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Syria: UN chief offers condolences in alleged chemical attack; OPCW investigating

4 April – United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today said that he is “deeply disturbed” by reports of alleged use of chemical weapons in an airstrike in the Khan Shaykhun area of southern Idlib, Syria.

In a statement from his spokesperson, the Secretary-General expressed heartfelt condolences to the victims of the incident and their families.

He noted that the UN Security Council affirmed that the use of chemical weapons “constitutes a serious violation of international law” and runs counter to resolutions passed by the 15-member body.

While the UN has said that it is not in a position to independently verify these reports, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is currently in the process of gathering and analysing information to confirm if chemical weapons were used.

The OPCW is the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which aims to eliminate an entire category of weapons of mass destruction by prohibiting the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer or use...
of chemical weapons by States Parties.

Meanwhile, the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has added its support for OPCW’s fact finding mission. Established by the UN Human Rights Council, the Commission works to investigate if human rights abuses occurred in Syria since March 2011 and who should be held responsible.

In statement, the Commission urged “full support” for the fact finding mission and the independent Joint Investigative Mechanism.

“It is imperative for perpetrators of such attacks to be identified and held accountable,” the Commission said, adding that it is also investigating the circumstances surrounding the attack.

Preliminary information indicates a number of civilian casualties, including children.

“Both the use of chemical weapons, as well as the deliberate targeting of medical facilities, would amount to war crimes and serious violations of human rights law,” the Commission said.

Recent attacks show pirates off Somalia’s coast still a potent threat – UN agency

4 April – Noting that recent attacks on commercial ships off the coast of Somalia highlight the continued threat of piracy, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has urged ships to follow advice of navies and that of the International Maritime Organization while planning passage through the region.

“After three attacks, following a lull of five years, it is clear that Somali pirates are resurgent and intent on continuing attacks on commercial shipping,” said UNODC Executive Director, Yury Fedotov, in a news release today.

“I urge the international community to be vigilant, to work in close partnership and to hold the Somali pirates accountable,” he added.

Over the course of last month, Motor Tanker (a merchant ship designed for the bulk transport of oil) Aris 13, fishing vessel Asayr 2 and cargo ship Al Kaushar were attacked by Somali pirates. While the crews of Aris 13, and Asayr 2 were released, Al Kaushar’s crew are reportedly still held hostage by the pirates.

According to UNODC, large parts of the Somali coast remain beyond the reach of law enforcement authorities and thus called on ships planning passage off the country to follow the advice of navies and the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

The UN agency added that it continued to support the trials of piracy suspects in the region and to the Somali maritime law enforcement agencies as they extend their reach around the Somali coast.

“The threat of Somali piracy has never gone away: it has been suppressed by the good work of the shipping industry and their security teams, navies, and UNODC’s support to the trial and imprisonment of 1,300 pirates,” expressed Alan Cole, the head of Maritime Crime Programme at UNODC.
Weather, existing socio-economic factors compounded Colombian landslide tragedy – UN agency

4 April – Very heavy rainfall triggered the landslides that hit Colombia over the weekend, but “exceptional” level of rains were not the sole cause, the United Nations weather agency said today, noting that many other factors, such as loss of forest cover, added to the devastation.

“The weather was not the only cause of the tragedy, many other socio-economic factors, including deforestation, came into play,” Clare Nullis, a spokesperson for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), told the media at a regular press briefing at the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG).

March is typically a rainy month in the country, but the quantities of rainfall seen in the past week have been exceptional, she explained, adding that the municipality of Mocoa, hardest-hit by the landslides, saw 129 millimetres of rainfall within 24 hours on 31 March.

Of that amount, 80 per cent of the precipitation fell in just three hours, explaining the size of the tragedy.

According to a Flash Update by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (in Spanish), as of 2 April 254 people have been confirmed to have perished in the disaster, 262 have been injured and 441 are missing.

The casualty figures are approximate and are expected to rise.

Furthermore, as of 3 April, more than 500 municipalities are at the of risk of landslides in the country, and of those 182 had orange to red alerts, noted Ms. Nullis.

She added that while the national meteorological service is very strong and well-equipped, it faced considerable challenges.

“There are more than 700,000 rivers and bodies of water, and it is impossible to have monitoring stations at each one of them,” said the WMO spokesperson.

Further, clarifying that the cause of the disaster was not El Niño, crediting a senior official at the Colombian Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies, she said that climate variability and climate change would continue to produce rain and drought, and that prevention is the most important.

She also informed the briefing that in the short-term, Colombian Meteorological Agency weather forecasts indicate that there would be no or very light rainfall in the affected areas till 6 April.

The long-term predictions for the season were for above average rainfall in the area.
US funding cuts to UN population agency based on ‘inaccurate perception’ – UN chief

4 April – United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today voiced deep regret at the decision by the United States to cut financial support for the United Nations population agency, stating that the announcement is based on a misinterpretation of the UN agency’s work.

The Secretary-General “believes that the decision is based on an inaccurate perception of the nature and importance of the work of UNFPA,” the spokesperson said referring to the acronym for the UN Population Fund.

In a statement from his spokesperson, Mr. Guterres said that the cuts “could have devastating effects” on the health of vulnerable women and girls and their families.

The UN agency’s aim is to deliver a world “where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person’s potential is fulfilled,” according to its website.

In the past year, the agency saved the lives of more than 2,340 women from dying during pregnancy and childbirth, and helped to ensure more than 1,250 fistula surgeries, for example.

