UN honours fallen peacekeepers; looks to past, present and future of ‘invaluable’ operations

29 May - On the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stressed the “invaluable contribution” of peacekeeping to the history of the Organization and reaffirmed his commitment to improving the effectiveness of ‘blue helmets’ in the coming years.

“Since its beginning in 1948, United Nations peacekeeping has evolved into one of the main tools used by the international community to manage complex crises that threaten international peace and security,” said Mr. Ban in message to mark the Day.

“Throughout its history, the United Nations has established a total of 71 peacekeeping operations. More than one million military, police and civilian personnel have served as UN peacekeepers, including 125,000 in the sixteen missions in operation today.”

The International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers is an occasion to salute the peacekeepers of today who serve in some of the world’s most volatile and dangerous environments. It is commemorated each year on 29 May because that was the date in 1948 when the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) – the world’s first peacekeeping mission – began operations in Palestine.

“United Nations peacekeeping has given life to the UN Charter’s aim ‘to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security,’” said Mr. Ban. “Through years of struggle and sacrifice, the iconic Blue Helmet has earned its place as a symbol of hope to millions of people living in war-ravaged lands.”

The message added that the Day exists as a chance to mourn fallen peacekeepers, noting that during its history, more than 3,300 “Blue Helmets” have died devoting their lives to peace, including 126 men and women in 2014.
To mark the Day at UN Headquarters, the Secretary-General participated in a wreath-laying ceremony in the morning, then presided over a ceremony at which the Dag Hammarskjöld Medal was awarded posthumously to the military, police and civilian personnel who lost their lives while serving in peacekeeping operations last year.

At the wreath laying, Mr. Ban and gathered dignitaries observed a solemn moment of silence to honour those who had died in the past year.

“Threats continue. Already this year, 49 peacekeepers have lost their lives,” he said. “The operational environments are getting worse. Our peacekeepers are increasingly exposed to asymmetric threats. They are attacked, targeted and killed by extremists.”

He described particularly hazardous conditions faced by operations in Mali and Darfur, which were responsible for the largest losses of life, and in Liberia, where a peacekeeper was lost to Ebola.

At the presentation of the Dag Hammarskjöld Medal, Mr. Ban said that the 126 peacekeepers killed last year marked a saddening trend, as the danger grew and 2014 entered the books as the seventh in a row in which more than 100 peacekeepers had been killed.

“Of all the ceremonies that the UN organizes, this is perhaps the most solemn and most difficult. But in many ways it is the most inspiring,” he said. “Their sacrifice, and the way that they lived their lives, makes us all proud and spurs us on to work harder to ensure that their lives were not lost in vain.”

Currently, demand for UN peacekeeping operations is at an all-time high. Operations receive contributions of military and police personnel from 122 Member States. This impressive number reflects strong global confidence in the value of United Nations peacekeeping as a tool for collective security.

In a press conference at headquarters, the Under-Secretary-Generals for Peacekeeping and for Field Support also reflected on the service of Blue Helmets who served the UN in the cause of peace in what he described as a “difficult world” but one in which there were extensive efforts to adjust to and rise to the expectations of the international community.

“It’s an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the threats that we face on the ground,” said Mr. Ladsous on the evolution of peacekeeping in the modern world. “More than ever our obligation is to improve performance. We improve on performance by the use of up to date technology.”

He said that did not mean merely the use of high-tech equipment like Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) but was about putting a lot more technical means, many of which were available on commercial markets, to improve safety and security.

This idea was echoed by Atul Khare, the Under-Secretary-General for Field Support. He also underlined the need for availability of a wide variety of technology to counter the many “grave and asymmetrical” threats faced by peacekeepers as they discharged their complex mandates and he outlined his priorities for his tenure. They were to improve rapidity and proactivity of support, as well as its effectiveness and the efficiency with which it was delivered.

He said he was “truly humbled” to receive the Dag Hammarskjöld medal on behalf of civilian peacekeepers, and noted that of the 126 peacekeepers who died last year, 19 were civilians, which he noted was a large proportion of the total.

