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Syria: UN officials give first-hand accounts of ‘horrible, terrible’ desperation in besieged towns

12 January - As United Nations officials gave on-site accounts of the “horrible and terrible” situation in the besieged Syrian town of Madaya, from 400 critically ill people facing death without immediate medical care to a kilo of rice costing $300, the first emergency evacuation took place today – a five-year-old girl rushed through pro-Government roadblocks for urgent surgery in Damascus.

“We saw thousands of people in desperation, thousands of people who are severely malnourished, older people who were in clear dire physical condition because of lack of regular access to food,” said UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria Yacoub El Hillo, who was with the first aid convoy to get through to Madaya, under siege by pro-Government forces, since October.

“We saw people who seemed to have lost hope that the world cared about them,” he added by telephone from Damascus on his return from the town of 42,000 people, where the 44-truck convoy of life-saving items, including health, nutrition and food supplies, blankets and shelter materials was unloaded into the early hours of today.

At the same time, a 21-truck convoy delivered similar items to 20,000 people in Kafraya and Foah, two towns under siege by opposition forces near the Turkish border in northwest Syria, also cut off from humanitarian access since October, as the war between the Government and a whole spectrum of opposition forces nears the start of its sixth year.

As the first reports were coming in from the besieged towns, UN humanitarian and development agencies gave details of their $7.73-billion appeal, in vital new funding for 2016 to help 22.5 million people in Syria and across the region.

The appeal comprises two main elements: help for an anticipated 4.7 million refugees in neighbouring countries by the end of 2016 as well as four million people in communities hosting them, and support for 13.5 million displaced and conflict-
affected people inside Syria itself.

The aid convoys are the result of tortuously negotiated local ceasefires between the UN and its partners, Government and rebel forces, even though the UN Security Council three weeks ago demanded immediate humanitarian access across all battle lines.

“Of course, there were a number of terrible examples of emergencies for intervention, to evacuate 400 critically ill people who are going to die if they don’t get fast to a medical facility that has the capacity to deal with their complicated condition […] These people must get out today before tomorrow if we are going to save their lives,” Mr. Hillo said of the people in Madaya.

The UN and its partners hope to send in new convoys to the besieged towns on Thursday with mobile medical clinics and emergency feeding centres for children “who are at a very advanced stage of malnourishment,” he added.

He stressed that sieges must be lifted throughout Syria, where the UN and its partners are equally concerned about the 4.5 million people living in hard-to-reach areas, including nearly 400,000 in 15 besieged locations without access to the aid that they desperately need.

“The sieges can no longer be tolerated,” Mr. Hillo declared. “Many people have lost their lives while waiting. Many more will die if the world does not move faster […] There are many, many horrible and terrible human stories.”

According to the non-government group Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), 23 people starved to death in Madaya in December, six of them children.

“We were pretty horrified,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative Sajjad Malik, who was also with the first convoy to reach Madaya.

“Most of them have not had bread, rice or vegetables for quite some time. They were desperately looking for something while we were offloading cars… kids and everybody around the cars were asking for anything (to eat) … we could see how desperate the situation is. They have been going around looking for grass or herbs and they use a bit of spices and make soup,” he said.

The few meagre supplies of food that remained in the town are being sold at exorbitant prices – with $300 sought for a kilo of rice, said Mr. Malik, adding: “Reportedly someone sold a motorbike to get five kilos of rice.”

“If we are not able to sustain this support to these communities, even this effort […] with all these trucks now is going to be another band-aid, because within a month, they will run out of food and medicines. What we saw in Madaya should not happen anywhere in this century, it should not have happened now,” he said.

**Yemen’s war-weary children face ‘new year of pain and suffering’ – UNICEF official**

12 January - The ongoing deadly violence in Yemen has left nearly 10 million children facing threats of malnutrition and disease, lack of education, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) representative to the country warned today, calling for unhindered humanitarian access to all those in need and an end to the conflict.

“Continuous bombardment and street fighting are exposing children and their families to a deadly combination of violence, disease and deprivation,” UNICEF Representative Julien Harneis said, sounding the alarm on behalf of the conflict’s most vulnerable.

According to the UN, more than 700 children have been killed, with more than 1,000
injured since last March. Additionally, about 700 had been forced to become child soldiers.

Children, who make up about half of the 2.3 million people in Yemen displaced from their homes, are also struggling to get water on a daily basis, and facing the risk of acute malnutrition and respiratory tract infections. They are also without access to education.

“The longer-term consequences of all this for Yemen – which was already the Middle East’s poorest nation even before the conflict – can only be guessed at,” said Mr. Harneis, adding that “public services like health, water and sanitation have been decimated and cannot meet the ever-increasing needs of a desperate population.”

