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In Paraguay, UN chief sets sights on post-2015 development agenda

25 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called on the Government of Paraguay to join forces with the United Nations and forge ahead in framing the post-2015 agenda for a new generation of sustainable development goals, noting that the country had “an important role to play across the board.”

“We need sustainable and inclusive development for all,” Mr. Ban declared today during a joint press briefing with Paraguay’s President Horacio Manuel Cartes Jara in the country’s capital of Asunción. “At this decisive moment, we must work together to end poverty and transform lives while protecting the planet.”

This year marks the end of implementation of the landmark UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which world leaders agreed on 15 years ago in an effort to tackle poverty and climate change and to pave the way towards a more gender equal global society. The new targets, to be known as the sustainable development goals (SDGs), are defining the way forward on the world’s most pressing issues until the next critical deadline in 2030.

Overall, there has been significant progress in meeting the MDG targets. Global poverty has been halved well ahead of the 2015 deadline; in developing countries, 90 per cent of children now enjoy primary education; the number of people lacking access to improved drinking water has halved; and the fight against malaria and tuberculosis has shown results.

Nonetheless, numerous challenges persist. Globally, 73 million young people are looking for work and many more are trapped in exploitative jobs. In recent years, more than two and a half million more children in affluent countries fell into poverty, bringing the total above 76 million.

In Asunción, Mr. Ban “warmly congratulated” Mr. Cartes on Paraguay’s “impressive achievements” in reducing poverty and striving to meet the MDGs. More Paraguayans are currently enjoying better access to education and health care, he
observed, and an increasing number of families are gaining access to clean water and sanitation.

At the same time, the country was experiencing the damaging effects of global warming despite not being a large contributor to global emissions.

“Paraguay is already feeling the impacts of climate change – ranging from increased flooding to prolonged droughts,” Mr. Ban continued. He added that at the Paris climate conference in December the world would have “the chance to adopt a meaningful, universal agreement to tackle climate change.”

The Secretary-General, who travels tomorrow to Paraguay’s famed ITAIPU hydroelectric dam, also celebrated the South American country for its ongoing contributions to the UN – from the Paraguayan peacekeepers serving in eight countries around the world to the country’s “leadership in advancing the special needs of Landlocked Developing Countries.”

**Cutting crime ‘manifestly important’ to sustainable development, UN Assembly told**

25 February - Reducing violent crime is critical to sustainable development, the top United Nations ant-crime official told the General Assembly today, spotlighting that while global progress has been made in combatting the scourge, homicide levels in low and lower-middle income countries have increased by 10 per cent over the last decade.

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2013, the homicide rate in these countries was on average 2.5 times the rate in high-income countries.

“Reducing crime and violence and ensuring the rule of law are manifestly important to the everyday lives of people – to protect the vulnerable from exploitation, stop corruption from eroding public services, and free young people from the downward spiral of poverty, drugs, crime and violence,” said UNODC Executive Director Yury Fedotov at a high-level General Assembly thematic session on ‘Integrating Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in the Post-2015 Development Agenda.’

Today’s gathering precedes the 13th UN Crime Congress to be held in Doha this April, and which is the largest gathering of governments, civil society and experts in the area of crime prevention and criminal justice.

Kicking off today’s session alongside Mr. Fedotov was, among other UN officials, Martin Sajdik, President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as well as the Permanent Representative of Austria, Qatar’s Foreign Minister via video message, and the Former President of Slovenia.

Following their opening remarks, two panel discussions were held on successes and challenges of crime policies and on fostering international cooperation.

UNODC’s programmes promote rights-based crime prevention and criminal justice responses to address challenges on a country, regional and global level. Its mandate involves battling corruption, illicit financial flows, money laundering and terrorist financing. Additionally, it focuses on emerging and re-emerging crimes, including wildlife and forest crime, cybercrime, piracy and trafficking in fraudulent medicines, all of which hinder sustainable development.

Its work is based on globally agreed frameworks, among them the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its three protocols, the Convention Against Corruption, the international drug control conventions, the universal legal instruments against terrorism and UN standards and norms on crime prevention and criminal justice.

Mr. Fedotov today stressed the importance of garnering support for these international treaties: “While much remains to be done for Member States to effectively implement their commitments, these frameworks provide a sound basis for addressing challenges to the rule of law and justice, strengthening institutions and promoting international cooperation in support of sustainable, equitable development.”
Furthermore, the UNODC chief called for “genuine ownership” on the part of States and tools to measure whether countries are upholding their commitments. Strengthening national statistical systems to provide high-quality crime and criminal justice data should also be a priority.

