'The future is happening now,' warns UN, calling for urgent measures to cut carbon emissions

21 March – The Earth is already one degree Celsius hotter than at the start of the 20th century, halfway to the critical two-degree threshold, and national climate change plans adopted so far may not be enough to avoid a three-degree temperature rise, the UN weather agency warned today upon the release of its 2015 annual report on the status of the climate.

"Many people now think that the problem is solved since we reached a nice agreement in Paris last year… but the negative side is that we haven't changed our behaviors," Petteri Taalas, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), told reporters in Geneva.

He argued that carbon dioxide concentrations in the air would be five times the current level in 500 years if no limits are placed on fossil fuel, meaning that the planet would be seven to eight degrees Celsius warmer at that time. It would then take up to 100,000 years to restore the normal level, he added, stressing the urgency of substantially cutting greenhouse gas emissions in the coming few decades.
According to the WMO Statement on the Status of the Climate in 2015, the year made history, with shattered temperature records, intense heatwaves, exceptional rainfall, devastating drought and unusual tropical cyclone activity.

“Our planet is sending a powerful message to world leaders to sign and implement the Paris Agreement on climate change and cut greenhouse gases now before we pass the point of no return,” Mr. Taalas said in a press release, emphasizing that the worst-case scenarios can be averted by taking urgent and far-reaching measures to cut carbon dioxide emissions.

The statement shows that the global average surface temperature in 2015 broke all previous records by a wide margin, at about 0.76 degree Celsius above the 1961-1990 average, because of a powerful El Niño and human-caused global warming. With 93 per cent of excess heat stored in the oceans, ocean heat content down to 2,000 meters also hit a new record.

Record-breaking trend continuing in 2016
The record-breaking trend has continued in 2016. January and February 2016 set yet more new monthly temperature records, with the heat especially pronounced in the high northern latitudes. Arctic sea ice extent was at a satellite-record low for both months, according to NASA and the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Greenhouse gas concentrations crossed the symbolic and significant 400 parts per million threshold.

“The startlingly high temperatures so far in 2016 have sent shockwaves around the climate science community,” said David Carlson, Director of the World Climate Research Programme, which is co-sponsored by WMO. He added that it is premature to determine that 2016 would extend a record-breaking streak.

The WMO Statement was released ahead of World Meteorological Day, on 23 March.

Political transition 'mother of all issues' for Syria talks – UN mediator

21 March – The UN mediator for the Intra-Syria talks said today that political transition is the “mother of all issues” in the ongoing peace negotiations involving the Government and the opposition.

Briefing reporters in Geneva, UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura said that today's discussion focused on some issues, but stressed that “an exchange” between the Government and opposition will not solve the problem, and what is needed is some common ground for the guiding principles for negotiations.

“I have been reminding everyone that there is no plan 'B'; so plan 'B,' is basically getting through this,” he underscored.

The issue of terrorism remains a sticking point. The Government has its own elaborate analysis and its own concept of terrorism, he said. As far as the UN is concerned, those organizations which are listed by the Security Council as terrorists are terrorists.

Drawing attention to United States Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Moscow to meet with his counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, which is taking place in coincidence with the ending of this session of the Geneva Intra-Syrian Talks, the UN mediator said “nothing in this situation is purely coincidental, everything is interconnected.”

Mr. De Mistura also said that he met with 25 representatives from civil society. “I know you may be less interested in civil society because they are less politicized… but they give us the voice of the Syrian people,” he said.

Asked if things are not moving quickly enough in this process compared to the developments on the ground, he said “that's why we are in a hurry,” highlighting the importance of progress on political transition while the cessation of hostilities is still holding.
To a question about Russia's warning that it would start responding unilaterally to the ceasefire violations in Syria if the US does not coordinate the rules of engagement against violators, the UN mediator said that he was concerned but supportive of the fact that both Russia and the US are talking to get the political process moving.

The “innovative” operations centre, in order to allow Russians and Americans to cooperate in containing the crisis, is something UN had not done before, he said.

