Ban strongly condemns use of chemical weapons and toxic chemicals as weapons in Syria conflict

27 August - Deeply disturbed by continuing reports of the use of chemical weapons, as well as the use of toxic chemicals as a weapon in Syria, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today strongly condemned any such use by any party to the conflict and stressed that the entire international community has the responsibility to hold the perpetrators to account.

In a statement issued by his spokesperson in New York, Mr Ban reiterate that a resolution unanimously adopted by the UN Security Council earlier this month, is a strong collective message from the international community that any use of chemical weapons “shall not be tolerated and will have consequences.”

The resolution, agreed on 7 August, gave the greenlight for the establishment of a Joint Investigative Mechanism to identify those responsible for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. It requested the UN Secretary-General, in coordination with the Director-General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), to submit recommendations for the establishment of the Mechanism within 20 days.

The Mechanism, established for a period of one year with a possibility of future extension, will be tasked with identifying “individuals, entities, groups, or governments involved in the use of chemicals as weapons, including chlorine or any other toxic chemical,” in Syria, according to the Council, which reiterated that those responsible must be held accountable.

In the statement issued today, the UN chief reiterated that the international community has a responsibility to hold the perpetrators accountable and to ensure that chemical weapons never be used again as an instrument of warfare.

Pursuant to the, Mr. Ban, in coordination with the OPCW Director-General, today submitted to the Security Council the requested recommendations, including elements of Terms of Reference, on the OPCW–UN Joint Investigative Mechanism.
(JIM) to be established by the resolution on the use of chemicals as weapons, including chlorine or any other toxic chemical, in Syria.

“The Secretary-General calls on all parties in the [Syria] to cooperate fully with the JIM. He counts on the continued engagement and support of the members of the Security Council as well as the entire UN membership to ensure the effective implementation of this resolution.”

**Clashes in Central African Republic force thousands to seek refuge at UN peacekeeping base**

27 August - Clashes between rival militias in the past few days have forced several thousand people to flee their homes in the Central African Republic (CAR) town of Bambari and seek shelter at a former cotton factory inside the compound of the United Nations peacekeeping mission, the UN refugee agency said today.

“We are extremely concerned by the mounting violence in Bambari and its impact on the civilian population. Our staff have reported the displacement of people who are extremely frightened,” Kouassi Lazare Etien, the Representative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in CAR, said in a press release.

Mr. Etien said that the agency was also worried about hundreds of Sudanese refugees “trapped in a refugee camp [near Bambari] and at high risk of attacks.” The road leading to the camp had been inaccessible since the weekend, but a UNHCR team escorted by UN peacekeepers reached the Sudanese refugee camp on Wednesday.

“Fresh fighting between rival militia forces erupted on August 20 and triggered new waves of displacement,” the refugee agency reported.

“A spontaneous IDP [internally displaced persons] site had sprung up inside the Bambari compound of the UN peacekeeping force,” the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA), according to the refugee agency.

UNHCR staff said the agency’s partner, the National Refugee Commission, had registered about 3,000 displaced persons in the MINUSCA compound as of Tuesday.

“But conditions are dire at the site, a former cotton factory with no sanitation facilities and limited access to water and shelter,” the agency said.

The situation began to ease on Thursday but UNHCR staff say Bambari remains very tense and they fear the situation could deteriorate again.

UNHCR is now able to move around Bambari and is trying to assess the total number of newly displaced. The tension remains with armed groups in control of the streets.

The population and aid workers were isolated and inaccessible, but a humanitarian corridor has been opened to the airport since Tuesday following negotiations between MINUSCA and the rival militia groups.

The latest flare-up in Bambari erupted after a 19-year-old Muslim was killed in the city and beheaded by alleged anti-Balaka fighters, according to the refugee agency. “This triggered violent reprisal attacks between the two communities in Bambari, which have left at least 10 people dead and many injured, including ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) staff,” it said.
Aid community must scale-up support to troubled Lake Chad region, senior UN official urges

27 August - A senior United Nations relief official today called on the international community to ramp up its support in response to the multifaceted humanitarian challenges affecting Chad, the seventh largest refugee-hosting country in the world.

