Yemen on verge of 'total collapse' says UN rights chief in wake of recent fighting

31 March - The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights today expressed his concern about the fast deteriorating situation in Yemen, where dozens of civilians have been killed in fighting in recent days.

“The situation in Yemen is extremely alarming, with dozens of civilians killed over the past four days. The country seems to be on the verge of total collapse,” said Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the High Commissioner.

He called on all sides to protect civilians from harm, and to resolve their differences through dialogue rather than through the use of military force, as at least 93 civilians were reported to have been killed since 27 March and a further 364 injured in Sana’a, Sa’ada, Dhale, Hudayda and Lahj.

“The killing of so many innocent civilians is simply unacceptable,” the High Commissioner said. “The principles of proportionality, distinction, and precaution fully apply in this context. International human rights law and humanitarian law should be fully respected.”

Among those killed were at least 29 who died in an airstrike on the Al-Mazraq camp for internally displaced persons that was established by the UN in 2009. At least another 41 were injured in the raid, including 14 children.

The High Commissioner, who said he was “shocked” by the attack on the camp, was joined by Johannes Van Der Klaauw, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen, who said he “deplored” the airstrike in the strongest terms.
“Confirmed reports state that the strikes destroyed a camp management office and a bridge adjacent to one camp, as well as damaging the local market and a health facility,” said Mr. Van Der Klaauw. “These sites constitute civilian infrastructure.”

Mr. Van Der Klaauw said around 1,100 families were living in the camp, having fled a series of conflicts in Sa’ada between 2004 and 2010. The families, who Mr. Van Der Klaauw described as being “among the most vulnerable people in Yemen” were relying entirely on external assistance to meet basic needs.

“With many camp residents now fleeing, they are again forced to seek refuge elsewhere, adding trauma to their already vulnerable state,” he said. “In mid-March, humanitarian partners had initiated a voluntary return programme for camp-based IDPs. Unfortunately, these efforts have now come to a halt.”

The High Commissioner for Human Rights said violence has also displaced many others, with hundreds reported to have fled their homes in Sana’a, Sa’da and Dhale. Heavy fighting has also been reported in the streets of Aden, resulting in casualties and making the humanitarian situation extremely difficult.

“Private homes, hospitals, education facilities and infrastructure in several locations have been destroyed, making life even more difficult for the people in this war-torn country,” said Zeid, pointing to attacks on civilian airports and electricity supplies in Sa’da, Sana’a and Hudayda. Meanwhile, in Dhale, hospitals were attacked, causing an unknown number of casualties.

“I roundly condemn all attacks on hospitals and other medical facilities, which have a special protected status under international law,” he said.

UNICEF’s Yemen Representative, Julien Harneis, who spoke from Amman, said education was also under attack, adding that the violence and displacement were leaving children terrified.

“Children are in desperate need of protection, and all parties to the conflict should do all in their power to keep children safe,” he said, pointing to a “rapidly deteriorating” humanitarian situation in the country, which was worsening already precarious conditions for children.

With widespread food insecurity, severe acute malnutrition and increased rates of child recruitment, Mr. Harneis said UNICEF was working to continue providing essential water, sanitation and health supplies, as well as vaccinations, nutrition, education, psychosocial and mine awareness programmes to affected children.

Fighting has been ongoing in Yemen since 22 January, when the legitimate Government under President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi was removed by force, provoking the recent military campaign by a coalition of ten countries lead by Saudi Arabia.
Donors pledge $3.8 billion in aid to people affected by Syria crisis at UN-backed conference

31 March - In an expression of solidarity with the millions of children, women and men affected by the devastating conflict in Syria, now in its fifth year, international donors today pledged $3.8 billion at a United Nations-backed conference held in Kuwait.

“Today, the international community has come together in solidarity with the people of Syria and neighbouring countries bearing the heavy burden of hosting millions of Syrian refugees,” said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who chaired the gathering, at a press briefing after the pledges were announced. “We have sought to send a message of relief to the millions of Syrians who have been affected by this terrible crisis.”


