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Ebola: UN emergency response mission winds down as WHO announces possible 'game changer' vaccine



The Ebola vaccine is administered to a participant in the trial in Guinea. Photo: WHO/S. Hawkey

31 July - Having achieved its “core objective” of scaling up global action to tackle the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response will officially wind down today, transferring its role to the World Health Organization (WHO), which just announced that an experimental vaccine being tested in Guinea appears to be highly effective and could be a “game changer.”

In WHO's announcement and in results it published today in the medical journal, *The Lancet*, the UN health agency said the results from an interim analysis of trials in Guinea show that the VSV-EBOV vaccine is highly effective against Ebola, which has killed more than 11,000 people in Liberia, Sierra Leone, as well as Guinea, in an epidemic that has proved devastating for the region.

The agency said that while the vaccine up to now shows 100 per cent efficacy in individuals, “more conclusive evidence is needed on its capacity to protect populations.”

The Guinea vaccination trial began in affected communities on 23 March 2015 to evaluate the efficacy, effectiveness and safety of a single dose of the vaccine VSV-EBOV by using a so-called ring vaccination strategy, the agency said.

“To date, over 4,000 close contacts of almost 100 Ebola patients, including family members, neighbours, and co-workers, have voluntarily participated in the trial,” it said.

Describing the initial results as “promising” and “exciting,” WHO Executive Director said Dr. Margaret Chan told reporters: “I would like to say that if proven effective, this is going to be a game-changer. It will change the management of the current Ebola outbreak and future outbreaks.”

Meanwhile, saying the world had reached an important milestone in the global Ebola response, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced that the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response – UNMEER – will close today and hand over its leadership role to WHO.



“The Mission has achieved its core objective of scaling up the response on the ground and establishing unity of purpose among responders in support of the nationally led efforts,” Mr. Ban said, adding that as of 1 August, oversight of the UN system’s Ebola emergency response will fully be led by WHO under the direct authority of its Director-General, Dr. Chan.

“The United Nations remains steadfast in its commitment to supporting the Governments of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone in getting to and staying at zero cases,” the UN chief said.

His Special Envoy on Ebola, Dr. David Nabarro, who will continue to provide strategic guidance for the response, told reporters in Geneva that the UN mission “was always designed to be a temporary measure, and when it was no longer needed, the UN system would go back to its more normal disposition in responding to the outbreak.”

UNMEER, the first-ever UN emergency health mission, was established on 19 September 2014 to meet immediate needs related to the unprecedented fight against Ebola. The Mission deployed financial, logistical and human resources to Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone to support the push to zero cases.

In the WHO announcement, Dr. Chan said the credit for the Ebola vaccine development goes to the Guinean Government, the people living in the communities and WHO’s partners in this project.

The trial is being implemented by the Guinean authorities, WHO, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, with support from a broad partnership of international and national organizations.

Dr. Marie-Paule Kieny, who leads WHO’s Ebola Research and Development effort, described the pace of the development as “record-breaking” that “marks a turning point in the history of health R&D.”

According to WHO, the vaccine was developed by the Public Health Agency of Canada. The vaccine was licensed to NewLink Genetics, and on 24 November 2014, Merck & Co., Inc and NewLink Genetics Corp. entered into an exclusive worldwide licensing agreement wherein Merck assumed responsibility to research, develop, manufacture, and distribute the investigational vaccine.

In ISIL-controlled territory, 8 million civilians living in ‘state of fear’ – UN expert



An increasing number of people, including families with children and the elderly, have encountered deadly ambushes as they try to escape areas controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Photo: UNAMI

31 July - The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has engaged in widespread and systematic human rights violations of the most serious kinds in Syria and Iraq, brutally forcing some 8 million people to “assimilate, flee or face death,” according to a United Nations expert.

“These violations may amount to genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and widespread attacks on the civilian population,” according to Ben Emmerson, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.

An estimated 8 million people live under ISIL territory in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.