#Climatechain: UN to launch campaign illustrating water-environment-climate change link

21 March – As the global community marked World Water Day during a special event at United Nations Headquarters, the UN Children's Fund reported that rapidly changing weather conditions are limiting access to safe drinking water for millions, and announced the launch of a new campaign on the link between water, the environment and climate change.

On the eve of the world Day, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) is warning about the safety concerns due to climate change, as water becomes scarce during droughts, flooding damages water and sewage treatment facilities, and water-borne diseases, such as cholera and diarrhoea, spread more quickly.

“Now that we can test water more cheaply and efficiently than we were able to do when the MDGs were set, we are coming to terms with the magnitude of the challenge facing the world when it comes to clean water,” said Sanjay Wijeserkera, head of UNICEF's global water, sanitation and hygiene programmes.

She was referring to the MDGs or the Millennium Development Goals which led international anti-poverty efforts between the years 2000 and 2015. Last September, the international community jointly approved the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which call for “safe water for everyone.”

“It's a whole new ball game,” said Mr. Wijeserkera, noting that the new SDGs do not simply start off where the MDGs left off.

In 2015, all but 663 million people had access to drinking water from improved sources. But newly available testing technology show that an estimated 1.8 billion people may be drinking water contaminated by e-coli, meaning there is faecal material in their water, even from some improved sources.

In addition, there are now concerns about diseases such as Zika, which are spread by mosquitos whose populations are growing and expanding geographically due to changing weather patterns.

Given these and other concerns, UNICEF is launching a global Instagram campaign that will run from World Water Day, marked tomorrow, until 22 April, when the Paris Agreement, which was adopted by world leaders in France last December, will be open for signature.

UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake, UN General Assembly President Mogens Lykketoft, and UN climate chief Christiana Figueres are among the first supporters expected to illustrate these challenges using the #ClimateChain hashtag.

Meanwhile at the event at UN Headquarters, which also marked the International Day of Forests, senior UN officials highlighted the importance of improving water quality and water supplies.

“The need for the sustainable management of forest and water resources is explicitly recognised in SDG 6 and SDG 15;
however these vital resources are important for all SDGs,” said Wu Hongbo, the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs.

He underlined that water resources maintain jobs across all sectors of the global economy – including agriculture, forestry and industry – and decent jobs and training are likewise needed in order maintain and extend water and forestry services.

“This is just one example of the complex inter-linkages among forest and water issues,” Mr. Wu noted. “Clearly, if we are to successfully implement the Sustainable Development Goals and targets on forests and water, we can only do so through an integrated and coordinated approach.”

Through the course of the event, participants heard different perspectives on how forests and water hold the key to the future – from building resilient urban communities and protecting coastal regions from storm surges, and how various stakeholders are taking action to manage and conserve these vital natural resources.

**Ban spotlights need for human, economic development in Africa’s Great Lakes region**

*21 March* – United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today stressed the importance of human and economic development in addressing peace and security challenges in Africa’s Great Lakes region, calling for the use of natural resources there as a powerful driver of growth.

“While we often focus on political, security and humanitarian issues as we discuss conflict prevention and resolution, we should remind ourselves that peace and security go hand-in-hand with human and economic development,” the UN chief told the Security Council during an open debate on the prevention and resolution of conflicts in the Great Lakes region, which includes the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi and Rwanda as well as Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.

A major challenge in the region is the presence of negative forces illegally exploiting and trading natural resources worth billions of dollars. “It is urgent that these economic lifelines are cut,” Mr. Ban said, calling on the Governments in the region to formulate sound strategies to turn their natural resources into powerful drivers of human and economic development.

In this regard, he welcomed last month's Great Lakes Private Sector Investment Conference in Democratic Republic of the Congo's capital, Kinshasa, which gave regional leaders a rare opportunity to engage with private investors and business leaders from around the world to discuss how to improve the investment climate in the region.

He also said that today's meeting marks the official launch of the UN Great Lakes Regional Strategic Framework for 2016-2017, which has six pillars: sustainable natural resource management; economic integration, cross-border trade and food nutrition security; mobility; youth and adolescents; gender and sexual and gender-based violence; and justice and conflict prevention.