The pledges come as the situation in Syria continues its downwards spiral. Some 12.2 million people, including 5.6 million children, now need humanitarian assistance. By conservative estimates, more than 220,000 Syrians have died in the conflict, but that number is likely much higher. Four out of five Syrians live in poverty and the country has lost nearly four decades of human development, with unemployment at over 50 per cent. Life expectancy has been cut by 20 years.

“People have experienced breathtaking levels of violence and savagery in Syria,” said Valerie Amos, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (OCHA), as she addressed the press. “While we cannot bring peace, this funding will help humanitarian organizations deliver life-saving food, water, shelter, health services and other relief to millions of people in urgent need.”

Many of the 3.9 million refugees now hosted in countries neighbouring Syria face a daily struggle for survival, their savings long depleted. More than a third live in sub-standard shelter, hunkering down in garages, crowded rooms, or makeshift settlements. Some 600,000 refugees are out of school, 2.4 million are in need of food aid, and 1.4 million very vulnerable people need cash assistance to meet their most basic needs. Meanwhile, the economies, societies and infrastructure of the host countries are buckling under the strain of hosting so many refugees.

“The hopes of Syrian refugees to return home anytime soon are waning as their country’s crisis worsens. It is vital that we massively increase our support to them – not only so they can survive, but live with dignity and some hope for the future,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres. “This also means we must not abandon the host countries to bear the brunt of this crisis alone. Supporting them in proportion to the scale of this gravest crisis of our time is our collective responsibility, and history will judge us on how we respond.”

Over the past four years, Syria has plummeted from a middle-income country to one where four out of five people live in poverty, and two out of three in extreme poverty. Countries and communities hosting refugees are also under severe strain as health and education services are stretched thin, public infrastructure such as sewage systems are overburdened, and competition for jobs and resources shows signs of tearing at social fabric.

“Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Turkey are hosting unprecedented numbers of Syrian refugees,” said UNDP Administrator Helen Clark. “The international community must accelerate its support for a development response which supports the solidarity shown by host countries and communities.”

In January 2014, the second pledging conference in Kuwait raised $2.4 billion. Ninety per cent of those funds have since been disbursed to provide life-saving support for millions of families in Syria and the region. Last year, some 8.9 million people received basic relief items and more than five million people received monthly food aid.
Before the pledges were made, Mr. Ban addressed the conference saying: “I have only shame and deep anger and frustration at the international community’s impotence to stop the war.”

The consequences of underfunding are catastrophic, leaving neighbouring countries on their own as they struggle to provide for refugees while meeting their own development needs. Nearly half of the country has been forced to flee their homes. Governments throughout the region have opened their doors, their hearts and their wallets to Syrian families running for their lives but are now stretched to the limit, he added.

Meanwhile, despite threats and attacks on aid workers, UN agencies continue to provide life-saving assistance through cross-border assistance. But all this is not nearly enough, he added.

There are no simple answers to this merciless conflict, Mr Ban said. The best humanitarian solution to end the suffering is a political solution to end the war. Absent a political agreement based on the Geneva Communique, the scale and regional impact of the world’s worst humanitarian disaster will only grow.

Addressing the conference earlier in the day, Ms. Amos recalled a trip to the country: “When I first visited Syria in 2011, we estimated that one million people were in need of humanitarian aid. Today, that figure stands at 12 million people.”

We must remember, she said, that behind each figure, each statistic, is a child, a woman, a man, a family – terrorized, abused and abandoned. Ms. Amos called the crisis a “rapid destruction of Syria’s future through the trauma of its children.”

“What kind of Government besieges its own people, drops barrel bombs and at the same time speaks of its responsibility to protect its own people? Armed and terrorist organizations think that they can operate outside the framework of international humanitarian and human rights law. We must make them accountable,” she urged.

After four years, people are exhausted and their resources depleted, she said.