In response, UNICEF and partners are doing the best they can in an extremely hazardous working environment: they have provided vaccinations against measles and polio to children under the age of five, as well as treatment for malnutrition.

Moreover, over 3.5 million affected people were provided water and sanitation, with vulnerable communities receiving humanitarian cash transfers in the cities of Sana’a and Taiz.

“But so much more is needed. The children of Yemen need urgent help and they need it now,” Mr. Harneis stressed, calling for unhindered access to areas where civilians are dying without functioning hospitals, where medicines are in short supply and children are at risk of dying from preventable diseases.

Ongoing conflict in Yemen wreaked havoc on the country, inflicting damage on civilian infrastructure, straining depleted resources and exacerbating an already precarious humanitarian situation. Despite some progress in identifying a framework for negotiations and defining a set of confidence-building measures, UN-facilitated peace talks in December 2015 had to be adjourned until a ceasefire could take hold.

Regarding current status of the talks, Ahmad Fawzi, interim Director of the UN Information Service in Geneva, told the regular bi-weekly press briefing today that the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, was still in the region. Following intensive talks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the Envoy was to visit Sana’a in Yemen.

Responding to a question about the resumption of talks, Mr. Fawzi said 14 January had been mentioned as a preliminary date, but the Special Envoy’s preference was now to hold the next round of talks in the region, and he was working with the parties to agree a location that was acceptable to all, with a provisional start date after 20 January.

Switzerland remained an option for the Special Envoy, and the Swiss authorities were supportive in every way and happy to host such a meeting. The host Government continued to offer to facilitate such political processes in an efficient and generous manner, added Mr. Fawzi.

**UN condemns ‘despicable’ terrorist bombing in Istanbul’s Sultanahmet District**

**12 January** - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today condemned the terrorist bombing in Sultanahmet Square in Istanbul, Turkey, calling it a “despicable crime targeting the heart of Istanbul’s tourist district.”

The attack reportedly claimed the lives of 10 people and injured at least 15 others.

In a statement issued by his Spokesperson, Mr. Ban said he expects the perpetrators to be swiftly brought to justice.

“He sends his heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims, as well as to the people and the Governments of Turkey and Germany and other foreign citizens impacted by the bombing,” the statement noted. “He wishes those injured a speedy recovery.”
Meanwhile, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, condemned the suicide bomb attack in the strongest possible terms.

“Mr. Al-Nasser expressed his profound sadness over the outrageous attack that targeted innocent people,” said a statement issued by his Spokesperson.

It added that the High Representative reaffirmed that such “heinous acts” are clear threats to peace and security and run contrary to the values of tolerance, peaceful dialogue and mutual respect that constitute the core of the mission of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, of which the Government of Turkey is a co-sponsor.

In addition, Mr. Al-Nasser said that in the midst of such a “tragic event,” the international community should remain united in their stand against terrorists and in countering all forms of violence and terrorist acts.

Deprived of school, future of 24 million children in conflict zones under threat – UN report

12 January - Nearly 24 million children living in crisis zones in 22 strife-torn countries are being deprived of a school education, threatening their own future and that of their societies, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reported today.

“Children living in countries affected by conflict have lost their homes, family members, friends, safety, and routine. Now, unable to learn even the basic reading and writing skills, they are at risk of losing their futures and missing out on the opportunity to contribute to their economies and societies when they reach adulthood,” UNICEF Chief of Education Jo Bourne said.

The analysis highlights that nearly one in four of the 109.2 million children of primary and lower secondary school age – typically between six and 15 years – living in conflict areas are missing out on their education.

South Sudan, which was thrown into turmoil when conflict erupted between President Salva Kiir and his former Vice-President Riek Machar two years ago, killing thousands, displacing over 2.4 million people, and impacting the food security of 4.6 million, is home to the highest proportion of out-of-school children.

Over half (51 per cent) of primary and lower secondary age children have no access to an education. Niger is a close second with 47 per cent unable to attend school, followed by Sudan with 41 per cent and Afghanistan with 40 per cent.

In countries affected by conflict, collecting data on children is extremely difficult and therefore these figures may themselves not adequately capture the breadth and depth of the challenge, UNICEF stressed.

The agency fears that unless the provision of education in emergencies is prioritized, a generation of children living in conflict will grow up without the skills they need to contribute to their countries and economies, exacerbating the already desperate situation for millions of children and their families.

Education continues to be one of the least funded sectors in humanitarian appeals. In Uganda, where UNICEF is providing services to South Sudanese refugees, education faces an 89 per cent funding gap.

"School equips children with the knowledge and skills they need to rebuild their communities once the conflict is over, and in the short-term it provides them with the stability and structure required to cope with the trauma they have experienced,” Ms. Bourne said.