Mr. Ban called on the Security Council, the States of the Great Lakes region and the donor community to endorse this Strategic Framework, as it seeks to support the objectives of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the DR Congo and the region signed by 11 countries in February 2013.

**Political, security and humanitarian issues**

He cited significant advances made over the last 16 years since the UN mission was first deployed in the DRC, including the withdrawal of foreign armed forces; the reunification of the country; the establishment of a transitional government; the organization of two national elections; and the signing of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework.
Over the last several years, there has also been some progress in the security situation in eastern part of the country, including the defeat of the Mouvement du 23 mars, or M23, but the security challenges still persist. In this regard, Mr. Ban welcomed the DRC's decision to resume joint military planning and operations with UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) to eliminate negative forces, notably the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

Mr. Ban also expressed his concerns about continued violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in eastern DR Congo and other parts of the region.

In the DR Congo alone, 7.5 million people are currently in need of humanitarian assistance, including more than 1.5 million internally displaced persons, he said, adding that due to the threat posed by armed groups, population displacements and human rights violations occur daily in some parts of the country.

Mr. Ban also called for the holding of timely and credible elections in accordance with the Constitution.

Turning to Burundi, he expressed concern about the rapidly deteriorating security situation, in which more than one million people, including some 25,000 internally displaced persons, are in need of assistance. In addition, some 250,000 Burundian refugees are being hosted in the DRC, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, he noted.

Also briefing the Council today was Said Djinnit, Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, who also noted that following the conflicts and political turmoil of the 1990s, there had been substantial progress towards political stability and development. However, not all segments of society had benefitted equally, and today, many States in the region were engaged in economic, democratic and political reform processes.

But, while the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other countries in the region had made encouraging progress over the past few years towards implementing their commitments under the Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region and the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework, “there is still a long way to go to achieve long-term stability and development in the region.”

Perspective of multilateral development institutions
Today’s debate was joined by a World Bank Group representative, who stressed that “peace and stability are essential pre-requisites” for investments.

Vijay Pillai, Adviser in the Office of the Vice President, Africa Region, noted that the Great Lakes region presents a stark example of the economic and human costs of conflict.

He said the drivers of this conflict are weak institutions, lack of basic services and economic opportunity, uncertain security situation, ethnic divisions, compounded by rapid population growth and competition over natural resources.

“We continue to see examples in the Great Lakes of how lack of peace and stability plays through quickly in terms of macroeconomic instability, rising fiscal deficits, reduced investor appetite, further fueling lack of jobs and access to basic services,” he said. “Development gains for the people of the Great Lakes require political stability and absence of conflict.”

He stressed that the World Bank Group committed to providing $1.2 billion in additional resources to support Great Lakes projects, which will tap into power generation, facilitate higher incomes for nearly 100,000 trading communities who currently sustain life through insecure cross-border trading, and support women who have been sexually abused, or victims of forced displacement. e World Bank Group also remains committed to sustaining the partnerships approach, working closely with the Governments, UN and other development partners, he said.
Marking the World Day, Ban celebrates potential of people with Down syndrome

21 March – The autonomy and independence of people with Down syndrome and other disabilities should be supported, so that they can be empowered to contribute to our common future, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today said marking World Down Syndrome Day.

“Persons with disabilities, including those with Down syndrome, are more than persons in need of assistance; they are agents of change who can drive progress across society,” Mr. Ban said in his message for the Day, which is observed annually on 21 March.

This year’s theme is “My Friends, My Community” – the benefits of inclusive environments for today’s children and tomorrow’s adults.

In his message, Mr. Ban recalled the words of actors and writer Pablo Pineda, who has Down syndrome, calling on others with Down syndrome, “They should see themselves as people who can achieve their goals.”

Mr. Ban also urged other in society to appreciate “the potential and power of the members of our human family with Down syndrome.”

He called for this affirmation to be backed by concrete steps to respect, protect and promote the rights of all persons with disabilities.

