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Civil society must be ‘equal partners’ in implementing UN sustainability agenda, Ban tells parliamentarians

31 August - With speakers of parliament meeting at United Nations Headquarters at a moment when the world is gripped by multiple crises – displacement has soared to all-time highs and the threat of climate change grows by the day – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged the legislators to help drive forward the new UN sustainable development agenda and ensure that civil society are equal partners in “building the future we want.”

“We are being challenged to strengthen our collective resolve to promote peace and security, sustainable development and human rights around the world,” said Mr. Ban, telling the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament that, earlier this month, UN Member States took a bold step in this direction by concluding negotiations on the “ambitious and transformative” agenda for the next 15 years.

The global parliamentary summit is held every five years. The current meeting will run through 2 September in New York and today’s opening session features addresses from Mr. Ban, IPU President Saber Chowdhury, UN General Assembly President Sam Kutesa and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Special Envoy for Peace and Reconciliation Forest Whitaker.

In his remarks, the Secretary-General said that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that form the basis of the new UN agenda are people-centred and planet-sensitive. They provide a plan of action for ending poverty and hunger, and a roadmap for building a life of dignity for all and they promise to “leave no one behind.”

Commending the parliamentarians of the world, and the IPU, for the valuable role they played in shaping the new framework, Mr. Ban underscored that their contribution to its implementation will be equally critical in ensuring that the agenda is translated from the global to the national.
“People will look to you to hold your governments accountable for achieving the goals, and to write the laws and invest in the programmes that will make them a reality,” he said, noting that while democratic principles also run through the entire document “like a silver thread,” Sustainable Development Goal 16 addresses democracy by calling for inclusive and participatory societies and institutions.

At the same time, the UN chief said the task of implementing and monitoring these goals is huge. It requires States to work in strong and close partnership with civil society of all stripes. This has never been more important.

And yet, for civil society, freedom to operate is diminishing – or even disappearing. Dozens of Governments have adopted restrictions that limit the ability of NGOs [non-governmental organizations] to work, or to receive funding, or both.

“As we embark on this new agenda, the State and civil society can and should be partners in building the future we want,” he said, emphasizing that the declaration the parliamentarians will adopt at the conference outlines their responsibilities in translating the voices of the people into meaningful action.

For his part, General Assembly President Kutesa said given their role as pillars of democratic governance, parliaments will have an important role in the implementation of the new development agenda.

“Parliamentarians should continue to ensure that the voices of the people are heard and included in the development process. This will enhance ownership of the new agenda and its implementation on the ground, which will be vital for its success,” he said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kutesa said, it will be essential to carry forward the unfinished business of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have been incorporated in the Sustainable Development Goals SDGs. In particular, greater attention will be needed in the areas of education, health, water and sanitation, advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment, and creation of employment, among others.

Parliamentarians will be essential to that effort, the Assembly President said, also spotlighting the critical role they must play in the protection and preservation of the environment, including through enacting appropriate legislation.

“As we work toward reaching a new, universally-binding climate change agreement at the Conference of the Parties on Climate Change (COP 21) in Paris this December, bold commitments that will protect our planet for generations to come are needed,” said Mr. Kutesa, stressing that parliamentarians and other stakeholders should remain actively engaged in collective efforts towards this noble goal.

Yemen: ‘worrying outbreak’ of dengue fever prompts UN health agency appeal for safe humanitarian corridor

31 August - The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) is appealing for a safe corridor to reach more than 3 million people in war-torn Yemen’s most populated governorate, Taiz, where “an extreme spike” in cases of dengue fever has been recorded over the past two weeks.

“There is an urgent need for a humanitarian corridor to assess the situation and institute control measures,” said Dr. Ala Alwan, WHO’s Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

“We need protection and safety for all people working to control the worrying outbreak of dengue fever in Taiz, which includes support with residual spraying, health education of communities and distribution of other supplies,” Dr. Alwan said.

With an estimated population of 3.2 million people, Taiz, near the southern tip of the country, is the most populated governorate in Yemen where now three of its major hospitals are inaccessible or have been caught in the frontline of fire denying millions of displaced, sick and wounded civilians access to health services, WHO said in a press release issued over
More than 800 deaths and over 6,000 injuries have been reported in Taiz since March 2015.

And now, according to WHO, an extreme spike in cases of dengue fever has been recorded in the governorate in the past 2 weeks from 145 suspected cases at the start of August to 421 by 25 August 2015.

“With the ongoing insecurity and mass displacement of thousands of people, it is likely that the situation will deteriorate in the coming days, placing over 3.2 million people at additional risk,” the agency warned.