“Now is the time for the aid community to scale up its support for humanitarian action, especially for people in the Lake Chad region,” where, “prior to this recent crisis, a quarter of the nation’s population needed humanitarian assistance,” advocated UN Regional Humanitarian for the Sahel, Toby Lanzer, at the end of a four-day visit to Chad and the Lake Chad Basin.

In the past few weeks alone, a press release reveals, the worsening security situation in the region forced over 41,000 persons to flee their homes on islands and relocate to safer areas inland.

“Communities witnessed unspeakable atrocities and violence. Entire families are uprooted and now face a very precarious humanitarian situation,” stressed Mr. Lanzer. “Many fled without anything but the clothes on their backs. People do not have access to sufficient potable water or food, are highly vulnerable to diseases, and sleeping under trees.”

The ongoing crisis has put additional pressure on the already stretched resources and livelihoods of both those displaced and the communities that host them. Insecurity is preventing many farmers from accessing their lands on the eve of the harvest season, which represents a lifeline for local communities.

“Some people had to flee their homes a couple of weeks after having planted their crops. The closure of the border between Chad and Nigeria is impeding trade and disrupting ancestral migration routes for herders and cattle. Fishermen too, are deprived of their livelihoods”, Mr. Lanzer continued. “The food security of many families is seriously compromised, much more than usual at this time of the year.”

Humanitarian teams on the ground are supporting Chadian authorities to respond to crucial needs in the Lake Chad basin. However, the volatile security situation and the population movements are challenging the ongoing efforts. In addition to assisting the newly displaced persons who are scattered across over twenty informal settlements and staying with host communities, humanitarian teams must also meet the needs of over 34,000 recently arrived people.

Only 35 per cent of this year’s humanitarian appeal for Chad – a total amount of $572 million – has been covered so far. “Without urgent additional financial support, the humanitarian situation in Chad is at risk of seriously deteriorating”, the Coordinator warned.

Over 750,000 displaced persons live in Chad, the majority being refugees or Chadian returnees who fled from the Central African Republic, Libya, Nigeria, and Sudan. Food insecurity affects some 2.4 million people and 350,000 children under five year are at risk of acute malnutrition. The country also has high prevalence rates of malaria, cholera or measles, while maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world. In addition, Chad is hit by natural disasters, such as droughts and floods.
UN health agency unveils sanitation and hygiene plan towards eradicating tropical diseases by 2020

27 August - The World Health Organization (WHO) today announced that it is strengthening water, sanitation and hygiene services to accelerate progress in eliminating and eradicating neglected tropical diseases by 2020 that affect more than 1 billion of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable populations.

“Millions suffer from devastating WASH [water, sanitation and hygiene] – related tropical diseases – such as soil-transmitted helminthiasis, guinea-worm disease, trachoma and schistosomiasis – all of which affect mainly children” said Dr. Maria Neira, WHO Director for Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health.

“Solutions exist, such as access to safe water, managing human excreta, improving hygiene, and enhancing targeted environmental management. Such improvements not only lead to improved health, but also reduce poverty,” Dr. Neira said in the WHO announcement.

WHO outlined a global plan to better integrate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services with four other public health interventions to accelerate progress in eliminating and eradicating neglected tropical diseases by 2020.

“Targeted water and sanitation interventions are expected to bolster ongoing efforts in tackling 16 out of the 17 neglected tropical diseases, which affect more than 1 billion of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable populations,” according to WHO.

WHO also said that in 2015 more than 660 million people did not have access to improved water sources, almost 2.5 billion people lacked access to improved sanitation and more than 500,000 million lives are lost each year as a result of neglected tropical diseases.

Besides advocating for basic water, sanitation and hygiene, WHO uses four other key interventions in overcoming the global burden of the neglected tropical diseases. The four strategies are: preventive chemotherapy, innovative and intensified disease management, vector control and veterinary public health services.

The five-year agenda is in line with a World Health Assembly resolution, which calls for the formulation of a new, integrated WHO strategy including a specific focus on promotion of sanitation and hygiene behaviour.

Urging end to ‘delaying' tactics, UN rights experts call for fairness in Guatemala’s genocide trial

27 August - United Nations experts on genocide prevention and transitional justice today called on Guatemalan judicial authorities to “prevent any further attempt at interference, obstruction of justice or manipulation of the law,” when the genocide trial against the country’s former de facto Head of State, and the former chief of intelligence resumes in January 2016.