“Today is a day for reflection and gratitude for the service of peacekeepers,” he said. “But today is also a day of introspection, of reflection, on the sacrifices that serve as a stark reminder of the massive challenges that we face on the ground every day.”
At debate, UN and Security Council renew pledge to counter foreign terrorist fighters

29 May - The increasing number of foreign terrorist fighters populating the front-lines of the world's conflict zones is cause for deepening concern and requires the international community's bolstered efforts to combat the scourge, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared today as the Security Council renewed its resolve in addressing this growing threat to international peace and security.

Briefing the 15-member Council ahead of the UN body's approval of its Presidential Statement on the issue, Mr. Ban warned that since mid-2014, the flow of foreign terrorist fighters into the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Da'esh, and other extremist groups, has swelled by 70 per cent.

According to UN monitoring teams, he added, more than 25,000 such fighters from over 100 Member States are estimated to have travelled to Syria and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya.

That is a notable increase in numbers from the last release of such data in November when the Organization observed that over 15,000 fighters from more than 80 countries were flocking to join radical groups.

“I remain concerned that recent events, particularly in Iraq and Syria, which have seen the advance of Da'esh and other groups with the growing support of [foreign terrorist fighters], demonstrate that this is an increasing threat to international peace and security that requires even more concerted action by the international community,” affirmed Mr. Ban.

“No country can tackle this challenge alone,” he continued. “Member States have to enhance their cooperation and exchange information, develop effective border controls and strengthen their criminal justice systems, in accordance with the rule of law and human rights standards.”

As the international community ramps up its efforts to counter the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, however, Member States must remain in full compliance with international law in order to be fully successful with all counter-terrorism efforts, the Secretary-General said. And, in particular, global efforts must also be directed towards address the conditions conducive to luring young men and women to extremism.

The UN has noted that most foreign terrorist fighters are young males aged between 15 and 35 but an increasing number of women and girls have also been joining the ranks of militant groups.

“I welcome this growing emphasis on addressing the underlying drivers of violent extremism at the global, regional, national and local levels to prevent radicalization,” stated Mr. Ban.

The Security Council last met for a debate on terrorism in November when a statement calling on Member States to cooperate in efforts to address the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters was adopted.

Today, in yet another Presidential Statement, the Council reaffirmed its view of terrorism as “one of the most serious threats to international peace and security” and expressed “great concern” that fighters continue to be recruited “in significant numbers.”

“The Security Council recognizes that addressing the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters requires comprehensively addressing underlying factors,” the statement announced, adding that that Member States “must ensure that any measures taken to counter terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law.”

In addition, the statement cited concerns for the ramped up usage of social media and communications technologies in
recruitment efforts by extremist groups which, it said, appeared to directly target women and youth.

Ramping up northern Mali relief efforts, UN agency aims to assist thousands newly displaced by violence

29 May - Across northern Mali, a flare-up in clashes between armed groups has spurred a renewed exodus of people fleeing the violence and their homes, the United Nations refugee agency said today, reporting difficulties in reaching the beleaguered populations with critical humanitarian aid.

“The volatile security situation is hindering access for humanitarian workers to all affected areas and the growing insecurity in the region is making the provision of protection and assistance to the newly-displaced very challenging,” William Spindler, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told reporters today at a press briefing in Geneva.

“Many [refugees] are sleeping outdoors and some are staying with friends or relatives,” he added. “They report that many women and children are among the displaced, and that they urgently need shelter, water and food.”

Despite positive developments on the ground, the situation in Mali has remained a challenge. The country’s Government has been seeking to restore stability and rebuild following a series of setbacks since early 2012, including a military coup d’état, renewed fighting between Government forces and Tuareg rebels, and the seizure of its northern territory by radical Islamists.

According to UNHCR, the latest outburst of hostilities between armed groups in the Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu areas of northern Mali have resulted in some 57,000 people fleeing their homes. The newly-displaced now join the ranks of more than 43,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) throughout the country, bringing the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Mali to just over 100,000.