Dengue is a mosquito-borne viral disease, according to WHO. It is a febrile illness that affects infants, young children and adults with symptoms appearing 3-14 days after the infective bite. The infection causes flu-like illness, and occasionally develops into a potentially lethal complication called severe dengue.

WHO reminded all parties to the conflict of their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians, health facilities, and health professional during the conflict, and that health facilities must be treated as neutral premises and never be exploited for military purposes.

“All parties to the conflict must observe a ceasefire and demilitarize all hospitals and health facilities in Taiz, allow for the safe delivery of the supplies, implement measures to control the dengue outbreak, provide treatment and enable access to injured people and other patients,” Dr. Alwan said.

More than 850,000 people face acute food insecurity in Somalia, UN food assessment shows

31 August - Somalia’s humanitarian situation remains “alarming” four years after a devastating famine with the number of people requiring emergency aid rising 17 per cent to more than 850,000 and those in “food-stressed” situations still at 2.3 million, according to the latest United Nations-managed food assessment study released today.

“The levels of food insecurity and malnutrition are critical,” said UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia, Peter de Clercq. “Humanitarian actors and donors have prevented the situation being a lot worse than it is, but we all need to do more.”

“The situation among internally displaced people is particularly worrying,” Mr. de Clercq said.

In 2011, Somalia experienced a devastating famine, according to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Things have since improved, but humanitarian needs remain vast and the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance continues to fluctuate around 3 million. The ability to absorb shocks – whether conflict or natural disasters – is very limited.

According to the Food Security and Nutrition Assessment for Somalia managed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), “widespread acute malnutrition persists across Somalia and large numbers of people will be acutely food insecure through December 2015.”

The results of assessment presented today in the Somali capital of Mogadishu “indicate that the country’s humanitarian situation remains alarming,” OCHA said.

The latest findings from the joint countrywide seasonal assessment reveal that some 855,000 people across Somalia will be in ‘crisis and emergency’ through December 2015.

“This figure represents a 17 per cent increase over the estimate for February to June 2015,” according to the assessment,
while the number of those in food-stressed situations remained at 2.3 million.

More than two thirds, or 68 per cent, of the people who are in crisis and emergency are internally displaced and nearly 215,000 children aged under five are acutely malnourished, of whom almost 40,000 are severely malnourished and face a high risk of disease and death.

“We must continue investing in saving lives. We cannot allow a reversal in the important steps forward made on the humanitarian and development fronts,” Mr. de Clercq said, “We must simultaneously address the underlying causes of the country’s predicament, and work on durable solutions that will mitigate suffering while also building a more resilient Somalia.”

**Land, resource rights key to Sami people’s self-determination, says UN expert**

31 August - Securing rights over their land and natural resources is fundamental to the Sami people’s self-determination and a prerequisite for them to be able to continue to exist as a distinct people, an independent United Nations human rights expert said after a visit to the Nordic region.

Speaking at the end of a special conference organized by the Sami Parliamentary Council, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz said she was pleased that Norway, Sweden and Finland all pay considerable attention to indigenous issues.

“In many respects, initiatives related to the Sami people in the Nordic countries can set important examples for securing the rights of indigenous peoples,” she noted in a news release.

Nevertheless, the expert cautioned that “the challenges ahead in Sápmi remain significant, and to meet them will require serious commitment, political will, and hard work.”

This is especially true given the increased drive to extract and develop minerals and set up renewable energy projects in the Sápmi region.

“In the context of mineral extraction and large-scale renewable energy projects, such as windmills, particular attention should be paid to ensuring that the traditional livelihoods of the Sami, including reindeer herding and salmon fishing, are effectively safeguarded,” she stated.

The expert encouraged the three governments “to ensure that their mineral laws and policies are in line with international standards related to the rights of indigenous peoples, including those requiring adequate consultations with the affected indigenous communities and their free, prior and informed consent, mitigation measures, compensation and benefit sharing.”

In that context, she was pleased to learn of the commitment of the Swedish Government to revisit its mineral act.

Considering the Norwegian Sami Parliament’s concerns over the current Mineral Act and the Norwegian Mineral Industry’s call for the Act to be revised and clarified with respect to Sami rights, she advised the Norwegian Government to embark on a process to do so, in close consultation with the Sami Parliament.

With respect to Finland, Ms. Tauli-Corpuz was pleased to learn of the increased safeguards for Sami rights and livelihoods in the Mining Act, and hopes that Finland will continue to pay attention to the rights of the Sami in its implementation.

The Special Rapporteur emphasized in particular the cross-border efforts taken by the Sami Parliaments and the Governments of Norway, Sweden and Finland to develop a Nordic Sami Convention, which could be enshrined as a global best practice to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Outcome Document of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples. “I encourage all parties involved to follow through on their commitment to adopt
this Convention by March 2016.”