In his remarks, UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson echoed that call to the Assembly, saying that all countries need effective crime prevention and criminal justice systems that adhere to due process and guarantees of fair trial.

Stressing that more must be done to safeguard sustainable development through effective crime prevention and the promotion of human rights, Mr. Eliasson called for a “holistic approach” to deal with crime. “As we move forward with our plans for transformative sustainable development, we must acknowledge the debilitating and destabilizing effects of crime and violence.”

“Insecurity corruption and crime impede access to health, education and other basic services. They undermine trade and commercial relations, job opportunities and the protection of property. All this harms individuals and damages societies. A deeply worrying trend is the growing relationship between organised crime and terrorism.”

Like Mr. Fedotov, the Deputy Secretary-General urged nations to adopt international instruments on terrorism, drug control, corruption, human trafficking and smuggling of migrants and firearms, and emphasised that governments and the global community need detailed crime research and analysis to make effective policy choices.

President of the General Assembly, Sam Kutesa, in his remarks said crime prevention and access to justice “go hand-in-hand” with many critically important development objectives including the eradication of poverty and increasing access to health care, education, water and energy.

Calling protection against crime and violence “one of the most fundamental pre-requisites for leading a dignified, productive life,” he said crime weakens State authority, fuels corruption, harms already fragile economies and undermines quality of life. Modern crime has great reach and considerable influence. It transcends borders and grows in size and scope.

Hence, the rule of law must be a fundamental principle integrated into the core of the UN’s work. That starts with States’ commitment to international law, Mr. Kutesa said encouraging the adoption of Conventions against transnational Organized Crime and against Corruption.

“The centrepiece of our efforts should be criminal justice reform, aimed at access to justice and the promotion of an independent judiciary.”

**UN health agency ‘taken aback’ as measles resurfaces in Europe, calls for widespread vaccination**

25 February - European policymakers, healthcare workers, and parents must step up their efforts to vaccinate children against measles amid an ongoing outbreak across the continent, the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) said today, warning that a recent resurgence in the disease threatened Europe’s goal of eliminating measles by the end of 2015.

According to UN data, over 22,000 cases of the virus have surfaced across Europe during the 2014 to 2015 biennium with the outbreak spreading to seven countries. This comes despite a 50 per cent drop from 2013 to 2014.

“When we consider that over the past two decades we have seen a reduction of 96 per cent in the number of measles cases in the European region, and that we are just a step away from eliminating the disease, we are taken aback by these numbers,” Dr. Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe, affirmed in a press release.

“We must collectively respond, without further delay, to close immunization gaps. It is unacceptable that, after the last 50 years’ efforts to make safe and effective vaccines available, measles continues to cost lives, money and time,” she added.
The WHO announcement comes amid a continuing measles outbreak in the United States and stalled progress in eradicating the virus in the Eastern Mediterranean region, where weak health systems, conflict and population displacement have hampered vaccination efforts.

According to WHO’s fact sheet on measles, the disease’s outbreaks can be particularly deadly in countries experiencing or recovering from a natural disaster or conflict. Damage to health infrastructure and health services interrupts routine immunization, and overcrowding in residential camps greatly increases the risk of infection.

WHO said that impressive gains had been made towards measles elimination in recent years and an estimated 15.6 million deaths were prevented through vaccination during 2000-2013 but the huge reductions in mortality are tapering off.

As for the 2014-2015 outbreaks, who lists the affected countries and number of cases as: Kyrgyzstan (7,477); Bosnia and Herzegovina (5,340); Russia (3,247); Georgia (3,291); Italy (1,674); Germany (583); and Kazakhstan (537).

Europe’s outbreaks, including the current one, are continuing to occur due to pockets of susceptible un- or under-immunized people, particularly as growing numbers of parents either refuse to vaccinate their children or face barriers in accessing vaccination.

In their press release, the WHO urged an improvement in surveillance to detect and investigate all suspected cases; the rapid testing of cases and the identification of chains of transmission; and making “high-quality evidence” readily available.

