Syria’s war continues ‘unabated and with total impunity,’ Security Council told

26 February - In a briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, two senior United Nations relief officials warned today that as the conflict enters its fifth year, the violence and brutality continue unabated and with total impunity.

Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Kyung-Wha Kang told the 15-member body that parties to the conflict continue to kill civilians and target critical infrastructure which condemn people to unnecessary suffering.

Ms. Kang delivered remarks on behalf of Under Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valery Amos. Joining Ms. Kang was António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

“Every month we report on the same violations. The numbers change, but the pattern remains the same. The parties to the conflict continue to act with impunity: killing and abducting civilians; denying access; removing vital supplies from convoys. This pattern must be broken,” Ms. Kang stressed.

Over 2 million people in Aleppo and Dar’a Governorates have been affected by willful denial of water and electricity by parties to the conflict this month. Of the 212,000 people who are besieged, in conditions that deteriorate every day, only 304 were reached with food in January.
In other areas where conditions deteriorate every day, parties to the conflict severely restrict access to those in need. In Raqqa and Deir ez Zor, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has closed down the offices of several aid organisations, including the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

“Some 600,000 people have not received food assistance in these governorates since last December. The sick or wounded often have nowhere safe to get treatment,” said Ms. Kang.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has succeeded in sending life-saving medicine and medical supplies from Damascus to rural Aleppo for some 65,000 treatments but many of the surgical items including midwifery and reproductive kits were removed by Government security personnel at one of the checkpoints.

The Council must do everything in its power to hold parties accountable and ensure that aid is delivered to people in need. Humanitarian organizations operating in besieged Syria and in neighbouring countries continue to reach millions of people every month. In January, some 3.4 million people were reached with food assistance while hundreds of thousands were also reached with medicines, household items and other supplies.

“But it is not enough. More effort must be made to deescalate the violence, protect and enable humanitarian organisations to give more support,” the Special Coordinator said, emphasising the need to secure the freeze in fighting in some parties of Aleppo so that humanitarian agencies can deliver food, remove debris and get children back into school.

Ms. Kang said she was extremely concerned that two UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) staff has been asked to leave the country without any reason given. “This will hinder our work tremendously,” she said, urging the Government to reverse its decision.

OCHA’s response cannot keep up with the needs of Syria’s people because there is simply not enough funding. By the end of last year, the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan for 2014 was just 48 per cent funded.

Lack of funding has already forced the World Food Programme (WFP) to reduce rations by 30 per cent. And for every million dollars that WHO cannot raise in Syria, some 227,000 people lose vital health services. And unless urgent funding is received before May 2015, a million children will not be able to access education.

Ms. Kang said she looked forward to the next pledging conference to be held on 31 March in Kuwait, expressing hope that the funds acquired there will make a difference on the ground.

Echoing that sentiment, UNHCR head António Guterres, said that the Kuwait III conference will play a determining role in stabilizing the situation in the refugee hosting countries because international support has been far from keeping pace with the magnitude of needs.

The Syrian refugee crisis has overwhelmed existing response capacities with 3.8 million registered in neighbouring countries. In Lebanon and Jordan, these populations have grown exponentially and Turkey is now the biggest refugee-hosting country in the world.

“The continued growth in displacement is staggering. And the nature of the refugee crisis is changing. As the level of despair rises, the available protection space shrinks, we are approaching a dangerous turning point,” Mr. Guterres warned.

Refugee resources are depleted and living conditions are drastically deteriorating. Host communities are severely overstretched. And the refugee influx has heavily impacted the economies and societies of Lebanon, Jordan and Northern Iraq in particular, overwhelming resources.

Almost two million Syrian refugees under 18 years of age risk becoming a lost generation and many of the over 100,000 refugee children born in exile could become stateless under Syrian law. If not addressed properly, this crisis-in-the-making will have huge consequences for the region.

Mr. Guterres also expressed concern over those risking their lives to find protection in Europe and called for flexible visa
policies, expanded family reunification, academic scholarships and private sponsor schemes.

**Amid uptick in Ebola cases, UN agency cites challenges in reaching affected communities**

26 February - New cases of Ebola rose again in Guinea and transmission remains widespread in Sierra Leone, the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) reported as it and the UN Ebola response mission both raised concerns about challenges in engaging communities to win the fight against the disease.