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**DR Congo: UN welcomes ‘milestone’ declaration aimed at combating rape in war**

31 March - The United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Zainab Hawa Bangura, today called the signing of a landmark declaration by military commanders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) a “milestone” on the road to ending conflict related sexual violence.

“This is a day we will all remember as a giant leap forward in the fight against conflict-related sexual violence,” SRSG Bangura said in a statement from the DRC capital of Kinshasa.

“The signing of this declaration by commanders, and the implementation of the FARDC (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo) action plan, represent the progress we can make when political will and commitment are coupled with concrete action and support from the international community. The Government and military of DRC should be very proud of this accomplishment,” she emphasized.

Signed by FARDC commanding pledging to combat rape in war, the declaration is seen as an integral step in implementing the national action plan against sexual violence in conflict launched by the armed forces in September 2014.

In Kinshasa, Ms. Bangura joined the FARDC military commanders, key Government leaders including the Ministers of Defence, Justice, Gender, Education and Health, the personal representative of the DRC President on sexual violence and child recruitment, and senior leadership from the UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).
The pledge will be taken by every commander serving in the FARDC and requires military leaders to take a number of important actions, including respecting human rights and international humanitarian law in relation to sexual violence in conflict and taking direct action against sexual violence committed by soldiers under their command.

It aims to ensure prosecution of alleged perpetrators of sexual violence under the command of commanders and facilitate access to areas under their command to military prosecutors and handing over perpetrators within their command that are under investigation, have been indicted or convicted.

In addition, it aims to sensitize soldiers under command about the zero tolerance policy on sexual violence in conflict; and take specific measures to ensure protection of victims, witnesses, judicial actors and other stakeholders involved in addressing sexual violence.

In addition to the signing of the declaration, the Minister of Defence also established the Commission that will oversee the implementation of the FARDC’s action plan against sexual violence, and which includes representatives from the military, the Ministries of Justice, Health and Gender, MONUSCO and UN Women.

**Syria: UN warns of humanitarian crisis in Idleb as fighting in city intensifies**

31 March - The humanitarian situation in conflict-torn Syria is deteriorating even further amid reports that the city of Idleb has fallen to anti-government insurgents, a senior United Nations relief official has warned.

“I am gravely concerned by the ongoing fighting taking place in Idleb governorate and its possible impact on hundreds of thousands of civilians,” Yacoub El Hillo, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria, declared in a press release.

“I appeal to all parties to this conflict to adhere to their obligations to protect civilians and all humanitarian personnel under International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law.”

Last weekend, Idleb, located in northwest Syria, reportedly fell under the control of a coalition of anti-government armed groups, according to the UN Office for the High Commissioner (OHCHR). The city was subsequently shelled by Government airplanes, resulting in the deaths of at least 15 civilians. The Syrian Air Force then expanded its raids throughout the governorate of Idleb, attacking the towns of Sarmin, Mantaf and Nayrab.

At a press briefing in Geneva today, OHCHR confirmed it had received reports of civilian casualties resulting from these attacks but could not yet verify the number of dead and injured.

In his press release yesterday, Mr. El Hillo cautioned that the situation in Idleb had become “increasingly dire” with electricity shortages and the closure of schools and hospitals. In addition, the city’s estimated 500,000 inhabitants remain in the city as fighting intensifies.

“I appeal to all parties to de-escalate hostilities and to allow humanitarian actors to deliver urgently needed life-saving help, which can offer some reprieve from the daily suffering Syrians face,” Mr. El Hillo continued. “While humanitarian actors continue to scale-up assistance, their efforts cannot be a substitute for a political solution to the crisis in Syria.”

Meanwhile, in its briefing today from Geneva, the OHCHR added its concern about threats by armed opposition leaders to attack the predominately Shi’ite villages of Al-Fu’ah and Kafraya.