As part of the UN agency’s immediate response, Mr. Spindler said, relief items are quickly being moved to the Timbuktu area in order to organize the future distribution of kitchen sets, soap, mosquito nets, blankets and plastic sheeting to an estimated 12,000 IDPs located in Gourma Rharous, some 100 kilometres east of Timbuktu. Meanwhile, earlier this week, UNHCR also began deliveries of relief items to more than 1,500 newly displaced people in Goundam.

The renewed fighting in Mali has also prompted an uptick in the number of civilians fleeing to neighbouring countries as UNHCR teams have registered 258 new Malian arrivals in Burkina Faso, 236 in Mauritania and 238 in Niger in recent weeks.

“Although the numbers are still relatively low, this is an extremely worrying development since it shows the degree to which civil strife in Mali is undermining social cohesion,” the UNHCR spokesperson continued, noting that until the latest bout of violence, Malian refugees had begun to trickle back to their homes from across the borders.

The agency’s latest estimates document some 137,500 Malian refugees in neighbouring countries fuelling fears that until the violence subsides the numbers will continue to grow.
UN ‘deeply concerned’ by desperate situation facing thousands of Iraqis fleeing Ramadi

29 May - Some 85,000 Iraqis have fled fighting in the central city of Ramadi but as temperatures in the region soar, thousands more still on the move are facing obstacles in reaching safety such as lack of proper shelter and “onerous requirements” for documentation, the United Nations refugee agency warned today.

“With thousands on the move and competition for transport, journeys that would normally take a few hours are taking days,” William Spindler, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told reporters in Geneva.

Even when they reach a camp for the displaced, “conditions are tough,” continued Mr. Spindler, with temperatures reaching 47 degrees [Celsius].” UNHCR is giving out fans as well as sleeping mats, jerry cans and plastic sheets to help reinforce the shade, he said.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that some 85,000 people have fled Ramadi, in Anbar governorate, and surrounding areas, since fresh fighting between militants and pro-Government troops erupted in mid-May, and in total, more than 180,000 people are estimated to have been displaced from the Ramadi area since hostilities began in early April.

“Many people are still on the move and UNHCR, alongside others in the humanitarian community, is striving to locate them and provide life-saving assistance,” Mr. Spindler said.

“Displaced civilians still face serious obstacles at various checkpoints out of Anbar into neighbouring provinces, as local authorities impose restrictions,” he said, adding that Babylon and Kerbala governorates were closed to displaced people from Anbar.

Mr. Spindler said the Bzebiz bridge, the main entry point from Anbar into Baghdad, was closed for four days at the start of this latest exodus from Ramadi, leaving many people stranded in soaring temperatures as they waited to have sponsorship arrangements processed.

“While the bottleneck at the bridge has now eased, our monitoring teams report that the requirement for displaced people to have a local sponsor in Baghdad remains a concern,” he said.

According to UNHCR, this requirement “hampers swift access to safety, leaves people waiting in searing heat without proper shelter and makes the displaced vulnerable to exploitation.”

UNHCR said it is urging the authorities to address this problem and more broadly to ensure freedom of movement and swift access to safety of all displaced Iraqis citizens.

“Onerous requirements for other documentation have also been a concern,” the spokesperson said. “UNHCR’s partners have spent days helping 600 vulnerable people – many with serious medical conditions or living with disability – get access to Baghdad governorate.”

Unable to move to other provinces, thousands of displaced people congregated around the city of Al-Khalidiya, which is east of Ramadi and also the scene of fighting in recent weeks. Some people are moving north towards the cities of Kalar and Kirkuk.

Adequate shelter is one of the key needs for thousands of displaced people, who are out in the heat for long periods, the refugee agency noted, and said it is focusing on providing shelter for the displaced.
“The United Nations advocates for the respect of the fundamental human rights of freedom of movement and access to safety for all Iraqis in flight,” Mr. Spindler said. “Being able to reach a place of safety makes the difference between life and death for desperate displaced people on the move.”

**UN agency welcomes Southeast Asia region’s proposals to address plight of refugees and migrants at sea**

29 May - The United Nations refugee agency today welcomed the positive outcomes of a regional meeting in Thailand to resolve the advancing solutions to refugees and migrants stranded in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.

"Saving lives must be the number one priority," Volker Türk, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said today in Bangkok during a special meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean organized by Thailand.