Both WHO and UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) also noted unsafe burials of those who died from the disease posed a challenge and that “a significant number” of individuals are still either unable or reluctant to seek treatment for Ebola, which has affected over 23,500 people and killed more than 9,500 mainly in the Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In its latest update issued Wednesday afternoon, WHO reported that new cases in Guinea continued to arise from “unknown chains of transmission” and that transmission remained “widespread in Sierra Leone” but transmission continued at very low levels in Liberia, with 1 new confirmed case reported in the 7 days to 22 February associated with a known chain of transmission.

“Engaging effectively with communities remains a challenge in several geographical areas,” WHO said in its most recent update.

Nearly one-third of prefectures in Guinea reported at least one security incident in the week to 22 February, often as a result of rumours and misinformation linking response efforts with the spread of EVD [Ebola Virus Disease], according to WHO.

The Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on Ebola, Dr. David Nabarro, last week told the UN General Assembly that the final phase of “getting to zero” cases may well be the hardest, saying the hunt to track down the virus is “like looking for needles in haystacks.”

Dr. Nabarro told reports that having strong surveillance capabilities on the ground to identify people with Ebola, to confirm diagnosis, to quickly arrange effective treatment, to identify people that are their contacts and to keep those people under review for 21 days “is a really difficult task.”

UNMEER also reported today that border between Guinea and Liberia reopened to the public on Wednesday after months of closure.

**In Paraguay, UN chief says 2015 a ‘pivotal year’ for international community**

26 February - In an intensive year of landmark events – from establishing a post-2015 agenda to tackling climate change – Paraguay has yet another opportunity to demonstrate its “exceptional global leadership” in the international arena, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has affirmed.

Delivering remarks to the National Congress of Paraguay earlier today, the Secretary-General reminded those gathered that the international community continues to face “big global challenges” in addressing inequality and insecurity, deepening democracy, enhancing the quality of education, and respecting and protecting the rights of all regardless of gender, ethnicity, culture, religion or sexual orientation.

“Now is our moment to take on these challenges. The year 2015 presents a once-in-a-
generation opportunity for people and our planet,” Mr. Ban declared. “We are the first generation that can end poverty. We are the last generation that can avoid the worst effects of climate change.”

Mr. Ban’s remarks come as he continues his week-long trip to the South American country, including official visits in the capital of Asunción and to the critical Itaipu Hydroelectric dam which supplies up to three-quarters of Paraguay’s energy needs.

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 addition, Mr. Ban noted that despite efforts to reduce gender inequality, “gaps between law and practice” remained.

The scheduled meeting on the SDGs coupled with the major climate conference to be held in Paris in December has made 2015 a “pivotal year” for the international community, the Secretary-General continued, particularly as Member States face down an ever-growing list of threats and crises, from the “continuing bloodshed in Syria, tumult in Ukraine, Ebola disease in Africa.”

“Intolerance is growing. And violent extremism is rising. No country or organization can defeat terrorism and extremism on its own,” he added. “All countries – along with regional and international organizations as well as political, religious, academic and civil society leaders – should join hands together to forge a multi-faceted response that respects international human rights and humanitarian law.”

**Iraq: UNESCO outraged over terrorist attack against Mosul museum**

26 February - Iraq: UNESCO expresses outrage over terrorist attack against Mosul Museum

The head of the United Nations agency mandated to protect heritage sites today said that she is “deeply shocked” by the footage depicting the destruction of statues and other artefacts at the Mosul Museum in Iraq.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Director-General, Irina Bokova, condemned the “deliberate attack against Iraq’s millennial history and culture”, calling it an inflammatory incitement to violence and hatred.

“This attack is far more than a cultural tragedy – this is also a security issue as it fuels sectarianism, violent extremism and conflict in Iraq,” Ms. Bokova said.

She emphasized that the attack was in direct violation to the most recent Security Council Resolution 2199 that condemns the destruction of cultural heritage and adopts legally-binding measures to counter illicit trafficking of antiquities and cultural objects from Iraq and Syria.

“This is why I have immediately seized the President of the Security Council to ask him to convene an emergency meeting
of the Security Council on the protection of Iraq’s cultural heritage as an integral element for the country’s security,” Ms. Bokova stressed.