“I especially call for priority actions to improve opportunities for girls and women with disabilities who often face greater exclusion than boys and men,” Mr. Ban said.

He underscored that the voiced of children and adults with Down syndrome is particularly vital as the international community works towards achieving the new anti-poverty Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to leave no one behind.

Ban hails Nowruz as opportunity to bolster UN goals to 'leave no one behind' on road to sustainable future

21 March – On the first year of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations celebrates Nowruz, “an ancient tradition with modern relevance,” as an occasion to strengthen the international community’s resolve to leave no one behind in the collective journey to a better future.

Underscoring “our vision for a life of dignity for all people,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in his message on the Day, said: “Let us enable all people who celebrate Nowruz to celebrate with joy and meaning – and let us spread its essential message of hope and renewal around the world.”

Mr. Ban also pointed out that this was also the first year of the historic Paris Agreement on climate change, which “possesses enormous
potential to open a new future.”

Nowruz, which marks the first day of spring and the renewal of nature, is celebrated by more than 300 million people all around the world and has been celebrated for over 3,000 years in the Balkans, the Black Sea Basin, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East and other regions. It promotes values of peace and solidarity between generations and within families as well as reconciliation and neighbourliness, thus contributing to cultural diversity and friendship among peoples and different communities.

Stressing that conflict, discrimination and other violations of human rights continue to take an immense toll, the Secretary-General said: “We must respond with compassionate action that addresses immediate suffering while tackling root causes. With its focus on good relations, environmental stewardship and lasting peace, Nowruz is an occasion to strengthen our resolve to leave no one behind in our journey to a better future.”

In 2009, Nowruz was inscribed on the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and was, the following year, proclaimed by the General Assembly.

UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova called Norwruz “an outstanding manifestation of how living cultural heritage expresses the way we understand the world and the means by which we shape it for the good of all.”

In her message, Ms. Bokova said that the celebration “brings together local traditions, accompanied by rituals that vary from one community to another,” which together “embody the shared human aspiration to experience moments of togetherness, solidarity and joy, representing a bridge from the past to the future, an annual commitment renewed to rising generations.”

To see Nowruz celebrated around the world, check out our photo story: Ringing in the Year 1395.

'Assault on one minority community is attack on all,' Ban says on Day to eliminate racism

21 March – Observing the world's day set aside to bolster efforts on eliminating racial discrimination, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today urged increased global efforts towards that aim and declared that “an assault on one minority community is an attack on all.”

This year, the the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination highlights challenges and achievements since the adoption of the agreements at the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa.

“The world has undoubtedly come a long way in ensuring equal rights and non-discrimination” in the past 15 years, the UN chief said in a message, noting that Member States have adopted new laws and safeguards, and established new institutions dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights, while civil society organizations worldwide working on racism are increasingly active and vocal.

“Yet we have not yet done enough,” he stressed, adding:“Today we are witnessing a surge of intolerance, racist views and hate-driven violence.”

He cited racial profiling and violence against certain communities as well as increased hostility towards minorities triggered by economic hardship and political opportunism. Such sentiment is being manifested most directly in anti-refugee, anti-migrant and, in particular, anti-Muslim bigotry, attacks and violence, he added.
Furthermore, extreme right-wing political parties are fomenting divisiveness and dangerous myths, and even once-centrist parties have hardened their views, he said.

In these tumultuous times, it is imperative to stand up for rights and dignity for all, and for diversity and pluralism, and speak out against anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim bigotry and other forms of hate, he urged.

Warning that the collective determination that enabled the far-reaching Durban Declaration and Programme of Action is being undermined by political expediency, he urged the implementation of the framework, which “can uplift not only those who suffer most profoundly but humanity as a whole.”

In her message on the Day, Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) said that racial discrimination divides and kills. It impedes peace between States and undermines social cohesion within increasingly diverse societies. Sectarian ideologists rely on hatred of the other to carry out large-scale ethnic and cultural cleansing. The historic refugee crisis serves as a pretext to foster prejudices and to foment rejection of others.