The meeting concluded with a 10-point action plan which focuses, among others, on search and rescue, safe disembarkation, anti-trafficking, arrival reception and root causes, while stressing the need of collective efforts among related countries.

“Yet, there is an urgent need to reach a common understanding about more effective and predictable disembarkation options and proper reception arrangements in the region,” said Mr. Türk.

He also hailed the related States' commitment to ensure UNHCR's access to the areas. "These proposals are a good beginning that will require robust implementation," he said.

So far, UNHCR and partners have helped identifying refugees, economic migrants, trafficking victims and arranged solutions accordingly.

Noting this growing regional issue, the UN refugee agency is willing to provide Governments with paperwork arrangements and other creative means to tackle the migration problem.

“There is no solution without addressing root causes,” underscored Mr. Türk, urging legal identification of residency in Myanmar as a mid-term goal, with granting citizenship in the long run.

The importance of protecting vulnerable people such as women and children has also been addressed in the action plan, which calls for development assistance, security protection, and respect for human rights.

Participants at the meeting agreed to explore ways to address the root causes of irregular movements and improve livelihoods in at-risk communities. Recommended actions included providing development assistance, enhancing a sense of security and belonging, and promoting full respect for human rights and adequate access to basic rights and services.

Over 88,000 people have departed on smugglers’ boats from the Bay of Bengal since 2014 and more than 1,000 are believed to have died as a result of abuse and deprivation at sea.
Inclusion and active involvement of youth vital to success of UN sustainability agenda – Ban

29 May - The United Nations General Assembly today commemorated the 20th anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth with an acknowledgement that young people have been “disproportionately” affected by many global challenges but “are ready and willing to be actively involved in shaping their future.”

In his remarks to the meeting, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that the commemoration comes at “a critical time” as “2015 represents an opportunity for transformation.”

“As we approach the adoption of a new set of sustainable development goals, the global community has an unparalleled opportunity to change the course of history,” the UN chief said, and “as the largest generation of youth the world has ever known, you are in the driving seat of this change.

“You are the first generation that can end poverty – and the last generation that can act to avoid the worst effects of climate change,” Mr. Ban told the gathered delegates.

“I call on governments to enhance their efforts to implement the World Programme of Action for Youth under the new post-2015 development agenda, and to include young people as part of their delegations to the summit in September,” he said.

More than 60 delegates have signed up to speak at the High-Level Event of the General Assembly marking the 20th Anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth to highlight Youth Priorities in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which “offers an important opportunity for Member States and other relevant stakeholders to take stock of progress made in its implementation, identify the gaps and challenges ahead while discussing the best way forward for the full, effective and accelerated implementation of this ground-breaking agreement.”

Ahmad Alhendawi, the first ever United Nations Envoy on Youth, also addressed the High-Level Event, saying the action plan is a “milestone in articulating a vision for youth development.”

“To this day,” he said, “the document remains one of the most important internationally agreed paths to a better future young people deserve.”

Earlier today, as part of his Office’s digital #YouthNow campaign, Mr. Alhendawi tweeted a number of “youth facts” and messages such as: “With 1/2 world’s population under 25 yrs, investing into youth is not luxury – It’s a necessity.”

Both the UN Secretary-General and the Acting President of the UN General Assembly, Alvaro José de Mendonça e Moura, noted that youth around the world have been disproportionately affected by economic crises, recession and today’s many global challenges.

“Youth unemployment continues to be a formidable issue worldwide, with young people three times more likely to be jobless than adults,” Mr. Mendonça e Moura said.

But on a positive note, he said, “governments are becoming increasingly aware of the need for legal and policy frameworks that adequately respond to young peoples’ needs, aspirations and demands. I am heartened to note that as of 2014, 127 countries had a national youth policy.”
“The #YouthNow digital campaign, organized by the Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, has also served as a meaningful platform for engaging web users on youth issues. Since its launch only four months ago, the site has already registered close to 500 million impressions,” he said.”

“These examples, as well as many others, demonstrate that young people around the world are ready and willing to be actively involved in shaping their future,” Mr. Mendonça e Moura said.