Large statues from the UNESCO world Heritage site of Hatra, as well as unique artefacts from the archaeological sites of the governorate of Ninewah have been destroyed or defaced in the Mosul Museum, among many other pieces.

“The systematic destruction of iconic components of Iraq’s rich and diverse heritage that we have been witnessing over the past months is intolerable and it must stop immediately,” said the Director-General, reiterating her numerous previous statements on this matter.

UN-backed treaty set to mark 10 years of dramatic change in tobacco use worldwide

26 February - A World Health Organization-led treaty that aims to achieve a tobacco-free world has dramatically curbed tobacco use worldwide since its entry into force 10 years ago tomorrow, but “the war on tobacco is far from over” with the tobacco industry still spending billions to promote products that are expected to kill some 8 million people each year by 2030, the United Nations health agency said.

The WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) entered into force on February 27, 2005, enacting a set of universal standards stating the dangers of tobacco and limiting its use in all forms worldwide.

The treaty is the first international treaty negotiated under the WHO’s auspices, and has become one of the fastest endorsed by the United Nations to date, with 180 Parties, covering 90 per cent of the world’s population.

“The WHO Framework Convention stands out as the single most powerful preventive instrument available to public health,” says WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan. “We know it works.”

“It averts addiction to a deadly product,” Dr. Chan went on to say. "It saves lives. Implementation of its provisions brings both an immediate and longer-term reduction in diseases and premature deaths. Increasingly fierce opposition from the tobacco industry is further evidence of how well this treaty works.

During the past decade, the treaty has enabled countries worldwide to make many significant achievements in tobacco control, including the following:

• 80 per cent of countries have boosted tobacco control legislation since becoming Parties;
• The cost of a packet of cigarettes has, on average, increased by 150 per cent among Parties;
• There has been an increase in use of graphic health warnings – such warnings cover 75–85 per cent of cigarette packages in many countries and plain packaging initiatives are increasing;
• Many countries have banned smoking in indoor and outdoor public spaces, which has helped to ensure that smoking is no longer seen as socially acceptable;
• Some Parties have set the explicit goal of becoming “tobacco free” (with less than 5 per cent prevalence of tobacco use), including Finland, Ireland and New Zealand, and the Pacific Island countries.

“However, the fight against tobacco is far from over,” said a press release announcing the anniversary issued today.

Tobacco companies are still spending billions on advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco products, according to WHO. In addition they are also challenging the treaty’s implementation as well as tobacco control laws at national and international courts, and through trade and investment agreements.

Dr. Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, Head of the Convention Secretariat, has said: “We still expect 8 million people to be dying
each year by 2030 – because they have smoked tobacco or have been exposed to second hand smoke.”

“The use of alternative products such as water pipes, smokeless tobacco and electronic nicotine delivery systems are gaining in popularity and will need to be addressed through tobacco control measures,” she said. “The illicit tobacco market still counts for 1 in every 10 cigarettes consumed globally.”

According to WHO, the illicit tobacco trade is driven by numerous players, ranging from criminal networks to the tobacco industry.

“To counter the tobacco lobby’s influence, we must stand together against this insidious industry,” Dr. da Costa e Silva was quoted as saying. “We must fight to save the 6 million lives lost each year to tobacco. On this 10th anniversary of the WHO FCTC, we must recommit to further reducing tobacco use because a tobacco-free world is in our reach.”

**Mali: Inquiry team concludes probe into violent demonstration against peacekeepers in Gao**

**26 February** - The high-level team appointed by the United Nations to investigate the events surrounding a violent demonstration against the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has concluded its visit to the African country, the UN spokesperson’s office confirmed today.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the investigation on 29 January to determine the facts surrounding the “tragic incident” which resulted in the death and injury of protesters in the northern city of Gao.

The Inquiry team – formed by three independent experts, Bacre Waly Ndiaye of Senegal (team leader), Ralph Zacklin of the United Kingdom and Mark Kroeker of the United States – spent eight days in Mali, meeting with national and regional authorities as well as representatives of MINUSMA, authorities from hospitals that received victims, protesters who were injured and the associations who organized the protests with the hope that they “could help shed light on the events.”

The three experts will now head to New York where they will present a preliminary report to the Secretary-General.