“The brutal nature and overall scale of abuses appears to be intended to reinforce the group’s absolute monopoly on political and social life and to enforce compliance and conformity among communities under its control. The result is that civilians who remain in ISIL-controlled areas live in a state of constant and almost unimaginable fear,” said Emmerson in his report, which was presented to the Human Rights Council last month.

ISIL has targeted religious and ethnic groups in Iraq and Syria and committed acts of violence against civilians because of their affiliation with them. These communities have been forced to assimilate, flee or face death, he explained. “In Iraq, violence against the Yezidis have been reported with men being separated from women and children, then taken to ditches and brutally executed,” he added.

Extremely vulnerable to violence and discrimination, women face sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual slavery, killings, enslavement, and rape. They are confined to their homes and forced to adhere to a strict dress code, pointed out the expert. And children as young as six have been raped, tortured and kidnapped.

Children as young as 8 years old have also been trained and used in military roles. “They are reportedly made to watch videos of beheadings, and mass executions to desensitize them to forms of violence employed by ISIL.”

The growing military capacity of ISIL also means the spread of fear and terror on civilians, Mr. Emmerson continued, emphasizing that more than 20,000 foreign fighters have now joined the ranks of non-State armed groups from about 80 countries around the world.

Addressing the military response by the international coalition of States, led by the United States, he said that civilians living in ISIL-controlled territory are mainly residing in urban areas where many of the coalition air strikes have been performed. It has also been reported that ISIL strategically places its fighters among civilians, in civilian areas or uses hospitals and schools as military bases, to provoke civilian casualties in the event of attacks by the coalition.

The UN Rapporteur then called attention to the lack of transparency with coalition operations in Iraq and Syria.

“Each nation participating in the air war operates under unique rules of engagement, and transparency levels differ significantly,” the expert noted. While air strikes are carried out by different sources, it is difficult to know which States were responsible for an event and when they will occur.

The Special Rapporteur recalled the coalition states’ obligations under international law to ensure that their military operations are “transparent and accountable,” and that any civilian death resulting from these operations is “promptly, independently and impartially” investigated.

Highlighting the failure by the Security Council to take appropriate and immediate action to protect civilians in affected areas, Mr. Emmerson also stressed the need for the international coalition of States engaged in military acts against ISIL to ensure that measures are put into place to protect civilians and prevent further casualties.

Experts like Mr. Emerson work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

Senior UN officials condemn West Bank arson attack that killed Palestinian child

31 July - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the UN special envoy on the Middle East have strongly condemned today’s arson attack in the West Bank that killed a Palestinian child and left the child’s parents severely injured.

“The Secretary-General strongly condemns today’s murder of a Palestinian child in the West Bank and calls for the perpetrators of this terrorist act to be promptly brought to justice,” reads a statement issued by his spokesperson in New York.

Continued failures to effectively address impunity for repeated acts of settler violence have led to another horrific incident involving the death of an innocent life, adds the statement. “This must end.”

The absence of a political process and Israel’s illegal settlement policy, as well as the harsh and unnecessary practice of demolishing Palestinian houses, have given rise to violent extremism on both sides, the statement continues.

“This [situation] presents a further threat to the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for statehood, as well as to the security of the people of Israel. The Secretary-General urges both sides to take bold steps to return to the path of peace.”



Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov. UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz

Mr. Ban reiterates his call on all parties to ensure that tensions do not escalate further, leading to more loss of life, the statement concludes.

Earlier today, the United Nations special envoy on the Middle East today expressed his outrage over what he called a “heinous murder” and a “terrorist crime.”

“I am outraged by today’s vicious arson attack by suspected Jewish extremists in the Occupied West Bank village of Duma, near Nablus, which killed Palestinian toddler Ali, critically injured his mother and father, and injured his four-year old sibling,” the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov, said.

Joining in the “strong condemnations” issued by Israeli and Palestinian Governments and political leaders, the Special Coordinator also called for a “full and prompt investigation” to bring the perpetrators to justice.