“The delaying strategies, abusive use of judicial recourses and alleged threats and pressure against judges and prosecutors working on the case that have characterized the genocide trial, reveal significant flaws in the administration of justice in Guatemala,” said a joint statement by the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, Pablo de Greiff.
This statement is endorsed by the President of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary, Ariel Dulitzky, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Christof Heyns, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Juan Méndez and the Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Mónica Pinto.

Their appeal comes as a Guatemalan court decided to restart, in January 2016, the trial against former de facto Head of State, José Efraín Ríos Montt, and former chief of intelligence José Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez.

According to the statement, the two men are accused of genocide and crimes against humanity for human rights violations committed against the Mayan Ixil population between 1982 and 1983. Reports estimate that 200,000 persons were killed or disappeared during the internal armed conflict in Guatemala (1960-1996).

“Time is critical,” the experts said. “The decision to schedule the new hearing for January 2016, does not reflect the decisive prioritization that the case merits. The defendants, witnesses and victims are all getting older. Two witnesses have passed away. Victims only ask to see that justice is served before they die.”

The human rights experts raised questions about the court’s decision, based on Mr. Ríos Montt’s mental health condition, to order the application of special procedures, which includes representation by a legal guardian and hearings held behind closed doors.

They said it is unclear why these procedures will apply to both defendants, while only Mr. Rios Montt was found unfit.

“Denying victims and their families the right to justice by further delays and postponement of the trial will perpetuate feelings of frustration and discrimination,” the statement said. “Guatemala still needs to transform a culture of impunity into a culture in which the truth is told and individuals are held accountable, whoever they are. Impunity destroys the social fabric and perpetuates mistrust. A fragmented society is a society that cannot live in peace.”

**UN humanitarian chief urges Security Council action to end ‘immense suffering’ of Syrians**

**27 August** - The United Nations humanitarian chief today urged the Security Council to do everything in its power to push for a political solution to end the conflict in Syria, as he described the immense suffering and destruction he witnessed for himself during a recent visit.

“It is difficult to find words that would justly describe the depth of suffering that the Syrians face on a daily basis. Having just returned from the country, I have seen a glimpse of this grim reality myself,” said Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien.

“I left the country deeply saddened and outraged,” he continued. “The needless and immense suffering of ordinary Syrians and the abhorrent destruction this conflict has wrought on the country. I am angry, because we as the international community are not allowed and are not able to do more to protect Syrians who more than ever need our unfaltering support.”

During his three-day visit earlier this month, Mr. O’Brien discussed with senior Government representatives the need to strengthen protection of civilians and the overall humanitarian response.

“I urged the Government to grant full and unhindered access to all people in need, wherever they may be located. It is my sincere hope that the necessary steps will be taken towards improving access, including approving requests for inter-agency and agency convoys.”

Since the conflict began over four years ago, more than a quarter of a million people have been killed in Syria and over a million people injured, Mr. O’Brien noted in his briefing to the 15-member body. Some 7.6 million people have been
displaced inside the country. Over one million people have had to leave their homes this year alone.

Over four million people have fled across borders in a desperate search for survival and a future, placing host countries and communities under pressure which is now stretched to breaking point.

“We may all be living on borrowed time. In the name of both security as well as humanity, we do need to find a better, more sustainable way forward for the wider international community to share the burden in hosting Syrian refugees.”

He reported that, over the past month, violence has continued to escalate across the country. Indiscriminate and targeted attacks by all parties to the conflict have resulted in loss of life, destruction of infrastructure; and access to basic services such as water, has been denied to hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

“The parties’ callous disregard for human life and basic survival seemingly knows no bounds.”

Despite the increasingly challenging environment, millions of people continue to receive lifesaving assistance using all available modalities, including across borders, Mr. O’Brien stated.

During the first half of 2015, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations provided food assistance for 5.9 million people on average per month; medicine and supplies for 9 million people; water and sanitation support for over five million people; and basic relief items for more than four million people.

“While these numbers are significant, I regret to say that many more could be reached should unimpeded access be allowed,” Mr. O’Brien said, voicing particular concern about the severely limited access to the 4.6 million people living in hard-to-reach and besieged areas.

During the first half of 2015, the UN only reached 12 per cent of people in hard-to-reach areas with food each month and 3.4 per cent with health supplies, indicating major access challenges which limit the humanitarian community’s ability to reach the most vulnerable and affected people in Syria.