“The priority is now to control current outbreaks in all affected countries through immunization activities targeting people at risk,” concluded Dr. Nedret Emiroglu, Deputy Director of the Division of Communicable Diseases, Health Security and Environment at the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

“At the same time, all countries, with no exception, need to keep a very high coverage of regular measles vaccination, so that similar outbreaks won’t happen again in our Region, and measles can be eliminated once and for all.”

The fourth Millennium Development Goal (MDG 4) aims to reduce the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015. Recognizing the potential of measles vaccination to reduce child mortality, and given that measles vaccination coverage can be considered a marker of access to child health services, routine measles vaccination coverage has been selected as an indicator of progress towards achieving that target.

Natural disasters in Asia and Pacific impact some 80 million people, new UN study shows

When leaders and decision makers from across Asia and the Pacific gather next month in Japan to discuss how to reduce disaster risks, their top priority will be to build resilience in a region that saw some 80 million people affected and nearly $60 billion in economic losses incurred by natural disasters last year.

That’s according to Natural Disasters in Asia and the Pacific: 2014 Year in Review report released today by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

The report said that more than half of the world’s 226 natural disasters occurred in the Asia and Pacific region last year.

And although it was a year without a single large-scale catastrophe caused by an earthquake or tsunami, the region experienced severe storms, cross-border floods and landslides, which accounted for 85 percent of all disasters, it said.

In addition, more than 6,000 fatalities were caused by natural disasters, compared to 18,744 deaths in 2013, and an estimated 79.6 million people were affected by natural disasters across the Asia and Pacific, according to the report.
Economic losses owing to natural disasters in 2014 also remained high, amounting to some $59.6 billion, highlighting the lack of economic resilience in the region, said the report, which presented a diagnostic analysis of the region’s state of resilience and lessons learnt.

The report noted that the highest economic losses in Asia and the Pacific were incurred from river-basin floods ($16 billion) and Cyclone HudHud ($11 billion) in India, followed by the Ludian earthquake in China ($6 billion), and the tropical cyclones Lingling and Kajiki in Japan ($5.2 billion).

The region was found largely unprepared in its response to cross-border floods and landslides, according to the report.

“Such disasters, which may very well be on the rise because of climate change, require improved regional information exchanges and the joint coordination of operations for effective early warning and evacuations,” it said. “The report calls for strengthened regional cooperation to address cross-border disasters.”

ESCAP noted that its findings show how preparedness for severe storm events through effective early warning systems has significantly reduced death tolls.

“One important lesson from 2014 is that end-to-end early warning systems save lives,” Shamika Sirimanne, Director of ESCAP’s Disaster Risk Reduction Division, was quoted as saying.

ESCAP said that leaders and decision-makers across Asia and the Pacific are preparing to finalize a new global framework for disaster risk reduction, which will succeed the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action, at a conference to be held next month in Sendai, Japan, expected to attract around 8,000 participants.

“The lessons from 2014 clearly show that building resilience remains a key priority in protecting lives and assets in the Asia and the Pacific,” it said.

The Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) is the first plan to explain, describe and detail the work that is required from all different sectors and actors to reduce disaster losses.

**UN Libya mission urges country’s stakeholders to pursue next round of talks**

25 February - The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) announced today that it is undertaking a series of urgent consultations with stakeholders in the North African country to ensure the convening of the next round of talks soon and “not let this window of opportunity slip away.”

This follows recent political and security developments, particularly last week’s deadly terrorist bombings in the City of Al-Qubbah and the decision of the House of Representatives in Libya to suspend its participation in the political dialogue. The latest wave of violence has further rattled the war-weary nation, in conflict since the beginning of its civil war in 2011, which resulted in the ouster of late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

In a statement, the Mission said it “would like to clarify a number of misconceptions in recent media coverage regarding the talks” the latest round of which took place in Geneva last month.

The UN-facilitated Libyan dialogue was conducted in a “responsible and serious environment, with a high sense of resolve and determination” with the hopes of reaching a comprehensive political agreement to end the country’s crisis and restore security, the Mission said.

“The participants and the United Nations were fully transparent during their work on the dialogue; decisions were made by participants after broad and inclusive deliberations and consultations,” it emphasized, adding that ending the “severe political division” in Libya is of critical importance, since its continuation will pose a clear threat to the unity of the country.
“Accordingly, it is urgent and necessary to reach an agreement on a strong and independent Government, whose highest priority should be restoring the confidence of the citizens in the Libyan State, as well as provision of services and combatting terrorism, since terrorism has become a real threat to the political process, the Libyan State, and the security and stability of the country and the region.”