The reports come as the situation in Syria continues its downwards spiral. Some 12.2 million people, including 5.6 million children, now need humanitarian assistance. By conservative estimates, more than 220,000 Syrians have died in the conflict, but that number is likely much higher. Four out of five Syrians live in poverty and the country has lost nearly four decades of human development, with unemployment at over 50 per cent. Life expectancy has been cut by 20 years.
Top UN official in Lebanon calls for more support for Palestine refugee camp during visit

31 March - On a visit to the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein El-Hilweh in south Lebanon today, the United Nations’ top official in the country said the world body would continue working to assist where possible and would seek critical support from donors.

“We hope new support will also be forthcoming at the International Humanitarian Pledging Conference that is taking place today in Kuwait,” said Sigrid Kaag, the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon.

Ms. Kaag joined the Acting Director of the UN Relief and Works Agency for the Near East (UNRWA), Heli Uusikyla, on the trip, during which they visited an UNRWA-managed health centre and school and a women's centre, and met with camp representatives.

“Camp residents and officials briefed me on the challenges faced due to crowded living conditions, unemployment and poverty,” said Ms. Kaag.

Some 55,500 Palestinian refugees live in Ein El-Hilweh camp, in addition to over 6,000 Palestinian Refugees from Syria. Noting the high demographic density, the Special Coordinator hoped more could be done to ensure efficient shelter rehabilitation inside the camp.

She welcomed the role played by the joint security force in maintaining stability in the camp and urged continued cooperation between Palestinian and Lebanese authorities for the benefit of the Lebanese and Palestinian refugee communities.

Today's visit was the first by the Special Coordinator to Ein El-Hilweh, the largest of the 12 Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

UN agency concerned over plight of refugees after 2 Iraqis die at Bulgarian border

31 March - The United Nations refugee agency today expressed concern that people needing international protection are being blocked from entering the European Union, citing the deaths of two Iraqi men who were in a group of 12 Yazidi people allegedly beaten by Bulgarian border guards.

“With few legal alternatives to enter the European Union, many people fleeing conflict and persecution are undertaking increasingly dangerous journeys and using smugglers to reach safety,” William Spindler, a spokesman for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told a news briefing.

“IT is deeply disturbing that people in search of international protection are being turned away, often with violence. EU member States at the external border need to ensure that these practices stop, and should conduct independent and transparent investigations into allegations of abuses and illegal practices in their border regions.”

The statement followed a recent incident in which UNHCR was told 12 Iraqis belonging to the Yazidi minority were stopped by Bulgarian border guards as they tried to enter from Turkey. The Iraqis had their belongings seized and were badly beaten. The group scattered and two of the men, suffering from severe injuries, died later of hypothermia on the Turkish side of the border. According to the reports, a third person was taken in a critical condition to a hospital in Edirne after Turkish authorities were alerted.
“UNHCR urges the authorities in Bulgaria and Turkey to investigate this grave incident,” Mr. Spindler said. “We are particularly disturbed by the accounts of brutality which may have contributed to the deaths of two people who, being members of the persecuted Yazidi community, were likely to have been refugees.”

Information gathered by UNHCR in 2014 indicated that people seeking international protection often attempted to cross the border into Bulgaria multiple times, but had to turn back because of bad weather, were abandoned by people smugglers paid to take them across the border, or were intercepted by Turkish authorities.

Many, however, reported being denied entry or being “pushed back” by Bulgarian border guards. “Push-backs” are not in conformity with Bulgaria’s obligations to admit asylum-seekers to their territory. The use of violence has also been reported and, in many cases, people say their money and property were confiscated by border police.

Bulgaria is also planning to add 82 kilometres of razor-wire fences to an existing 33-kilometre fence constructed in 2014 in response to increased irregular arrivals, the majority from Syria. Efforts to reduce the number of irregular arrivals and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria had a significant effect in 2014, with almost 50 percent less arrivals than the previous year.