At the conference, held in Hemavan, Sweden, from 25 to 27 August, she also examined both progress and remaining gaps regarding other key issues affecting Sami people, including in the areas of education, language and mental health, as well as combatting violence against Sami women.

Ms. Tauli-Corpuz’s participation at the conference was considered an official visit to the traditional region of the Sami people, who continue to live within their territories spanning the formal boundaries of several States.

She will submit a report next year to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council with her conclusions and recommendations.

**Ban mourns death of force commander on UN Haiti mission**

31 August - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said Monday was saddened by the news of the death of the Force Commander of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).

In a press release issued by his spokesperson, Mr. Ban said he learned “with great sadness the sudden passing” of Lieutenant General José Luiz Jaborandy, Jr., 30 August 2015 in Miami, while was on a trip to Brazil, where he was born.

Lieutenant General Jaborandy, Jr. was the Force Commander of MINUSTAH since March 2014.

The Secretary-General said he was grateful to Lieutenant General Jaborandy, Jr. for the dedication to peace and leadership he has shown during his deployment.

Mr. Ban expressed his sincere condolences to the bereaved family and to the Government of Brazil for this “tragic loss.”

**UN relief wing cites major access challenges in eastern Ukraine, where millions need supplies ahead of winter**

30 August - Sounding the alarm on behalf of relief agencies working to meet ongoing needs and jump-start critical preparations for winter in strife-riven eastern Ukraine, the United Nations humanitarian wing has reported that aid organizations are facing major challenges in getting access to the most vulnerable of an estimated 5 million people affected by the conflict that began in the region in April 2014.

According to the latest monthly update from the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) access challenges vary from security concerns, bureaucratic impediments, and logistical and legal constraints. An estimated 2 million people living in areas along the contact line between Government forces and armed groups are the most vulnerable and the highest priority group in terms of aid operations.

“Half of these people are estimated to be living in Government-controlled areas, while the remainder live in non-Government-controlled areas. Fire exchanges and shelling in many hot-spot locations along the contact line are constantly endangering the lives of many civilians and exacerbating their suffering.”

OCHA explains that their plight has been compounded by their inability to flee to safety, particularly across the contact line (from non-Government controlled- to Government-controlled areas) due to complicated procedures on population movements in the area. This has been further aggravated by the lack of social services, disruption of trade, lack of access to pensions and other social-benefit payments, and lack of functioning banking systems in non-Government-controlled areas.
At the same time, people living in Government-controlled areas have been similarly affected and cannot access basic services. Most of the 2 million people have received limited or no assistance from humanitarian agencies, as aid organizations have been unable to reach these people due to insecurity and bureaucratic hurdles.

Humanitarian agencies are also concerned about the protracted displacement of 1.4 million people in Government-controlled areas. About 60 per cent of the registered IDPs [internally displaced persons] are elderly people and about 13 per cent are children, says OCHA, explaining that meeting their needs requires interventions by humanitarian and recovery/development actors in the immediate and longer term.

“The humanitarian community has repeatedly advocated to all parties to the conflict to guarantee free and unimpeded humanitarian access, including limiting bureaucratic procedures to the strict minimum,” notes OCHA, adding that under international humanitarian law, parties to the conflict are responsible for facilitating access for humanitarian organizations to affected people.

Intense discussions are under way at various levels to resolve the issue and find practical solutions, focusing on the humanitarian imperative of providing assistance to the people who need it most. OCHA also notes that positive steps have been undertaken to engage with the Government of Ukraine on facilitating access to vulnerable people, and on bringing various laws and by-laws and the temporary order on population movements and movement of humanitarian cargo and personnel in line with the laws of Ukraine and international humanitarian principles.

Yet aid agencies remain concerned, noting the critical delay of winterization efforts caused by suspension of aid convoys. They are extremely concerned, says OCHA, that the “window of opportunity to be well prepared for the winter already closing.” If access continues to be restricted, aid agencies will be unable to transport, store and ensure sufficient supplies of critical non-food and shelter items to help thousands of affected people.

The agencies are also concerned that due to ongoing hostilities about 1.3 million people are at risk of losing access to safe drinking water.

Finally, OCHA underscored that the 2015 Humanitarian Response Plan for Ukraine remains underfunded, according to the Financial Tracking Service (FTS). By the end of August, donors disbursed and pledged about $114 million, which is equivalent to 37 per cent of the $316 million required. This includes $104.9 million (33 per cent) disbursed and another $9.2 million pledged (3 per cent). The shortfall is about $200 million.