Similarly, parties to the conflict continue to heavily restrict access to besieged areas, Mr. O’Brien reported. The UN managed to reach less than 1 per cent with food and non-food items each month and 2 per cent with health supplies each month during the first half of this year. In July, no food or other type of humanitarian assistance by the UN reached any besieged areas through official routes where some 422,000 people are located.

The UN humanitarian chief said he came away from his visit to Syria “determined not to give up, not to be exasperated by the relentless repetitiveness of the challenges we as humanitarians face, and the need to explore every avenue to do everything possible to provide life-saving aid and protection to the people in need.”

He urged members of the Council to do everything in their power to end this crisis. “With all the will in the world, humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political action. The Council must exert leadership to push for a political solution.”
Ancient crops to be deposited in Norway’s Arctic seed vault for future generations – UN

27 August - As a significant step towards preserving the world’s most important ancient crops for future generations, the head of the United Nations agriculture agency, together with scientists and delegations from Peru, Costa Rica and Norway, today witnessed a ceremony during which potato seeds were deposited to the “safety box” in Arctic seed vault.

“In a few decades, our planet’s food systems will need to feed an additional 2 billion people,” said José Graziano da Silva, Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), adding that “producing more and more nutritious food will be made all the more challenging as a result of climate change.”

750 potato seeds, as well as other wild potato relatives, were deposited by representatives of indigenous Andean communities from Peru, scientists from Costa Rica, FAO and Norwegian officials at the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in the Arctic Circle.

The potato, originated in the Andes of South America, is now the world’s third-most consumed food. Feeding over 1 billion people every day, the potato is low in fat with high protein, calcium and vitamin C.

However, climate change, agricultural modernization, land-use changes, and diseases such as potato blight pose a critical challenge to this precious natural resource.

“Agricultural biodiversity – like that locked inside the potato seeds being deposited here today – is essential to facing these challenges, by helping us develop better, more resilient crops,” said Mr. da Silva.

These seeds are made possible through benefit-sharing projects supported by FAO’s International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. It aims to ensure farmers and researchers accessible to a large diversity of seeds and other plant genetic material - and a fair share of the benefits resulting from any new varieties.

Thanks to the Treaty, the Andean farmers learned how to pollinate their potatoes and collect seeds for storage, with some being deposited in Svalbard today.

Svalbard Global Seed Vault, currently holding over 860,000 food crop seeds from all over the world, is a back-up facility in the permafrost far north of the Arctic Circle. Co-funded by the Global Crop Diversity Trust, its mission is to conserve the planet's crop diversity for the food security of current and future generations, and the Government of Norway.
UN humanitarian agencies reach thousands of South Sudanese cut off for months

27 August - Emergency relief teams from the United Nations have managed to reach more than 27,000 people in a town in South Sudan cut off by insecurity since March where “there were only some fish and a few tomatoes for sale in the market, and almost nobody had the means to buy them.”

“With little or no services available, children are going without nourishing food and healthcare in these villages,” said Jonathan Veitch, Representative for the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in South Sudan.

“It is a desperate situation,” he added during a visit to the town of Wau Shilluk, on the west bank of the Nile River, across from the capital of Malakal in South Sudan’s Upper Nile State.

“In the past several months, access problems and concerns for staff safety have prevented humanitarian agencies from reaching people living in Wau Shilluk and other areas of rural Upper Nile,” UNICEF said in a joint press release with the UN World Food Programme (WFP). “Many agencies have been forced to scale down their operations on the west bank of the Nile because of insecurity.”

Since fighting broke out in South Sudan in December 2013, more than 2 million people have been uprooted from their homes, and 4.6 million people face severe food insecurity.

The World Food Programme and UNICEF, together with their partners, have reached more than 1.3 million people, including 220,000 children under the age of 5, in the most hard-to-reach areas of the country since they began deploying the joint teams known as Rapid Response Missions more than a year ago.

And this week, after being denied access due to insecurity since March, the World Food Programme and UNICEF deployed a mobile emergency relief team to assist more than 27,000 people in Wau Shilluk.

“We could see that people are struggling; there were only some fish and a few tomatoes for sale in the market, and almost nobody had the means to buy them,” said Valerie Guarnieri, the WFP Regional Director for East and Central Africa.