“We need more than ever to redouble efforts at the global level to build the defences against racism and intolerance in the minds of every individual and within common institutions,” she said, noting that to counter this evil, “which feeds on ignorance and a hatred of others,” UNESCO promotes global citizenship education and develops tools and expertise capable of enhancing mutual understanding, critical thinking and intercultural dialogue.

Among others she noted the agency’s Slave Route Project and initiatives such as the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022) and the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024) as powerful platforms for adding depth to the dialogue to strike down racial prejudice.

### ‘Investing in forests is an insurance policy for the planet,’ says UN chief

21 March – On the International Day of Forests, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is calling on governments, businesses, civil society and other partners to adopt holistic policies and practices to protect, restore and sustain healthy forests.

“Investing in forests is an insurance policy for the planet,” said Mr. Ban in a message on the day, marked annually on 21 March.

Despite their critical importance, forests continue to be razed and damaged. The UN estimates that every year seven million hectares of natural forests are lost and 50 million hectares of forest land are burned.

“The world’s forests are essential to realizing our shared vision for people and the planet. They are central to our future prosperity and the stability of the global climate. That is why the Sustainable Development Goals call for transformative action to safeguard them,” the UN chief noted.

### 2016 theme: supporting water systems

This year, the theme focuses on forests’ role in supporting water systems. Forested catchments reportedly provide three-quarters of all the freshwater used for farms, industry and homes.

“City dwellers in Bogota, Durban, Jakarta, Madrid, New York, Rio de Janeiro and many other major cities rely on forested areas for a significant portion of their drinking water,” Mr. Ban highlighted. “When we protect and restore forested watersheds, we can save on the cost of building new infrastructure for water purification.”
As the global population grows and demands for water escalate, the UN is warning that safeguarding the water-providing capacity of forests is becoming more urgent. By 2025, nearly 1.8 billion people will live in areas with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the world population could face water-stressed conditions.

**Improving water quality and water supplies**

Responding to this threat, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) today launched a new programme aiming to enhance the critical role of forests in improving water quality and water supplies.

The programme, focused specifically on the close relationship between forests and water, will start off by looking at ways to improve water security in eight West African countries: Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Sierra-Leone.

The agency will work with local communities to raise their awareness of the interactions between forests and water and help them to integrate forest management in their agricultural practices to improve water supplies.

"The challenges are many, but the goal is very clear: to ensure the sustainable management of forest and water resources on the planet," said FAO Director-General Jose Graziano da Silva at a ceremony marking the international day in Rome.

"Promoting forest restoration and avoiding forest loss will require a significantly increased level of funding and innovative financing, including from private funds and traditional investors, in the coming years,” he added, noting that FAO is committed to providing a neutral platform for negotiations and dialogue.

**UNESCO chief hails poetry as an 'expansion of our common humanity' on World Day**

21 March – By paying tribute to the men and women whose only instrument is free speech, the head of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized the value of poetry as a symbol of the human spirit's creativity as she marked the annual observance of World Poetry Day.

“By giving form and words to that which has none – such as the unfathomable beauty that surrounds us, the immense suffering and misery of the world – poetry contributes to the expansion of our common humanity, helping to increase its strength, solidarity and self-awareness,” Director-General Irina Bokova said in her message for the Day.

Ms. Bokova pointed to the voices that carry poetry as helping to promote linguistic diversity and freedom of expression, saying: “They participate in the global effort towards artistic education and the dissemination of culture. The first word of a poem sometimes suffices to regain confidence in the face of adversity, to find the path of hope in the face of barbarity.”

Shakespeare, who died 400 years ago, wrote in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that: “The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven. And as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet's pen turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.”

Ms. Bokova underscored that in the age of automation and the immediacy of modern life, “poetry also opens a space for the freedom and adventure inherent in human dignity. From Korean Arirang to Mexican Pirekua, the Hudhud chants of the Ifugao people, Saudi Arabian Alardah, Turkmen Koroghlu and Kyrgyz Aitysh, each culture has its poetic art that it uses to transmit knowledge, socio-cultural values and collective memory, which strengthen mutual respect, social cohesion and the search for peace.”
Commemorating the Day, she applauded the practitioners, actors, storytellers and all those anonymous voices committed to and through poetry, giving readings in the shadows or in the spotlights, in gardens or streets and called upon all Member States “to support this poetic effort, which has the power to bring us together, regardless of origins or beliefs, by that which is at the very core of humanity.”