The UN-backed dialogue is intended to produce proposals to be endorsed by Libyan stakeholders and supported by the people. All decisions made by participants – whether related to the consensus government’s mechanism, method of formulation, or to security arrangements related to the ceasefire – are first and foremost Libyan decisions that are made by the consensus of the participants, the Mission said.

In that regard, Special Representative of the Secretary-General Bernardino León, who also heads up UNSMIL, has reiterated to Libyan leaders the neutrality of the UN on many occasions, the last of which when he contacted Interim Prime Minister Abdullah Al-Thinni to offer condolences for the victims of the terrorist bombings in Al-Qubbah.

In that telephone conversation, Mr. León reiterated that a political agreement is the safeguard to Libya’s unity and ability to combat terrorism, and asked for the interim government’s public support for the dialogue. The Special Representative also assured Mr. Al-Thinni that the international community remains fully supportive of the dialogue.

Libya’s protracted conflict has caused a serious humanitarian crisis, with at least 120,000 people forced to flee their homes, resulting in consequent shortages in both food and medical supplies along with mounting numbers of casualties.

New UN report urges push to end problem of torture in Afghan detention facilities

25 February - The Government of Afghanistan’s efforts to prevent torture and ill-treatment have shown some progress over the last two years but much more remains to be done, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) confirmed today as it released its latest report on the treatment of conflict-related detainees in Afghan custody.

“UNAMA’s finding that torture of conflict-related detainees persists in spite of Government efforts over 2013-14 to address it is a source of serious concern,” said the UNAMA Human Rights Director, Georgette Gagnon, in a press release. “Continuing impunity for the use of torture allows torture to continue.”

The report – the third of its kind, and jointly produced with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – is based on interviews with 790 conflict-related detainees between February 2013 and December 2014, and highlights ill-treatment and torture during the arrest and interrogation phases in numerous facilities across the country with many alleged members of the Taliban and other anti-Government groups subjected to “severe pain and suffering, aimed mainly at obtaining a confession or information.”

Overall, 16 methods of torture and ill-treatment were described including severe beatings with pipes, cables and sticks, suspension, electric shocks and near-asphyxiation. The report also documents a “persistent lack of accountability” with only one criminal prosecution for torture observed since 2010, despite numerous verified incidents raised with officials over the course of the reporting period.

Although torture is prohibited and criminalized under Afghanistan’s Constitution and laws and under international law, UNAMA’s findings note that the country’s National Directorate of Security and the Ministry of Interior accountability and oversight mechanisms remain “inadequate, lacking independence, authority, transparency and capacity.”

“Accountability – particularly the prosecution of both those who perpetrate and administer torture, and those who order or condone it – is a key means of signalling political commitment at the highest levels to end it,” Ms. Gagnon continued.

Twenty out of 71 interviewed detainees reported having experienced torture or ill-treatment following their transfer to Afghan custody in 2013-14, including in Afghan facilities the International Security Assistance Force had certified as not
using torture. Moreover, the report points out that many Afghan security and police officials interviewed appeared not to accept that torture is illegal, instead viewing it as an appropriate method by which to extract valuable information.

“Torture is a very serious crime, for which there can be no justification. The international prohibition is absolute,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein stressed in the press release. “We have seen many examples showing how its use undermines national security and proves counter-productive.”

In addition, he pointed out that both the Afghan Constitution and the Criminal Procedure Code include due process guarantees to protect detainees from the use of torture and ill-treatment, including the prohibition of using evidence gained through torture.

Nevertheless, the report also shows a 14 per cent decrease in the number of detainees tortured or ill-treated compared to the previous reporting period.

Nicholas Haysom, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA, confirmed the Mission’s steadfast willingness to assist the authorities in improving accountability mechanisms in an effort to further reduce the instance of torture across the country.

“Well, we support – and can assist as requested – this comprehensive approach to eliminate torture and ill-treatment in Government of Afghanistan facilities.”

**Through UN-backed project, Ethiopian marmalade will soon hit shelves at ‘Eataly’**

*25 February* - Next time you feel like some cactus pear marmalade from Ethiopia but can’t make it to the town of Mekelle, check out the shelves of Italian gourmet food store Eataly.