“Erecting fences and creating more barriers instead of providing additional legal avenues to reach safety in the EU pushes people in need of international protection into increasingly dangerous situations with, sometimes, fatal consequences,” Mr. Spindler said.

According to Bulgarian authorities, over 38,500 people attempted to cross irregularly the Bulgaria-Turkey border in 2014. Some 6,000 of them – mostly Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis – reached Bulgaria. This is a significant drop from 11,500 irregular arrivals – out of over 16,700 attempts – registered in 2013.

Elsewhere, UNHCR has raised concerns over reports of border practices that could place refugees and migrants at risk, notably in Greece, where UNHCR has documented numerous accounts of “push-backs” at the land and sea borders with Turkey, especially in the last two years.

**In Vanuatu, UNICEF launches ‘back-to-school’ relief as country recovers from Cyclone Pam**

31 March - As schools reopen across the cyclone-battered nation of Vanuatu, 30,000 children will begin receiving targeted assistance in order to help them resume classes and continue with their studies, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) announced today.

In a press release, the UN agency confirmed it would begin providing “urgent assistance” in the form of school education and recreation supplies, tents for use as temporary classrooms and school kits as part of the Organization’s wider humanitarian relief efforts in the archipelagic nation.

“It is critically important for children to return to school, even if it is a temporary location or facility, immediately after an emergency because schools keep children safe from harm, minimum disruption to learning enables them to progress as expected to exams, and the school day gives them a sense of normalcy and stability that helps them to psychologically recover,” explained UNICEF Pacific Representative Dr. Karen Allen in the release.

Vanuatu was struck two weeks ago by Cyclone Pam, a Category 5 tropical storm, which descended on the country with 250kmp/h winds and 320kmp/h gusts, causing widespread damage to agriculture, infrastructure, and impacting services such as electricity and communications. Initial assessments of the storm’s immediate aftermath in Vanuatu counted 17 people dead and some 65,000 people homeless as well as 166,000 people in urgent need of life-saving assistance.

In addition, UNICEF estimates that up to 50 per cent of Vanuatu’s schools suffered damage to infrastructure, facilities and resources during Cyclone Pam. On badly-affected Tanna Island, for instance, six of the ten classrooms at Lenakel
Presbyterian College were destroyed as well as the dining room, boys’ dormitories and teacher’s quarters. All learning resources have also been damaged, the agency reported.

“Often the cost of replacing school supplies is too much for a family to cover when their homes, possessions and livelihoods have been damaged or destroyed,” Dr. Allen continued.

“These kits facilitate children’s return to school and provide a reminder that education should remain a top priority for affected students and their families even in the face of immense challenges.”

Cyclone Pam’s devastation also affected the broader region, wreaking havoc in nearby Tuvalu, where UNICEF is similarly providing back-to-school back packs containing school supplies.

However, as the agency rolls out its humanitarian assistance for the affected region, it has also warned that a funding shortfall could risk impeding its continuing efforts. Just last week, UNICEF spokesperson Christophe Boulierac announced a $4.8 million appeal in order to make sure that children and their families in Vanuatu and in affected communities in Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, and Kiribati had access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene and health services including immunisation.

**Eliminating sheep and goat plague will boost livelihoods and nutrition, says UN official at conference**

31 March - The United Nations agricultural agency will outline a strategy in Côte d’Ivoire today for the total eradication of sheep and goat plague by 2030 at an international conference that began today in the country’s capital, Abidjan.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) aim to tackle the disease, known as Ovine Rinderpest – or *Peste des petits ruminants* (PPR) – and free hundreds of millions of rural families from one of the major risks to their food security and livelihood.

“The positive impact on the livelihoods of farmers and food and nutrition security for all communities, Sustainable Development Goals and the United Nations' Zero Hunger Challenge will be substantial,” said the FAO Assistant Director-General for Africa, Bukar Tijani, as he opened the International Conference for the Control and Eradication of PPR.