**UN envoy urges restraint among all Burundian parties; heads to region for weekend summit on crisis**

29 May - The United Nations Special Envoy for Burundi today travelled to Tanzania where he hopes an East African community summit over the weekend will help reinforce dialogue among the Burundian parties amid concerns raised by UN agencies that the current political instability and violence puts children at risk and could lead to a humanitarian crisis.

The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said that amid the ongoing crisis in Burundi, children are at risk, especially those who have been exposed to violent clashes and demonstrations along with the more than 60,000 refugees who had fled to neighbouring countries.

“Prolonged insecurity was likely to have a massive impact on an already vulnerable population,” said UNICEF spokesman Christophe Boulierac told the UN press briefing in Geneva, Switzerland.

At the same briefing, the World Food Programme (WFP) spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs, said the agency is concerned that the political instability in Burundi could lead to a humanitarian crisis.

“It was also affecting food security inside Burundi, which is already one of the poorest and most food insecure countries on earth,” Ms. Byrs said.

In the Burundian capital, Bujumbura, Said Djinnit, UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes and facilitator of the political dialogue, today called on all Burundian parties to exercise restraint and to refrain from any action that could generate violence and increase tensions.

“Despite persisting divergences on the core issue of the presidential term,” he said, “the parties agreed to pursue their dialogue and have exchanged views on confidence building measures and mutual commitments regarding the management of the electoral calendar, guarantees and measures for the holding of free, transparent, inclusive and peaceful elections, and Constitutional political rights and freedoms.”

Mr. Djinnit spoke to reporters today before travelling to Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, to participate in the East African Community Summit on Sunday.

The envoy said he hopes the summit will provide further guidance and impetus to reinforce the Burundian dialogue, and called on all Burundian parties to exercise restraint and to refrain from any action that could generate violence and increase tension.

Meanwhile, in Geneva, UNICEF spokesman Christophe Boulierac said that since the start of the crisis five children had been killed by bullet wounds, including one just yesterday morning, and 200 children had been injured since the start of the street protests in and around Bujumbura on 26 April.

He also expressed concern over cases of the unlawful detention of children in prisons and said that UNICEF was working with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to identify children who may have been arbitrarily arrested and unlawfully detained in Bujumbura prisons in an effort to secure their release and reunite them with their families.
WFP spokesperson Byrs said her agency was providing food assistance to more than 60,000 Burundian refugees who fled to Rwanda, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

**Libya: UN envoy hopes new draft of political deal can be agreed within four weeks**

29 May - Libya is on the verge of economic collapse amid ongoing violence, political infighting and efforts by terrorists to “build strong bases” throughout the country, the envoy facilitating the United Nations efforts to restore peace there said as he briefed journalists on meetings held in Brussels discussing the situation in the North African country and efforts towards a political transition.

Speaking to the press yesterday, Bernardino León, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya, said the UN is preparing a new draft political deal on the future of the country, which would be handed to parties in the first week of June. He expects the new draft to address the concerns of all parties, but made it clear that it was impossible to have a text that has 100 per cent of the wishes and ideas of everyone reflected.

“There will be an agreement if they understand clearly that they have to give up on important issues, that they have to be flexible,” he said. “A political agreement with concessions, even if it does not reflect the key concerns of the parties will be better than continuing this conflict that is going nowhere.”

Efforts went beyond the political, he said, pointing to a security track, where negotiations were ongoing with different armed actors, the army, armed groups, militias and others. He stressed the role of the international community, the UN and the European Union (EU) in future security arrangements.

“These two elements – political and security – have to work together if we want a stable Libya which will soundly return to democracy in the future,” he said.

He said that the second session of meetings focused on the role of the EU and the Organization’s partnership with the UN, noting that dialogue-centred approaches were “in the DNA” of both organizations and stressing the convergence that exists between them.

“Our views are the same about Libya,” he said. “It has to be a Libyan-owned process, a Libyan-Libyan solution with the support of the International community.”

The EU’s historical links to Libya in terms of trade, economics and politics were extensive and Mr León said the EU was a very important partner, as well as Libya’s neighbours, with whom the UN was also working closely.