**Security Council extends UN peacekeeping force in Abyei through July 2015**

**26 February** - The Security Council has extended the United Nations peacekeeping force in Abyei – a resource-rich area contested by Sudan and South Sudan – as part of the Organization’s ongoing efforts to maintain peace and protect civilians in the disputed territory.

In a unanimous vote held earlier today, the 15-member body adopted the resolution noting that the continuing tensions in Abyei and along the border between Sudan and South Sudan still constituted “a serious threat to international peace and security.”

The mandate of the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) was extended until 15 February 2015. The force, set up by the Council in June 2011 following an outbreak of violence after Sudanese troops took control of the oil-rich area in the weeks before South Sudan became independent, is tasked with overseeing the demilitarization of the area and maintaining security.

Among other measures, the Council reiterated its demand that Sudan and South Sudan “immediately resume” the work of the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee, otherwise known as the AJOC, “to ensure steady progress” on the implementation of the 20 June 2011 Agreement, which provides for temporary administrative arrangements for Abyei and the withdrawal of
troops by both sides.

In addition, the Council also reiterated its demand that both Sudan and South Sudan “urgently commence” the establishment of the Abyei Area Administration and Council in order to form an Abyei Police Service with a mandate to take over policing functions in the area, including the protection of oil infrastructure.

The UN body also underscored that “continued cooperation” between the Governments of Sudan and South Sudan was “critical for peace, security and stability” and the future of relations between the countries.

**Security Council condemns abduction of Syrian Christians by ISIL**

26 February - The United Nations Security Council has strongly condemned the abduction of more than 100 Assyrians, as well as the destruction and desecration of Christian and other sites in northeast Syria this week by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

“Such crimes once again demonstrate the brutality of ISIL, which is responsible for thousands of crimes and abuses against people from all faiths, ethnicities and nationalities and without regard to any basic value of humanity,” the 15-member UN body said in a statement issued to the press yesterday evening and which referred to the group by its Arabic acronym, Da’esh.

ISIL/Da’esh militants have reportedly taken hostage more than 200 Assyrians as they stormed villages in northeast Syria this week.

In their statement, Council members demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all those abducted by ISIL, Al-Nusra Front and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida, and stressed that those responsible for such heinous acts must be held accountable.

The Security Council also strongly condemned all acts of violence against civilians including those committed on the basis of their ethnicity, religion or belief.

**UN envoy for Lebanon visits refugee camps, pledges support to deal with influx of Syrians**

26 February - The United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon Sigrid Kaag today expressed support to Middle East country as it faces the impact of the conflict in Syria.

During her tour of Lebanon’s north-eastern Bekaa Valley – home to some 410,000 Syrian refugees – Ms. Kaag expressed her appreciation to the country’s host communities for their generosity and solidarity with Syria’s refugees.

“This is not about differentiation, it is about human dignity, to support the most vulnerable,” the Special Coordinator said, emphasizing the need for timely and targeted assistance by all partners to ensure that needs continue to be met. “Safety, security, protection and human rights are needed to ensure the stabilization of Lebanon.”

During her tour, Ms. Kaag met with region’s parliamentarians, the Governor of the northern Bekaa and local authorities of Baalbeck. The talks covered political and security developments but also the humanitarian and socio-economic challenges of the area.

The Special Coordinator also referenced the importance of sustained assistance to reinforce stability and stabilization of Lebanon, benefitting the Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese host communities alike.
Ms. Kaag visited a Syrian refugee site in Fayda/Omarieh and listened to the concerns of refugees. She also visited a solar panel installation, set up in the village of Terbol with the assistance of the Municipality of Terbol and UN Development Programme (UNDP) to serve all residents of the area.

Regarding the security situation along Lebanon's eastern borders with Syria, the Special Coordinator praised the efforts of the Lebanese army and security forces to safeguard the country's security and stability.

**Ban concerned by reported violence, loss of life in Venezuela**

**26 February** - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today voiced concern over new reports of violence and loss of life in Venezuela, and expressed support for regional dialogue to help the country overcome its current challenges.

In a statement, Mr. Ban's spokesperson said the Secretary-General had taken note of the Government stated willingness to undertake a full investigation into the incident.

According to media reports a 14-year old boy was shot during a protest in the western city of San Cristóbal.

