “although cases have been reported from the same four prefectures in Guinea for the past 3 weeks, the area of active transmission within those prefectures has changed, and in several instances has expanded.”

WHO reported that in the northern prefecture of Boke, the main focus of transmission has switched from the coastal sub-prefecture of Kamsar to the more urbanized sub-prefecture of Boke Centre and “of particular concern, two of the cases reported from Boke in the week to 21 June were health workers.”

Compared with Guinea, transmission in Sierra Leone has been more geographically confined over the past three weeks, WHO said.

In Guinea-Bissau, UN agencies have joined hands with international and national partners to strongly advocate and support leadership, coordination and action for rapid establishment of the necessary national EVD preparedness and response components.

There have been 27,443 confirmed cases of Ebola in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone with 11,207 reported deaths, according to WHO. The outbreak in Liberia was declared over on 9 May.
New UN report finds drop in global foreign direct investment in 2014

24 June - Global foreign direct investment (FDI) declined in 2014 but flows to developing countries actually reached their highest level ever, says a new United Nations report released today that also calls for systematic reform of the current international investment agreement regime.

According to the 2015 edition of the World Investment Report, FDI fell by 16 per cent to $1.23 trillion in 2014, while flows to developed countries declined by 28 per cent to $499 billion.

The report, produced by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), says this is mostly because of “the fragility of the global economy, policy uncertainty for investors and elevated geopolitical risks,” adding that new investments were offset by some large divestments, the most important being in the United States.

In the meantime, inward FDI flows to developing economies reached their highest level ever, at $681 billion with a 2 per cent rise. Among the top 10 FDI recipients in the world, five are developing economies, with China taking the lead.

For 2015, UNCTAD projects global FDI inflows to grow by 11 per cent to $1.4 trillion. Expectations are for further rises to $1.5 trillion in 2016 and to $1.7 trillion in 2017.

The Geneva-based UN agency is also calling for a systematic reform of the international investment agreement regime in order to bring coherence to the almost 3,300 agreements currently in existence.

“The case for reform is clear,” UNCTAD Secretary-General Mukhisa Kituyi said. “We are now faced with a global patchwork of agreements, with unintended and sometimes far-reaching consequences for the right, of developed and developing countries alike, to regulate.”

“‘Old style’ international investment agreements have increasingly come to a dead end. Reform should make the global network of international investment agreements better fit the needs and realities of today and tomorrow,” explained Mr. Kituyi, stressing the importance of achieving such harmonization as the international community is in the process of formulating a new development agenda.

“Reform should be guided by the goal of more effectively harnessing international investment agreements for sustainable and inclusive development, focusing on key reform areas, and following a multi-level, systematic and inclusive approach,” Mr. Kituyi stated. “Only a common approach will deliver an international investment agreement regime in which stability, clarity and predictability help achieve the objectives of all stakeholders.”

Among the areas where governments should undertake efforts, UNCTAD mentions the need to safeguard the right to regulate in the public interest, to reform investment dispute settlement and to expand investment promotion and facilitation in international investment agreements.
UN deputy chief asks stakeholders to consider assessed contribution for peacebuilding

24 June - The United Nations Peacebuilding Fund is “something positive which works, in a troubled, turbulent and turmoil-driven world,” Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson said today, while asking its stakeholders to consider devoting a small amount of assessed contributions for peacebuilding purposes.

“We need a mechanism to provide predictable, core support for peacebuilding.” Mr. Eliasson said in remarks to the Annual Peacebuilding Fund Stakeholders Meeting at UN Headquarters. “Isn’t it time to consider devoting a small amount of assessed contributions for peacebuilding purposes? Wouldn’t this remind us all that we need to invest in longer-term peace stabilization?”

Following a request from the General Assembly and the Security Council, the Secretary-General established the Fund for post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives in October 2006, as an essential component for a more sustained engagement in support of countries emerging from conflict.

Mr. Eliasson said the Secretary-General’s Advisory Group had endorsed an annual programming target of $100 million per year, and for its part, the Peacebuilding Fund is now achieving this target.

“However – and this is serious – we are not raising $100 million per year. And we have used up the reserves from the initial contributions of donors,” he said, adding that “it is short-sighted to not also be investing in conflict prevention and post-conflict programmes.”

Citing examples and describing the work of the Fund, the deputy UN chief said it was “a particular pleasure” to address the meeting because it provided him a chance to talk about “something positive which works, in a troubled, turbulent and turmoil-driven world.”

“Post-conflict countries face simultaneous challenges on nearly every front: economic, social, cultural and political,” he said. “Their leaders do not have the luxury of time. They need to create economic opportunities, to invest in their youth and to unleash the creative social and economic power of their women. They need to set up working governance systems. And they need to do all this under great pressures and expectations, taking advantage of critical windows to consolidate peace.”

But Mr. Eliasson also drew attention to the need to focus more on women’s empowerment.

“The Secretary-General has established a target that 15 per cent of all UN peacebuilding resources should focus on the empowerment of women,” he said. “I regret to say that the Peacebuilding Fund is still failing to meet this figure.”

He cited an example by the Fund, which approved a project earlier this year that will facilitate the networking and capacity-building of women’s organizations engaging in political life in Somalia.

Mr. Eliasson concluded by saying that “we have developed an instrument, built on guidelines from the General Assembly, which emphasizes speed, flexibility, national ownership and risk-tolerance.”

“This work is now delivering results,” he said. “Now is also the time, I suggest, to renew and expand that support.”
UN Somalia envoy condemns latest terrorist attack in Mogadishu

24 June - The top United Nations official in Somalia has condemned “in the strongest terms” today’s Al-Shabaab terrorist attack against a convoy from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the capital of Mogadishu, resulting in a number of casualties.

“I condemn today’s appalling attack against innocent civilians and dedicated international officials who are providing critical peace-building and State building support to Somalia,” Nicholas Kay, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), declared in a press statement issued earlier this afternoon.

“The attack is an attempt to deter and undermine those from the international community working with Somalis to build a better Somalia,” he continued. “These terrorists will not achieve that objective.”

In a briefing of the Security Council last month, Mr. Kay told Security Council members that momentum had been regained on efforts to achieve political progress in the country, pointing to work by federal, regional and local leaders, and parliamentarians to build a State through dialogue and reconciliation, and top-level commitment to deliver Somalia’s Vision 2016 plan.

At the same time, however, he conceded that there was “still a long way to go,” adding that with so much at stake between now and 2016, “we can expect Al-Shabaab to do everything it can to derail the political process.”

In today’s statement, the UN official added his “sincere condolences” to the family and friends of all those who have suffered, as well as to the government of the UAE, and reiterated the UN’s “unfaltering commitment to fighting the scourge of terrorism.”