He underscored it was “difficult to say” whether the new draft would bring about agreement within three or four weeks but he underlined the existence of the possibility and stressed that Libyans have a very clear idea that such an agreement was the only solution to their current predicament.

“Libya is on the verge of economic and financial collapse,” he explained, noting that the country is “facing a huge security threat” in the form of Da’esh (also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant or ISIL), as well as increasing political division.

“Da’esh is trying to build strong bases in Libya. Libya also is facing an increasing political division with these competing institutions in the east and in the west, so all these challenges will oppose the possibility of an agreement,” he said, stressing: “This is the context in which we are working, the context in which we are proposing this agreement and in three, four weeks we will see whether it is working or not.”
South Sudan: UN officials call for international engagement to de-escalate country’s conflict

29 May - As South Sudan’s civil conflict continues to escalate, five senior United Nations officials have urged all stakeholders in the country to reach a sustainable solution to the crisis through inclusive dialogue and foster a lasting peace based on accountability and reconciliation.

“We are appalled at the large scale, widespread nature of the violations and abuses reported, including extra judicial killings, the abduction of women and children, rape and other forms of sexual violence, recruitment and use of children, looting and destruction of property,” UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Zainab Hawa Bangura, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng and the UN Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, Jennifer Welsh declared in a joint statement released yesterday evening.

“The fighting has exacerbated an already dire economic and humanitarian situation by reducing the humanitarian space, thus depriving thousands of South Sudanese of essential humanitarian assistance.”

South Sudan’s ongoing conflict began in December 2013 and has been marked by brutal violence against civilians and deepening suffering across the country. Some 119,000 people are sheltered in UN compounds there while the Organization estimates that the number of people in need for 2015 will include an anticipated 1.95 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and a projected 293,000 refugees.

In recent weeks, however, the fighting in the country has worsened considerably with reports of widespread killings, rapes, abductions and the burning and destruction of towns and villages, particularly throughout South Sudan’s Unity state.

In addition, UN human rights monitors have been denied access to various sites in the State by members of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLM/A) as they sought to verify the reports.

The five UN officials reminded all parties on the ground of their responsibilities, in line with international law, to ensure the full protection of the civilian population, especially women and children, from violence and to spare them the effects of hostilities, while also urging the UN Security Council, African Union, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and neighbouring countries to facilitate the process of de-escalation. Women, as leaders and agents of change, must also be represented in peace talks, they added, and women’s groups must be fully consulted in the process.

“It is the collective responsibility of the international community to take decisive steps to end the protracted suffering of the South Sudanese people, especially the women and children who are disproportionately affected by the recent clashes,” they continued.

In other news, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today announced the appointment of Eugene Owusu of Ghana as his Deputy Special Representative in the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), where he will also serve as UN Resident Coordinator, Humanitarian Coordinator, and Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

He will succeed Toby Lanzer of the United Kingdom, who will be taking up the post of Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel region. The Secretary-General is grateful for Mr. Lanzer’s dedicated service with the United Nations in the Republic of South Sudan.
UN rights office welcomes Nebraska as latest US state to abolish death penalty

29 May - Welcoming Nebraska as the nineteenth state in the United States to abolish the death penalty, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) today urged the Federal Government to engage with those states retaining the policy towards achieving a nationwide moratorium as a first step to abolition.

“We welcome the abolition of the death penalty in the state of Nebraska on Wednesday,” said OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani, who added that Nebraska has not executed any inmates since 1997.

States, such as Colorado, Delaware, Montana and Kansas, whose legislative bodies are currently debating the abolition of the death penalty, are encouraged to follow Nebraska’s lead, Ms. Shamdasani said.

OHCHR also called on the US Federal Government, at the recommendation of the Human Rights Committee in March 2014, to establish a federal level moratorium on the death penalty, while engaging “retentionist states with a view to achieving a nationwide moratorium,” as a first step towards abolition.

The number of people executed each year, and the size of the population on death row in the US have progressively declined in the past 10 years. In 2014, the death penalty was carried out only by seven states, and the number of executions was 35, the lowest since 1994.