The disease, which can kill up to 90 per cent of the animals it infects, was first diagnosed in Côte d'Ivoire in the 1940s and has expanded rapidly in the past 15 years, reaching 70 countries across South and East Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and threatening Europe.

Livestock health experts from the FAO and the OIE say the technical tools, including an inexpensive, safe and reliable vaccine and simple diagnostic tests already exist, and they have developed a three-pronged strategy to control and eradicate PPR focusing on targeting the approach, strengthening veterinary services and looking at other diseases that might be priorities in a given country or region.

The two organizations worked together on a previous joint campaign which eradicated bovine rinderpest, a catastrophic cattle plague that was responsible for famines and the collapse of empires, and which remains the only animal disease to have been eradicated. There are key similarities that experts think make PPR an apt target for a campaign aimed at outright eradication.

“First of all, the viruses belong to the same family. Some of the tools that were developed for rinderpest have actually been adapted to be used for Peste de petits ruminants,” said Juan Lubroth, FAO’s Chief Veterinary officer in Rome. “Other aspects of the rinderpest campaign were regional networks that became so, so important to implement the strategy. Well, the same will be done for Peste de petits ruminants. So certainly there are a lot of lessons that can be learned from that.”
There are ample economic incentives to learn those lessons and apply them to targeting the complete eradication of PPR, not least the $1.45 billion to $2.1 billion of losses directly attributable to the disease as well as much more stemming from restrictions on trade and livestock mobility triggered by outbreaks.

In addition, over 2 billion small ruminants worldwide, 80 per cent of which are in affected regions, represent an important asset for a third of poor rural households in developing countries. Sheep and goats readily adapt to harsh environments, provide year-round protein and dairy products, and income from wool and leather, and they contribute to greater gender equity because of the role women play in tending to them.

“Sheep and goats – or, goats at least – are often referred to as the poor person’s cow,” said Mr. Lubroth. “So, if you are a poor farmer or in poor communities, the role of sheep and goats is very, very important.”

Funding for and political commitment to the campaign would be vital, not least because the global price tag for poorly-targeted PPR vaccinations are anyway likely to run between $4 and $5.5 billion over the next 15 years. FAO and OIE believe that focusing on elimination will reduce the costs currently associated with battling outbreaks and new incursions.

“One of the lessons of rinderpest was that we did not have the financial resources to be able to do a faster job among the countries or the continents affected,” said Mr. Lubroth. “We want to avoid some of those lessons and be able to get the financial resources available now, during and in the post-PPR campaign to ensure the world is free from PPR.”

**Libya: UN mission welcomes ceasefire, withdrawal of forces in Sidra Oil Crescent region**

31 March - The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has today welcomed the ceasefire and the withdrawal of forces from the Sidra Oil Crescent area, a move which follows weeks of mediation efforts between parties.

The talks took place between the Sunrise (Alshuruq) Operation and the Oil Installation Guard forces, “relying on the goodwill of the parties to end the conflict,” said a statement from UNSMIL today.

“The Mission considers the withdrawal a significant first step in ending the fighting in the Oil Crescent area,” the note said, further inviting parties to a meeting soon to continue the negotiations, which include interim security arrangements for the oil facilities.

UNSMIL has repeatedly called for an end to the fighting across Libya, including in the Oil Crescent area and urged parties to the conflict to cease all military hostilities. Parties should “focus instead on their common enemy, the terrorist groups which are determined to expand their areas of influence.”

Welcoming the developments in the Sidra area, UNSMIL stressed that such action, in addition to stopping the bloodshed and securing Libya’s oil wealth, would also help create an atmosphere of trust as Libyan parties engage in a decisive stage of the political dialogue aimed at finding ways to end the country’s political crisis and military conflict.

The Mission urged parties in other areas to engage in similar arrangements to end the bloodshed and restore stability in the high interest of Libya.
UNICEF launches Ukraine mine awareness campaign amid ongoing civil conflict

31 March - An estimated 109 Ukrainian children have been injured and 42 others killed by landmines and unexploded ordinance resulting from the Eastern European country's ongoing civil conflict, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said today as it reported on the recent launch of its lifesaving mine awareness campaign.