“Schools can also protect children from the trauma and physical dangers around them. When children are not in school, they are at an increased danger of abuse, exploitation and recruitment into armed groups.”
During episodes of instability and violence, schools become more than a place of learning. UNICEF is working to create safe environments where children can learn and play to restore normalcy to their lives. Despite these efforts, security restrictions and funding shortfalls are affecting education and the distribution of learning materials in conflict situations.

**Deputy UN chief presents new report on global migrant trends, highlighting rising numbers for 2015**

12 January - Presenting the key finding of the latest United Nations survey on international migrant trends, the UN Deputy Secretary-General today stressed that the issue of migration is one of the most challenging and important that the Organization is taking on in the new global landscape.

“When we get into a period of dealing with the migration and refugee issues, it’s important that we have the facts,” Jan Eliasson told reporters at a press briefing, at UN Headquarters, thanking the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) for producing the latest international migration report.

The senior UN official was speaking alongside Karen AbuZayd, the new Special Adviser on a meeting scheduled next September called the Summit on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants, as well as Bela Hovy, from DESA’s Population Division.

“The number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow,” noted the Deputy Secretary-General. “Back in 2000, there were 173 million international migrants, in 2010 there were 222 million, and this past year in 2015, 244 million migrants.”

These figures, Mr. Eliasson explained, also include 20 million refugees for the purpose of “statistical correctness” and despite there being a “different legal regime” for them as compared to migrants.

“Not included in this figure […] are around 40 million internally displaced people – refugees inside a country,” he added.

Offering additional details, Mr. Hovy said that the motive of migration is not taken into account when DESA produces statistics on international migrants, and that the numbers include people who may have arrived to their new place of residence 10 to 40 years ago.

According to the *Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2015 Revision*, nearly two thirds of international migrants live in Europe (76 million) or Asia (75 million). North America has the third largest number of international migrants (54 million), and globally, women comprise half of all of them.

Meanwhile, two thirds of all international migrants were reported to be living in only 20 countries, with the largest number in the United States – about a fifth of the world’s total migrants. The next in line is Germany, followed by Russia, and Saudi Arabia.

Turning to refugees, they are mainly in Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Jordan – and come mainly from three countries – Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia.

“What I found particularly interesting is how important migration has been for population growth, which is sorely needed in certain parts of the world,” Mr. Eliasson stated.

“In Europe, the size of the population would have fallen between 2000 to 2015, in the absence of positive net migration, so here is something related to what I would call the positive narrative about migration and refugees – the contribution to the demographics […] and of course what they do in terms of remittances.”

The Deputy Secretary-General highlighted that remittances to international migrants’ countries of origin is about two or three times bigger than the official development assistance in the world, which supports many health and education efforts.
worldwide.

“We have a series of very important meetings and events which relate to the political significance of migration and refugees,” noted Mr. Eliasson, recalling that in November, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon presented a road map for the work on migration and refugees.

One of the most important global events on refugee and migrant flows will take place on 19 September in New York, led by Ms. AbuZayd, who will begin meeting with Member States starting next month and work closely with DESA and other UN partners in the lead up to it.

“The summit is intended to work towards solutions as a global community,” Ms. AbuZayd underlined. “Because I think that many countries that may not have much to do with migration or with refugees may also want to come in and contribute and participate in this action working toward solving this problem.”

**Libya: senior UN relief official condemns attacks on Benghazi power plant**

**12 January** - Strongly condemning the recent attacks against a major power plant in Libya’s eastern city of Benghazi, the top United Nations humanitarian official in the country said today he is “deeply shocked by these actions that directly affect civilian life,” and warned that such “ignoble” attacks may amount to war crimes.

In a statement the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator of the UN in Libya, Ali Al-Za’tari, expressed serious concerns about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the country.

He highlighted that these ignoble attacks put additional pressure on the already strained service delivery mechanisms as they further deteriorate the living conditions of people affected by the conflict and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

“I am deeply shocked by these actions that directly affect the life of civilians. Attacks against civilian objects and service delivery institutions are attacks against the ordinary people and prohibited under international humanitarian law and may amount to war crimes,” Mr. Al-Za’tari said.

He emphasized that the citizens of Benghazi are now without electricity for more than four hours a day, and added that “the repercussions of these power failures on hospitals, community services and households are severe and expose the local population to further distress and deprivation.”

Against that background, the Humanitarian Coordinator called on all parties to ensure the safety and the security of service delivery institutions to meet the basic need of all Libyans.
Iraq: UN envoy calls on all sides to shun cycle of reprisals following mosque attacks

12 January - The top United Nations official in Iraq today appealed to all parties in the strife torn-country to avoid being drawn into a vicious cycle or reprisal attacks following the “outrageous” bombing of six mosques in Muqdadiya in Diyala Province.