**Senior UN official condemns arson attack in occupied West Bank**

21 March – A senior United Nations official has condemned an arson attack by suspected Jewish extremists on the home of a Palestinian family in the occupied West Bank village of Duma.

Ibrahim Dawabsheh and his wife were at home during the attack and sustained light injuries as a result of smoke inhalation.

“This violent act could easily have resulted in a more tragic outcome, as did the heinous terrorist attack last July on the home of Mr. Dawabsheh’s relatives in the same village,” said Robert Piper, the UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance and Development Aid for the occupied Palestinian territory, in a press release.

Mr. Dawabsheh was the sole witness to that deadly arson attack which resulted in the death of 18-month-old Ali and his parents, and injuries to his 5-year-old brother Ahmad.

“I call upon Israel, as the occupying power, to investigate this incident promptly and fully, to bring the perpetrators to justice and to take all possible steps to ensure that vulnerable Palestinian communities in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are protected,” Mr. Piper stressed.

“We must not permit such acts to foster hatred and escalate violence – this will only bring more personal tragedies and bury any prospect of peace,” he warned, adding that today’s attack highlights “the urgent need to work together to bring an immediate resolution of the conflict and an end to the occupation.”

**Caste systems violate human rights of millions worldwide – new UN expert report**

21 March – At least 250 million people worldwide still face appalling and dehumanising discrimination based on caste and similar systems of inherited status, warned the United Nations expert on minority issues while presenting finding to the UN Human Rights Council.

“This is a global problem affecting communities in Asia, Africa, Middle East, the Pacific region and in various diaspora communities,” said UN Special Rapporteur Rita Izsák-Ndiaye in a news release, stressing that “caste-based discrimination and violence goes against the basic principles of universal human dignity and equality, as it differentiates between ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ categories of individuals which is unacceptable.”

Ms. Izsák-Ndiaye warned that discrimination leads to extreme exclusion and dehumanisation of caste-affected communities, who are often among the most disadvantaged populations, experience the worst socioeconomic conditions and are deprived of or severely restricted in the enjoyment of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.
The term 'caste' refers to a strict hierarchical social system often based on notions of purity and contamination. The expert report describes how people from 'lower castes' are often limited to certain occupations which are often deemed 'polluting' or menial by others, including manual scavenging, sweeping and disposal of dead animals.

“Unfortunately, in many cases, attempts to challenge these prohibitions or the unlawful consequences derived from caste systems, which are hereditary by nature, result in violence against caste-affected individuals and retaliation against their communities.” the Special Rapporteur said.

She emphasised that caste-affected women and girls are often the victims of caste-based and sexual violence, trafficking and are especially vulnerable to early and forced marriage, bonded labour and harmful cultural practices. Violence and the threat of violence against them frequently go unreported, allowing a culture of invisibility, silence and impunity.

“The shadow of caste and its stigma follows an individual from birth till death, affecting all aspects of life from education, housing, work, access to justice, and political participation” Ms. Izsák-Ndiaye said. “In many societies discussing these practices is taboo; we need not just legal and political responses but ways to change the mindset of individuals and the collective conscience of local communities.”

There have however been some positive developments, such as constitutional guarantees, legislation and dedicated institutions to monitor and overcome caste-based discrimination.

“I hope that my report will be used as an advocacy tool in supporting the efforts of caste-affected communities and others who are tirelessly working to relegate caste discrimination to history,” the Special Rapporteur concluded.

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

**In Brazil, UN expert highlights deadly consequences of delaying land demarcation**

21 March – Following a visit to Brazil, a United Nations independent human rights expert today expressed alarm about the extent of documented and reported attacks on indigenous peoples in the country's central-western state of Mato Grosso Do Sul.