**Prohibition of enforced disappearance is 'absolute,' UN declares, urging action to ramp-up searches for missing**

30 August - Marking the fourth International Day of Enforced Disappearances, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon denounced the “alarming” number of acts by that are tantamount to enforced disappearances and appealed to all Member States to ratify or accede to the legal instrument prohibiting such acts.

“The prohibition of enforced disappearance is absolute,” Mr. Ban declared in a message on the Day, commemorated annually on 30 August.

The UN chief was referring to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, which affirms unequivocally that the use of enforced disappearance is illegal under any circumstances, including war, internal political instability or any other public emergency.

“Victims of enforced disappearances are deprived of their liberty, kept in secret detention and seldom released,” Mr. Ban said. “Often their fate remains unknown; they are frequently tortured and in constant fear of being killed. Even if they are eventually set free, the physical and psychological scars stay with them for the rest of their lives. The victims' families and loved ones also suffer immense anguish.”
“On this International Day, I urge all Member States to ratify or accede to the Convention without delay, and I call on the States parties to the Convention to implement it,” Mr. Ban said, adding: “It is time for an end to all enforced disappearances.”

He noted that far from being a practice employed only in the past by military dictatorships, enforced disappearance continues to be used by some States.

Furthermore, “in recent years there has also been an alarming number of acts by non-State actors, including armed extremist and terrorist groups, that are tantamount to enforced disappearances and that are also gross abuses of human rights,” he said.

In the past year alone, the two UN mechanisms [expert groups] on enforced disappearance received 246 requests by family members across the world to take urgent action.

“This figure is just a fraction of the thousands of cases that are never reported either because of security conditions or because of a lack of knowledge of the existence of international mechanisms that can help,” the UN chief said.

Providing details on these incidents in a strongly worded statement, the two UN mechanisms – the Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances – called on States to establish and activate protocols for the immediate search of disappeared persons, in a systematic way, across the world.

The experts explained that the 246 recent cases of enforced disappearances that they had been working on over the past year “are a clear indication that this heinous practice is still used in a number of countries.”

Those cases are nevertheless only the "tip of the iceberg" of thousands of cases which are never reported either because of fear of reprisals or because the security conditions do not allow doing so, they added, echoing the Secretary-General. The lack of resources and the insufficient awareness of existing international mechanisms are other reasons why many cases of enforced disappearances are never reported to the United Nations.

“Following the activation of the urgent actions procedures by the Working Group and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances over the last year, 13 disappeared persons were found alive, in detention, and sadly two were found dead,” they revealed, stressing that the use of the “urgent action” procedures shows that in the case of enforced disappearance, time is of the essence.

“The hours and days that follow a disappearance are crucial to find the disappeared person alive. The actions taken in the immediate aftermath of a disappearance cannot be left to hazards but have to be systematized in protocols that permit the immediate activation of all means at disposal for the search of the disappeared.”

With this in mind, the experts called on governments to take action as soon as a case of disappearance is reported to the authorities and all necessary measures to seek and find the disappeared person and to avoid irreparable harm.

“We equally urge governments to guarantee the full protection from all forms of reprisals of those who report cases of enforced disappearances, the authors of the urgent actions requests, the witnesses, and the relatives of the disappeared persons… [and] also encourage all those whose beloved ones have disappeared, as well as those acting on their behalf, to make use of the tool provided by the urgent action procedures.

By a resolution adopted in December 2010, the UN General Assembly welcomed the adoption of Convention and decided to declare 30 August the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances.

The Convention entered into force in 2010, has been signed by 93 States and ratified by 50, and provides a sound foundation for fighting impunity, protecting disappeared persons and their families and strengthening the guarantees provided by the rule of law – including investigation, prosecution, justice and reparation.
Ban 'deeply regrets' Egyptian court decision to uphold sentences of Al Jazeera journalists

30 August - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has expressed “deep regret” over the decision by the Egyptian court of Cassation to uphold the sentencing of several Al Jazeera journalists and has reiterated his appeal for their cases to be resolved expeditiously and in accordance with the country's international obligations to protect free expression.

In a statement issued last evening by his spokesperson in New York, the Secretary-General expressed deep regret over the sentencing of Al Jazeera journalists Baher Mohamed, Mohamed Fahmy, and Peter Greste (in absentia), as well as others.

“The Secretary-General recalls his earlier appeals for their cases to be resolved expeditiously and in accordance with Egypt's international obligations to protect freedom of expression and association and in full observance of due process guarantees,” added the statement, underscoring the importance of pluralism and respect for fundamental freedoms for the long-term prosperity and stability of Egypt.

The two journalists were initially arrested in 2013 along with their Australian colleague, Peter Greste, for carrying out legitimate news reporting activities, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and were subsequently convicted and sentenced in June 2014 by an Egyptian court.