“Once again, places of worship are being attacked. The perpetrators want to incite sectarian violence, in a desperate attempt to take the country back into the dark days of sectarian strife,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s Special Representative Ján Kubiš said in a statement.

“I appeal to all sides to refrain from being drawn into a cycle of reprisals by these outrageous acts which aim to drive a wedge between the various components of Iraqi society,” he added.

Mr. Kubiš also condemned the attacks on the Baghdad shopping mall and car bomb attack, which claimed a number of lives and left many injured yesterday.

Five polio-free years in South-East Asia Region, announces UN health agency

12 January - The United Nations health agency today announced that the South-East Asia Region has completed five years without any case of wild poliovirus, a highly infectious disease that invades the nervous system and for which there is still no cure.

“This is a remarkable achievement in view of the continued threat of poliovirus importation from the remaining polio-endemic countries,” said World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, in a statement.

“Countries in the region have been making commendable efforts, stepping up vigilance against polio and continuing to protect children against the crippling virus,” he added, noting that the last case of wild poliovirus reported by WHO in the South-East Asia Region was in West Bengal, India, in 2011.

The UN agency is underlining that completing half a decade without any case of wild poliovirus is “yet another achievement” and a reminder that efforts need to continue until the disease is eradicated globally.

“We need to ensure that our efforts and investment over the years to eradicate polio do not go to waste,” warned Dr. Singh. “Globally, polio transmission is at its lowest ever levels. However, the risk of importation of the poliovirus into all polio-free areas persists.”

As part of the Polio End Game strategy, a long-term plan that addresses what is needed to deliver a polio-free world by 2018, countries in the region are accelerating the introduction of one dose of injectable inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) in childhood immunization schedules, along with plans for a globally synchronized, phased and sequential withdrawal of oral polio vaccines from the programme.

WHO says these strategies are aimed at addressing all polio – including the rare cases of vaccine derived polio.

“Our efforts to stop polio and now to keep the region polio-free, have been possible due to numerous innovative strategies that helped strengthen immunization and disease surveillance, and promote community ownership,” Dr. Singh explained.
“While these lessons learnt are now being adopted by the remaining endemic areas, countries in the region need to replicate these strategies and optimally use the polio programme resources for other public health goals, particularly in the areas of immunization, surveillance and emergency response.”

He added that a polio-free world “is in sight,” and that the international community must continue to make efforts to rid the world of the “crippling disease.”

WHO’s South-East Asia Region comprises Bangladesh, Bhutan, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste.

**African Union–UN mission calls for restraint in West Darfur as tensions rise over recent violence**

12 January - The African Union-United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) expressed concern over continued tension in El Geneina town and around Mouli village, 15 kilometres south of El Geneina, West Darfur, after an armed attack on Mouli village.

“Receiving reports of continuous unrest and sporadic firing across El Geneina and in Mouli with an undetermined number of casualties, UNAMID calls on the government authorities to exert their utmost efforts to contain the situation and investigate the incidents,” the Mission said in a press statement issued yesterday.

Tensions developed on 9 January after an unidentified armed group attacked Mouli village. A large number of inhabitants were displaced to El Geneina, where the next day they demonstrated in front of the Wali’s office – leading to the closure of schools and commercial businesses in the town.

“UNAMID emphasises the importance of restraint by all parties and stands ready to assist the state authorities as well as the Darfuri people in their efforts to arrive at a peaceful resolution of the situation,” concluded the statement.

**Draft UK surveillance law threatens freedom of expression, UN human rights experts warn**

12 January - United Nations human rights experts have called for a comprehensive review of the United Kingdom’s draft Investigatory Powers bill, warning that if adopted in its present form it could threaten the rights to freedoms of expression and association both inside and outside the country.

The legislation, currently being examined by the Joint Parliamentary Committee, aims to unify the various regulations governing how UK surveillance agencies, police and other authorities can monitor suspects.

Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression David Kaye, Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association Maina Kiai, and Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders Michel Forst expressed serious concerns about several provisions of the draft Bill.

They cited excessively broad definitions and disproportionate procedures to authorize surveillance, including mass surveillance, and data retention without adequate independent oversight and transparency.

“The lack of transparency could prevent individuals from ever knowing they are subject to such surveillance,” the experts noted in a six-page submission to the Parliamentary Committee. “This will ultimately stifle fundamental freedoms and exert a deterrent effect on the legitimate exercise of these rights and the work of civil society and human rights defenders.”

Stressing the potential for human rights violations, they called for a comprehensive review of the draft bill “to ensure its
compliance with international human rights law and standards.”

UN rapporteurs, serving in an independent capacity, are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council, to whom they report back.