Thanks to a partnership between the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Eataly to support family farmers around the globe, a cooperative of women in Ethiopia are now ready to ship their 4,000 jars of jam to Rome, where they will soon reach the shelves.

“The success story in Ethiopia illustrates what FAO is aiming to do on the ground: empowering women farmers to generate extra income and improve their livelihoods,” the agency said in a press release.

“The result: better food and nutrition, stronger local economies, and small businesses that will be able to thrive on their own once FAO’s intervention ends,” it adds.

FAO reported that for a few years Tsega Gebrekidan Aregawi ran a small kiosk in the northern Ethiopian town of Mekelle, where local university students would stop by to purchase fresh fruit juice, biscuits and homemade marmalades on their way to and from class.

“At that time, Tsega could hardly imagine that some of her own products might someday fly from Africa to reach international markets,” FAO said. “But things changed last year when FAO and the Italian food chain Eataly reached out to her and her five-woman cooperative with a challenging offer.”

Tsega and her colleagues were offered support in producing more cactus pear marmalade, which would be then bought and shipped to European tables.

“The group rose to the challenge,” according to FAO. “So far, they’ve produced 4,000 jars of marmalade and are now looking at using the revenues to even expanding their output and the variety of what they produce.”
Each jar will be bought at 3.50 EUR, a price FAO said is considered in line with local market standards and which covers production costs and guarantees significant revenues for its members.

“Our lives have changed since we started in this endeavor,” Tsega said.

“These are the kind of results we expect from agriculture,” FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva said, congratulating them on their success. “Family farming and small scale producers have a lot to offer – to their local communities, and on international markets. Their potential is large; they just need the right kind of support to unlock it,” he added.

The partnership between FAO and Eataly is also providing support to other small producers in other countries, helping them to find new markets, improve value addition, and get better prices for their goods.

The teamwork with Eataly is an example of FAO’s focus on partnerships. Since 2013, the Organization says it has signed over 60 agreements with a wide range of different stakeholders, including the private sector, civil society, non-governmental organizations, cooperatives and academia.

**Myanmar ‘needs urgently to get back on track’ – UN rights chief**

25 February - United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, today warned that Myanmar “seems headed in the wrong direction and needs urgently to get back on track” in a crucial year for the country’s democratic transition and long-term reconciliation.

“The international community has seen the transition in Myanmar as a story of promise and hope,” the High Commissioner said in a statement. “But recent developments relating to the human rights of minorities, the freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest are calling into question the direction of that reform, and even threatening to set it back.”

Zeid cited a number of recent cases in which the new space for freedom of expression and peaceful protest has been curtailed by regressive application of the law.

“In the latest in a long line of similar cases, last week 14 members of the Michaungkan community were jailed for peacefully protesting the alleged confiscation of their land by the military. Last year, we saw the jailing of 10 journalists under outdated defamation, trespassing and national security laws. And U Htin Lin Oo remains in detention for speaking out against the use of Buddhism as a tool for extremism,” Zeid said.

“Myanmar had promised to end the era of political prisoners, but now seems intent on creating a new generation by jailing people who seek to enjoy the democratic freedoms they have been promised,” the High Commissioner continued, stressing that ensuring democratic space will be critically important for the upcoming constitutional referendum and elections.

On 11 February, Myanmar’s President issued a notification announcing the expiry by the end of March of temporary ‘white cards’, held mainly by ethnic minorities who do not have citizenship under the discriminatory 1982 Citizenship Law. The decision appears designed to prevent ‘white card’ holders – the majority believed to be members of Myanmar’s stateless Rohingya Muslim minority – from being eligible to vote in the upcoming constitutional referendum and possibly in the General Election later this year. On 16 February, the Constitutional Tribunal ruled that it would be unconstitutional for ‘white card’ holders to vote in any upcoming referendum.

The Rohingyas, who number about one million, have lived in Myanmar for generations, but they are denied equal access to citizenship, and many have been victims of violent attacks. Notwithstanding that the Government has made some efforts to improve services, around 140,000 people continue to reside in overcrowded camps, the vast majority of whom are Rohingya, with severe and discriminatory restrictions placed on their freedom of movement. Noting the Government's official resistance to the use of the term “Rohingya”, Zeid warned the denial of a group's right to self-identification “should sound a clear warning bell” to the international community.
“During an election year, it will be tempting for some politicians to fan the flames of prejudice for electoral gain,” the High Commissioner said. “But at a time when religious extremism is creating havoc in many parts of the world, the terrible consequences of appealing to or appeasing such sentiments should be all too clear. A new democratic Myanmar should be built on the strength of its diversity.”