In a press release issued just days before the UN system marks the International Day of Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action, observed annually on 4 April, UNICEF warned that casualty figures of children residing in Ukraine's conflict-affected Donetsk and Luhansk regions could actually be greater than initially thought.

“The number of children killed and maimed by mines and unexploded ordnance would be significantly higher if we include non-government controlled areas,” said Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF Regional Director for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of the Independent States, who recently returned from visiting the eastern regions of Ukraine. “Lack of access to these areas is a real challenge for humanitarian actors on the ground.”

In late February 2014, the situation in Ukraine transcended what was initially seen as an internal Ukrainian political crisis into violent clashes in parts of the country, later reaching full-scale conflict in the east. Despite a September 2014 cease-fire agreed in Minsk, the situation in Ukraine has since continuously deteriorated, with serious consequences for the country's unity, territorial integrity and stability. Recent media reports have suggested a potential worsening of the situation amid claims of a massive recruitment campaign by anti-Government groups.

According to a recent human rights report released by the UN Office for the High Commissioner (OHCHR), the surge in fatalities in Ukraine has continued despite successive ceasefires as Government and rebel forces have escalated their fighting in recent weeks, particularly near the airport in Donetsk and in the area around the town of Debaltseve. The clashes have resulted in hundreds of deaths, both civilian and military, and “an untenable situation” for those trapped in the strife-torn areas.

The casualty figures are further exacerbated, however, by the remnants of the hostilities – such as landmines and unexploded ordinance – which litter battlefields and become easy prey for children once the fighting has subsided due to their bright colouring and small size. Children may be drawn to them mistaking them for toys or objects of value resulting in injury or death.

As a result, the UN agency has launched a mine-risk education campaign in Ukraine's crisis-affected areas targeting some 500,000 children and their families with information about the risks posed by landmines and explosives.

“Until now, there has been very little community awareness and understanding of the dangers posed by mines and explosives used in the conflict.” Ms. Poirier continued. “That is why we are working with our partners to strengthen families' knowledge of the hazardous munitions remaining in many communities that have been fighting – so that children and their parents know what to watch out for and how they can stay safe.”

The UN notes that at least 5 million people in Ukraine have been affected by the crisis, including 1.7 million children, while more than 1.1 million people have also been in have been internally displaced in-country because of the violence.
UN envoy lauds ‘historic’ Myanmar ceasefire as Government, armed groups build ‘new levels of trust’

31 March - The latest ceasefire reached between the Government of Myanmar and 16 ethnic armed groups operating in the Asian country is “a historic and significant achievement,” bringing to an end more than 60 years of conflict and hostilities, a United Nations envoy has declared.

“The United Nations welcomes this milestone in Myanmar’s history and congratulates President U Thein Sein and his negotiators as well as leaders of the Ethnic Armed Organizations and the NCCT [Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team],” Vijay Nambiar, the UN Special Adviser for Myanmar, said in a statement today.

“We are deeply honoured and humbled to have been invited to observe the parties through their historic deliberations,” he added.

After more than a year of negotiations, during which the UN and China functioned as observers, Myanmar’s Union Peace Working Committee (UPWC) and NCCT agreed today on the text of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) for the country, setting up the next stage in the peace and reconciliation process.

“The signing of an NCA is a first step towards a larger dialogue for settling the political and military issues that will pave the way for an inclusive and harmonious future for Myanmar,” the statement continued.

“Today’s agreement is a signal that new levels of trust, confidence and cooperation are possible between former enemies and that the seeds of change in Myanmar are beginning to sprout.”

Mr. Nambiar added that while many concerns and difficulties would nonetheless remain on the ground in the country, the reaching of an agreement on the NCA text remained cause for celebration as it laid the groundwork for achieving “a genuine and lasting peace in the country.”