Speaking at the end of her 11-day visit to Brazil, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, noted that there were 92 killings in 2007, but the figure increased to 138 people killed in 2014.

“I decry these attacks and call on the Government to put an end to these human rights violations, investigate and bring their masterminds and perpetrators to justice,” Ms. Tauli-Corpuz said in her end of mission statement, noting that State authorities have not yet gone into the areas where the attacks took place.

The expert noted that attacks and killings frequently constitute reprisals in contexts where indigenous peoples reoccupy ancestral lands following long periods waiting for the completion of demarcation processes.

The UN expert said that Brazil has a number of exemplary constitutional provisions pertaining to indigenous peoples' rights and in the past has been a world leader in the area of demarcation.

In other words, the Brazilian Constitution recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples to lands that they have “traditionally” occupied. In the legal world, a formal, often lengthy and contested, process of “demarcation” is required for an indigenous
territory to receive these rights.

“A constant refrain from all the indigenous peoples I visited and met was the urgent need for demarcation processes to be completed, as this is fundamental to all other rights of indigenous peoples,” Ms. Tauli-Corpuz said.

She added that the urgency to demarcate territories is exacerbated by the rate of deforestation, destruction of rivers, and depletion of soil quality due to intensive mono-cropping and mining activities, rendering the land and waters incapable of supporting indigenous people' food sustainability into the future.

This forces indigenous peoples “into a situation where the only option they feel is available to them to guarantee their long-term cultural and physical survival is to retake their lands before demarcation processes are concluded,” she added.

Complicating matters is a proposed constitutional amendment, known as PEC 215, which would shift the power to demarcate indigenous lands from the Justice Ministry and the president's office, to Congress, where many of the members are linked to agro-business and resource-energies.

Ms. Tauli-Corpuz praised some of the measures adopted by the Brazilian authorities, such as the establishment of an internationally recognized legal and administrative framework for demarcation.

The Special Rapporteur, who works in an unpaid and independent capacity, will present a comprehensive report containing her findings and recommendations to the Brazilian Government and the UN Human Rights Council in September 2016.

**Colombia: over 250,000 children impacted by conflict despite peace talks, UN agency reports**

19 March – Hostilities in Colombia have disrupted the lives of more than a quarter of a million children since peace talks began three years ago, the United Nations children's agency today reported.

Of that figure, nearly 230,000 have been displaced and an estimated 1,000 children were used or recruited by non-State armed groups, according to the latest report from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Childhood in the Time of War: Will the children of Colombia know peace at last? .

“As peace negotiations to end half a century of war in Colombia continue, it is crucial to make children's interests and protection a priority,” said Roberto De Bernardi, UNICEF Representative in Colombia.

The report comes just days before a reported deadline to reach a final peace deal between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP).

If successful, the deal would end the longest running conflict in the Americas. It would also start operations of the newly approved UN Mission in Colombia, which will monitor the ceasefire, at the request of both the Government and the FARC-EP.

Even if the peace agreement is reached soon, “children will continue to be at risk of all kinds of violations including recruitment, landmines and sexual exploitation,” said Mr. De Bernardi, calling for material and psychological assistance for these children.

The report highlights that forced displacement, insecurity, fear of recruitment, the threat of sexual violence and the presence of antipersonnel landmines are causing school-aged children to drop out of school.
In addition, schools have been damaged or destroyed during the fighting, and at least 10 teachers have been killed, according to the report.

“Unless conflict-affected children have better opportunities, joining other non-State armed groups will be their only hope to survive,” UNICEF said.

The UN agency also called for the release of every child below the age of 18 from armed groups, irrespective of the outcome of the peace agreement.

**UN chief condemns deadly Istanbul attack as 'appalling violence'**

19 March – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has condemned today's bombing in the Turkish city of Istanbul and called for the perpetrators to be brought to justice, consistent with human rights obligations.

“This is the latest in a recent series of terrorist attacks in Turkey,” the Secretary-General said in a statement from his spokesperson.

A week ago, a car bomb tore through the capital city of Ankara, killing dozens of people.