In addition, the spokesperson added, Mr. Ban had also taken note of the call by the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States for “the building of a democratic space for dialogue in Venezuela.”

Venezuela has seen sporadic clashes amid protests since the death of former leader Hugo Chávez two years ago.

In October 2014, opposition leader Leopoldo López and more than 69 other people were arrested following mass public protests throughout the country, prompting the condemnation of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

According to information received by the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), over 3,300 people, including minors, were detained for brief periods between February and June 2014, and more than 150 cases of ill-treatment, many of them torture, were reported.

At least 43 people were killed during the protests, including one public prosecutor and nine members of the security forces. Journalists and human rights defenders have also reported threats, attacks and intimidation.

The spokesperson today underscored that the Secretary-General supported the current efforts of the Secretary General of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) to re-launch the dialogue between the Government and members of the opposition, initiated in April 2014 and supported by UNASUR and the Holy See, in order “to help the country overcome its current challenges and guarantee the human rights of all Venezuelans.”

“In this connection,” the statement concluded, “[Mr. Ban] welcomes the UNASUR Secretary General's announcement of an upcoming visit to Venezuela by a delegation of UNASUR Foreign Ministers.”
UN rights expert urges Belgium to boost fight against modern slavery

26 February - Despite its comprehensive approach to tackling modern forms of slavery, the Government of Belgium must further sharpen its focus on proper victim detection and identification, a United Nations independent expert declared today.

“Belgium’s multi-disciplinary approach to tackling modern forms of slavery, which brings together various stakeholders at policy and operational level is an example of good practice,” stated Urmila Bhoola, the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and its consequences, in a press release.

“However, potential victims, including children and other vulnerable groups, are not always detected, identified and referred to the appropriate structures, which leaves them susceptible to abuse and exploitation.”

Belgium already boasts a wide-ranging apparatus devoted to combatting slavery-like conditions including specialized units embedded within social and labour inspectorates and the police which investigate claims of abuse.

Following an eight day official monitoring visit to the country, however, Ms. Bhoola acknowledged that Belgian authorities required further training to ensure that victims of slavery are adequately informed of their rights and “understand the central role in support and assistance of specialized centres to which they can be referred.” Such centres, she added, perform “a critical function in assisting victims, including in obtaining access to justice.”

Moreover, she drew special attention to the need for providing continuous and sufficient financial and human resources to allow all those involved in the fight against modern forms of slavery in Belgium to carry out their work as well as boosting awareness-raising and information campaigns aimed at the general public, in order for them to also be alert to cases of contemporary forms of slavery.

“This preventive aspect, including in continuing to address specific vulnerabilities of those most discriminated and marginalized, needs strengthening.”

There are currently an estimated 21 million forced labour victims worldwide. A recent report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that $150 billion in illegal profits are made in the private economy each year through modern forms of slavery.

According to ILO, more than half of the victims of forced labour are women and girls, primarily in domestic work and commercial sexual exploitation, while men and boys were primarily in forced economic exploitation in agriculture, construction, and mining.

In Belgium, contemporary forms of slavery can be manifested in forced begging, forced labour and domestic servitude.

Following her visit to the country – which included meetings in Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, and Namur – Ms. Bhoola explained that she was “encouraged” by the steps taken by authorities to address domestic servitude in diplomatic households while relevant provisions in Belgium’s Criminal Code already impose harsh penalties when exploitation is secured through violence or coercion.
UN Chief ‘deeply saddened’ by loss of life in Afghanistan avalanches

26 February - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he is deeply saddened by the loss of life in Afghanistan as a result of avalanches, landslides and floods in the northern part of the country including in the Kabul, Parwan, Panjsher, Kapisa, Badakhshan and Nuristan provinces.

According to media reports, the snowstorms began on Tuesday and continued through Thursday, causing some of the worst avalanches in decades and resulting in the deaths of some 180 people. The death toll is expected to rise.

Mr. Ban extended his sincere condolences to the people and Government of Afghanistan, especially those who have lost family members, friends, homes and livelihoods in these disasters, said a statement released by his spokesperson this afternoon.

United Nations agencies and humanitarian partners have responded quickly to support the Government of Afghanistan in providing assistance to those who have been displaced, where they are accessible.