“This heinous murder was carried out for a political objective. We must not permit such acts to allow hate and violence to bring more personal tragedies and to bury any prospect of peace. This reinforces the need for an immediate resolution of the conflict and an end to the occupation.”

Thousands of unregistered children born in Liberia during Ebola crisis at risk of exploitation – UNICEF



Over 70,000 births were not registered during the Ebola outbreak in Liberia putting these children at risk. Photo: UNICEFLiberia/S.Grile

31 July - The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) warned today that the more than 70,000 Liberian children whose births were not recorded during the Ebola outbreak may be unable to access basic health and social services, obtain identity documents, and risk the danger of being trafficked or illegally adopted.

“No child should suffer the indignity, or not have protection from a state or other entities, and be unable to access basic services that are every child’s right just because of a lack of a registered identity,” Sheldon Yett, UNICEF’s Representative in Liberia, said in a press release.

“We cannot, and should never let that happen,” Mr. Yett said in Monrovia, the Liberian capital.

UNICEF said that birth registrations in 2014 and 2015 had dropped sharply from pre-Ebola levels.

In 2013, before the onset of the virus, the births of 79,000 children were registered. In 2014, when many health facilities had closed or had reduced services due to the Ebola response, the number of registrations fell to 48,000 – a 39 per cent decrease over the previous year.

And “just 700 children are reported to have had their births registered between January and May 2015,” according to UNICEF.

“Children who have not been registered at birth officially don’t exist,” according to Mr. Yett. “Without citizenship, children in Liberia, who have already experienced terrible suffering because of Ebola, risk marginalization because they may be unable to access basic health and social services, obtain identity documents, and will be in danger of being trafficked or illegally adopted.”

Prior to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which has killed more than 11,000 people in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, UNICEF had helped increase birth registration rates in Liberia from 4 per cent – then the world’s second lowest rate – to 25 per cent in 2013.

Ebola resurfaced in Liberia last month after the country had been declared free of the disease, but there were no new cases reported according to the latest epidemic update, released Wednesday by the World Health Organization (WHO).

In that same update, WHO reported that there are only seven confirmed cases of Ebola reported in the week to 26 July: 4 in Guinea and 3 in Sierra Leone.

“This is the lowest weekly total for over a year, and comes after 8 consecutive weeks during which case incidence had plateaued at between 20 and 30 cases per week,” WHO said, but cautioned that “although this decline in case incidence is welcome, it is too early to tell whether it will be sustained.”

UN refugee agency envoy Angelina Jolie visits displaced people in Myanmar’s Kachin state



UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie Pitt (left) in Myitkyina township, Kachin State, Myanmar, meeting with some of the 100,000 displaced people who currently live there. Photo: UNHCR/T.Stoddart

31 July - Oscar-winning actress and United Nations refugee agency Special Envoy, Angelina Jolie, travelled yesterday to Myanmar’s Kachin state, where internally displaced persons (IDPs), including a number of women, told her their stories.

“Women and girls need to have a meaningful and active role in the peace process,” said Mrs. Jolie, who is the Special Envoy for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

“With cease-fire talks and the upcoming elections, it’s essential that all of Myanmar’s people, including those displaced, can be engaged in decisions that affect their future.”

The Special Envoy stopped in the Myitkyina township, where over 100,000 people have been displaced since a cease-fire agreement between the Myanmar armed forces and ethnic armed groups broke down in 2011.

There, she spoke with displaced families and heard about challenges related to access to basic services, particularly health care. A 90-year-old woman described how she has been displaced for most of her life – perhaps 10 times since the 1960s, and most recently in 2012.

“We have relatives and friends who are still stranded in the forest. They need help urgently,” Mrs. Jolie Pitt was told by the head of a family who had just arrived after fleeing another township and spending 10 days in the forest.

The Special Envoy stressed the importance of humanitarian access to assist the displaced families.

No local or international humanitarian actors have been able to access this conflict area since clashes started in late June this year.