Today, Mr. Ban again extended his heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims and to the Government of Turkey.

In a separate statement, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) expressed its condolences and solidarity with the people and Government of Turkey.

Speaking on behalf of the entire international tourism community, UNWTO Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai, said “this tragic event reminds us once more that we are facing a global threat that requires a firm and coordinated response.”

Noting Turkey's destination for tourists, he said that “it is time to stand by Turkey in facing this challenge.”

In a Tweet, UNDP Turkey said its staff shared the pain of those who had lost relatives, and wished the injured a speedy recovery.
Earth Hour 2016: UN goes dark to spotlight climate change

19 March – The United Nations this evening dimmed the lights at its iconic Headquarters complex in New York and other facilities around the world in observance of 'Earth Hour,' an annual global event to put the spotlight on the issues facing the planet and to inspire millions across the world to live more sustainably.

In a video message, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, said: “This year’s Earth Hour comes at a pivotal moment. Last December, all the world's Governments came together to adopt the Paris Agreement on climate change. This is a historic achievement for people and the planet – but only if we follow through on the promises made.”

Organized by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Earth Hour encourages individuals, companies, organizations and Governments to switch off their lights for one hour at 8:30 p.m., local time worldwide, to focus attention on people-driven solutions to protecting the planet and building a bright, sustainable future.

Mr. Ban notes that the world is now entering a new era of opportunity. “Together, we can create the low-emissions future the world needs for sustainable development and a life of dignity and stability for all. Earth Hour reminds us that we all have a role to play.”

First launched in 2007, Earth Hour has become an annual event, mobilizing hundreds of millions of individuals to participate and growing to become the world's largest grassroots movement for the environment.

According to the WWF, the UN family will join the thousands of homes, offices, skylines and monuments that will go dark to put the spotlight on the issues facing the planet, and to inspire millions across the world to live more sustainably. At least 178 countries and territories are expected to take part in this year's celebrations.

So far over 366 landmarks are confirmed and will be turning off on the night of Earth Hour including iconic sites such as the Brandenburg Gate, Empire State Building, Sydney Opera House, the Roman Colosseum and Marina Bay Sands.

Amongst participating countries this year 90 are taking actions to achieve impact during Earth Hour through digital interactions, engaging local communities and raising awareness, adds the WWF.

UN rights chief welcomes ICC judgement finding Jean-Pierre Bemba guilty of war crimes in Central African Republic

21 March – The United Nations rights chief today welcomed the judgement delivered by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the case of Jean-Pierre Bemba, a Congolese national found guilty of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including rape, murder and pillage, committed in 2002 and 2003 in the Central African Republic (CAR).

“While recognizing that the judgement delivered today in Jean-Pierre Bemba’s case may be subject to appeal, it sends an important message across the world that international justice will finally prevail, even in cases where civilians with supervisory, or command, responsibility are accused of crimes committed in a country other than their own,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in a news release.
Jean-Pierre Bemba was the President and commander-in-chief of a Congolese rebel group, the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC), when its troops were sent to CAR to help fight a coup attempt against former President Patassé in 2002 and 2003. They were accused of carrying out numerous serious crimes against civilians, including widespread sexual violence.

“Much remains to be done to ensure justice for the many other terrible crimes that have been committed in CAR since 2002, not least the large-scale violations and abuses committed over the past three years. However I hope this judgement will act as a powerful deterrent against future serious human rights violations and abuses not just in CAR, but everywhere they are committed,” Mr. Zeid underlined, adding that it should also help make perpetrators understand that many victims and their supporters will never abandon their search for justice and accountability.

The UN rights chief also stressed that through this “emblematic case,” the ICC has built on the jurisprudence, pioneered in ad hoc international tribunals such as those for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, which established criminal sanctions for people employing rape during a conflict.

“I strongly believe that verdicts like the one delivered today represent an important step towards eradicating these horrendous sexual crimes which have blighted the lives of so many women – as well as men and boys – throughout the ages, and which until very recently were carried out with almost total impunity,” he said.