They have also bolstered contingency planning to increase the resilience of families and communities in the longer term, the note said.

Yemen: Security Council calls on all parties to stay committed to peaceful political transition

26 February - The United Nations Security Council called for all parties in Yemen, including the Houthis, to adhere to resolving their differences through dialogue and consultation, according to a press statement released yesterday.

In the statement, the 15-member body also called on the parties to reject acts of violence to achieve political goals, and refrain from provocation and all unilateral actions to undermine the political transition.

Members welcomed the fact that Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the legitimate President of Yemen, is no longer under house arrest, and demanded that the Houthis immediately, unconditionally and safely release Prime Minister Bahah, members of the Cabinet and all individuals still under house arrest or arbitrarily detained.

The statement pointed to several documents that aim at ensuring a Yemeni-led democratic transition in accordance with a number of Council resolutions passed since last year and members strongly called on all parties, in particular the Houthis, to abide by them, notably the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative and its Implementation Mechanism, the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue conference, and the Peace and National Partnership Agreement, and its security annex.

The intention of the President of Yemen, Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, to engage in good faith in the UN-brokered negotiations was welcome, Council members said, and they urged all parties to accelerate the negotiations to continue the political transition. The statement added that the aim should be reaching a consensus solution in accordance with the GCC Initiative and Implementation Mechanism, as well as the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue conference, and the Peace and National Partnership Agreement and its security annex, and to implement that solution.

Council members reaffirmed their support for and commitment to the work of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, in assisting the parties in reaching consensual agreements in order to resolve the political crisis. They stressed the importance of all parties allowing all Yemenis to assemble peacefully without fear of attack, injury, arrest, or retaliation, and reaffirmed their strong commitment to the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of
'We must not fail in Gaza' say UN agencies, joining global call to action

26 February - United Nations agencies and offices are expressing alarm over the limited progress in rebuilding the lives of those affected by last summer’s fighting between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip.

A joint statement from some 30 international aid agencies said that six months after a ceasefire ended over seven weeks of fighting the Israeli-imposed blockade continues, the political process, along with the economy, are paralyzed, and living conditions have worsened.

“Reconstruction and repairs to the tens of thousands of homes, hospitals, and schools damaged or destroyed in the fighting has been woefully slow. Sporadic rocket fire from Palestinian armed groups has resumed,” the agencies said.

“Overall, the lack of progress has deepened levels of desperation and frustration among the population, more than two thirds of whom are Palestine refugees,” they emphasized.

Living conditions in Gaza were already dire before the latest round of fighting. Most residents were unable to meet their food requirements and over seven years of blockade had severely compromised access to basic services, including to health, water and sanitation.

“But since July, the situation has deteriorated dramatically. Approximately 100,000 Palestinians remain displaced this winter, living in dire conditions in schools and makeshift shelters not designed for long-term stay,” the statement said.

Scheduled power cuts persist for up to 18 hours a day. And the continued non-payment of the salaries of public sector employees and the lack of progress in the national unity government further increases tensions. With severe restrictions on movement, most of the 1.8 million residents are trapped in the coastal enclave, “with no hope for the future,” agencies said.

Bearing the brunt of this suffering are the most vulnerable, including the elderly, persons with disabilities, women and nearly one million children, who have experienced unimaginable suffering in three major conflicts in six short years. Children lack access to quality education, with over 400,000 of them in need of immediate psychosocial support.

Agencies say that the international community is not providing Gaza with adequate assistance. “Little of the $5.4 billion pledged in Cairo has reached Gaza. Cash assistance to families who lost everything has been suspended and other crucial aid is unavailable due to lack of funds,” they noted.

A return to hostilities is inevitable if progress is not made and the root causes of conflict are not addressed, they added, calling on Israel, “as the occupying power,” to comply with its obligations under international law and fully lift the blockade, within the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1860 (2009).

The fragile ceasefire must be reinforced, and the parties must resume negotiations to achieve a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. “All parties must respect international law and those responsible for violations must be brought to justice. Accountability and adherence to international humanitarian law and international human rights law are essential pre-requisites for any lasting peace,” the non-governmental agencies said.

Also imperative, Egypt needs to open the Rafah Crossing, most urgently for humanitarian cases, and donor pledges must be translated into disbursements, they added.