While in Wau Shilluk, WFP provided food assistance to more than 20,000 people. UNICEF screened more than 3,000 children under the age of 5 for malnutrition, vaccinated more than 8,000 children under the age of 15 against measles, and vaccinated more than 7,800 against polio. More than 400 pregnant women were vaccinated against tetanus.

“We need a stronger presence by humanitarian organizations in places like Wau Shilluk to provide immediate food and nutrition support and to reopen schools, ensure health services and support agricultural production,” WFP’s Ms. Guarnieri said.
As Libyan political talks resume, UN envoy urges parties to set aside differences, agree unity government

27 August - The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has announced that a round of Libyan political dialogue began today in Skhirat, Morocco, with discussions expected to focus on expediting the process towards finalizing the Libyan Political Agreement, including reaching agreement on a Government of National Accord.

In a statement UNSMIL explained that it has been informed by the GNC (Libyan General National Congress) that its team will not be attending this round of talks in Skhirat, explaining that it needs to reorganize its negotiating team following the resignation of two members.

“The GNC assured UNSMIL that it remains committed to the dialogue process and will participate in the next session,” said the statement, adding that the Mission will continue its contacts with the GNC to ensure its effective participation in the process.

The statement goes on to echo comments made by Mission chief Bernardino León in his briefing to the UN Security Council yesterday on the situation in Libya, saying that time is running out as the country faces growing challenges, including the continuing suffering of the people as a result of the conflict, the expanding Da’esh terrorist (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL) danger and the threat of economic collapse.

He said that the Libyan dialogue has entered its “final phase” and the talks over seven months have come a long way in narrowing the differences between the parties.

“The onus is on Libya’s leaders on all sides, and at all levels, to set aside their differences, put the supreme interest of their country before any other consideration and make that final push towards peace,” said Mr. León, adding that UNSMIL will intensify its contacts with the Libyan stakeholders in the coming days towards this end.

Ban welcomes South Sudanese leader Kiir’s signature of agreement to resolve conflict

27 August - Welcoming President Salva Kiir’s signing of the agreement on the resolution of the conflict in South Sudan, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the move is “a critical and necessary step towards ending the 20 month-long conflict that has devastated [the country] and subjected its people to unspeakable suffering.”

In a statement issued late yesterday by his spokesperson in New York, Mr. Ban commended the Intergovernmental Authority on Development Partners Forum (IGAD)-led mediation for its tireless efforts to bring the peace talks to a successful conclusion.

“He is heartened by the unity of purpose that regional leaders have displayed in seeking an end to this tragic conflict. Their continued positive engagement remains essential to the achievement of lasting peace in South Sudan,” the statement added.

“No is the time to ensure that this agreement translates into an end to the violence, hardship and horrific human rights violations witnessed throughout this conflict,” the Secretary-General said in his statement and added that the UN stands ready to support the Parties in the implementation of this Agreement, in close cooperation with IGAD, the African Union and international partners.

Mr. Ban urged the parties to work in good faith to implement its provisions, beginning with a permanent ceasefire and the
granting of unhindered freedom of movement to UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and to humanitarian actors working to reach people in need of urgent assistance.

Recognises that the road ahead will be difficult, the UN chief in his statement looked forward to the participation of South Sudan’s regional and international partners in the High-Level meeting he intends to convene in the margins of the upcoming substantive session of the UN General Assembly to ensure sustained support for the restoration of peace and security for the afflicted people of South Sudan.

In a statement last Tuesday, Mr. Ban welcomed the signing of this agreement by former South Sudanese Vice-President Riek Machar and former detainees. At that time, according to media reports, Mr. Kiir, who initialled but not yet signed the agreement, had asked for additional time to consult with his constituencies.

The security situation in South Sudan has deteriorated steadily over the past year since political in-fighting between President Kiir and Mr. Machar, and their respective factions erupted in December 2013. The hostilities subsequently turned into a full-fledged conflict, resulting in reported atrocities and possible war crimes.

According to the latest estimates released by the UN refugee agency, more than 730,000 people have fled into neighbouring countries such as Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan, which has seen the highest arrival rate this year. Meanwhile, another 1.5 million remain internally displaced, often relocated to increasingly overcrowded ‘protection-of-civilians’ sites run by UNMISS.