High Commissioner Zeid also expressed particular concern about four new laws, currently before Parliament, that are discriminatory against women and religious minorities and breach international standards on freedom of religion. The package of laws would place restrictions upon people who wish to change their religion, control the marriage of Buddhist women to non-Buddhist men, and allow the Government to regulate birth spacing and family planning in certain areas through the designation of special zones for “healthcare”.

The situation in the Kokang self-administered zone in northeastern Shan State, which is fast deteriorating following the escalation of violence between the Myanmar Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and other armed groups, is also cause for alarm, the High Commissioner warned. He added that the two attacks against Red Cross convoys in the space of a week were very disturbing.

Reports suggest tens of thousands have been displaced by the current fighting. On 18 February, a State of Emergency was declared for 90 days in the Kokang self-administered zone, providing wide-ranging executive and judicial powers to the military.

“It will be tragic for Myanmar's peace process if this violence is allowed to spiral,” Zeid said. “All parties must step back from the brink and ensure full respect for human rights and protection of the civilian population.”

**New studies show ‘significant breakthrough’ in HIV prevention, says UN agency combating virus**

*25 February* - The United Nations programme working to combat HIV/AIDS welcomed yesterday the results of a number of recent clinical studies of the effects of antiretroviral medicines on preventing new HIV infections, which were presented at a conference on viruses held in Seattle.

At the 2015 Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI), the results of two separate studies on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) medicines showed 86 per cent efficacy in preventing new HIV infections among men who have sex with men.

A third study showed that in so-called serodiscordant couples – where one partner has HIV and the other does not – access to PrEP for the HIV-negative person combined with access to antiretroviral therapy for the HIV-positive person was 96 per cent effective in preventing new infections.

“These new results are a significant breakthrough in advancing efforts to provide effective HIV prevention options to men who have sex with men and to serodiscordant couples,” said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS. “The results are timely and important and will advance global efforts to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030.”

A study in the United Kingdom, involving 500 men who have sex with men at higher risk of HIV infection, found that those taking a daily pill of the medicines tenofovir and emtricitabine were 86 per cent less likely to become infected with HIV than those involved in the study not taking the medicines. The same effect was found in a similar study conducted in France and Canada, where participants took four tablets of tenofovir and emtricitabine, two before and two after sexual intercourse.

In both studies, the trials were modified to offer active antiretroviral medicines to all participants after interim analysis of the data showed a significantly positive effect.

In another study, conducted in Kenya and Uganda, PrEP was used on the HIV-negative partner, while antiretrovirals were used on the HIV-positive partner. The results, which showed that the combination produced 96 per cent efficacy, suggest that PrEP could be a highly effective “bridge” treatment to reduce new infections in the period between when a HIV-
positive person begins treatment and when their risk of transmitting the virus reduces.

A fourth study, in South Africa, was less successful. While the trial, which involved women at higher risk of HIV infection using a one per cent tenofovir vaginal gel, showed disappointing results, the study still provided valuable information about the urgent need to find new and effective HIV prevention options that work for young women.

UNAIDS, which unites the efforts of 11 UN organizations – UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank – and works closely with global and national partners towards ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030, congratulated all the researchers on completing their studies and welcomed the “highly effective additional HIV prevention option” offered by PrEP.

**UN envoy for Middle East peace condemns arson attack on West Bank mosque**

25 February - The United Nations envoy for Middle East peace today condemned an arson attack on the Al-Huda mosque near Bethlehem in the West Bank, calling for a swift investigation and saying that extremists “must not be allowed to turn this conflict into a religious one.”

“I condemn today’s arson attack and desecration of Al-Huda mosque in the village of Al-Jaba’a near Bethlehem in the West Bank,” UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Robert Serry said in a statement.

The fire was reportedly set to the mosque overnight Tuesday.

Mr. Serry said he is “concerned by this and all other religiously-motivated attacks and provocations by any party, which may further inflame an already volatile environment.”

“A timely and thorough investigation, as well as bringing the perpetrators to justice, is critical,” he added. “Extremists on both sides must not be allowed to turn this conflict into a religious one.”