Mr. Guterres, who was previously the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said that he saw first-hand the life-saving character of UNFPA, which is active in more than 150 countries and territories.

“He appeals to donors to increase their support for UNFPA to allow it to continue its critical work during this difficult period,” the spokesperson said.

The funding cut was announced in a memo from the US State Department on 30 March, stating that the UNFPA “supports, or participates in the management of, a programme of coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization” in China.

The UNFPA refuted the claim, calling it “erroneous”.

“UNFPA refutes this claim, as all of its work promotes the human rights of individuals and couples to make their own decisions, free of coercion or discrimination,” the agency said.

UNFPA called the US “a trusted partner” and said that support received from the country over the years “have saved tens of thousands of mothers from preventable death and disabilities.”
As a ‘different’ Darfur has emerged since 2003, exit strategy for AU-UN mission being considered

4 April – The African Union (AU) and the United Nations are actively discussing with the Government of Sudan how best to configure a strategy for AU-UN peacekeeping to eventually leave Darfur, the head of that operation said today.

“In view of the current circumstances in Darfur, a pragmatic reconfiguration of UNAMID [the AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur] will become necessary and the AU and UN will have to focus on how best that could be done without compromising the gains thus far made,” the Joint Special Representative, Jeremiah Mamabolo, told the Security Council.

He said that from 5 to 17 March, UNAMID received an AU-UN strategic review team, which met with the Government of Sudan in Khartoum and Darfur, and travelled throughout the Darfur region. UNAMID awaits the outcome of these deliberations.

The three strategic priorities established by the Council in 2014 continue to provide a framework within which UNAMID implements its mandate to protect civilians, mitigate inter-communal conflicts and mediate between the Government and the non-signatory armed movements.

“The Darfur of today is a very different place from what this region was in 2003, when the armed conflict began, and from that of a year ago,” Mr. Mamabolo said, noting that fighting between Sudanese Government forces and the main three non-signatory armed movements has considerably diminished.

The past three months have also witnessed a continued reduction in the number of inter-communal security incidents, in particular as a result of the more effective involvement of the native administrations and the impact of security measures by State Governments, leading to an increased number of peace agreements.

Further, UNAMID has not seen any new displacement in 2017. Cooperation with the Government has noticeably improved in terms of humanitarian access. UNAMID and the UN country team have repeatedly been able to visit previously off-limits areas in Jebel Marra while UN humanitarian partners are commencing regular helicopter flights to Golo.

However, efforts by the AU High-level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) to get warring parties to sign a cessation of hostilities agreement and start direct negotiations towards an inclusive peace agreement to end the conflict have remained inconclusive, Mr. Mamabolo said.

Although Sudan Liberation Army/Abdul Wahid al-Nur (SLA/AW) is no longer capable of mounting and sustaining significant military operations, it continues to refuse to join the peace process and seems to want to continue to fight, he explained.

“We would like to appeal to this Council and those with influence and leverage on him to persuade him to recognize the importance of a political settlement and desist from bringing more suffering to the very people that he professes to represent,” Mr. Mamabolo said.
Mali ratifies amendment to Montreal Protocol, first country vowing to slash HFCs – UN

4 April – Mali has become the first country to ratify the Kigali Amendment, a ground-breaking amendment to the Montreal Protocol to phase out hydrofluorocarbons, a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, the United Nations environment agency today announced.

“We urge more countries to follow suit in order to protect our climate,” said Erik Solheim, Head of UN Environment, in his congratulatory statement.

Countries that ratify the Kigali Amendment commit to cut the production and consumption of greenhouse gases hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), which are frequently used as substitutes for ozone-depleting substances (ODSs).

The goal is to cut HFCs by more than 80 percent over the next 30 years. According to preliminary studies, this could lead to a cut in 0.5 degrees Celsius if fully implemented.

The Kigali Amendment will enter into force on 1 January 2019, provided that it is ratified by at least 20 parties to the Montreal Protocol.

“Through the Kigali Amendment, the Montreal Protocol takes responsibility for HFCs and plays a leading role in working towards an environmentally sustainable world where no one is left behind, consistent with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” UN Environment said in a press release.

The 2030 Agenda includes 17 goals that the world governments universally agreed to try to attain, including one standalone goal on combatting climate change and its impacts.

The Montreal Protocol is an international treaty designed to protect the ozone layer by phasing out the production of a number of substances responsible for its depletion.

The ozone layer, a fragile shield of gas, protects the Earth from the harmful portion of the sun's ultraviolet rays, thus helping to preserve life on the planet.

Under the Protocol, Governments phased out nearly 99 per cent of close to 100 ozone-depleting substances. This “prevented adverse impacts on agriculture, animals, forests, marine life, natural ecosystems and materials. In addition, up to 2 million cases of skin cancer may be prevented each year by 2030,” according to UN Environment.

Developing countries that are parties to the Kigali Amendment will have access to financial and technical support provided under the Montreal Protocol.
Central African Republic: Security Council pledges support for President’s efforts to stabilize country

4 April – The United Nations Security Council today expressed its support for the efforts of President Faustin Archange Touadera of the Central African Republic (CAR) to restore State authority as well as for the African Union-led mediation initiative to find a political solution to the situation in the crisis-torn country.

In a Presidential Statement issued today, the 15-member body renewed its support for CAR President Touadera and welcomed his significant role to stabilize the country, promote peace and reconciliation, advance plans for disarmament, enable long-term development, and build the capacity of state institutions and basic service delivery, with the support of regional and international partners.

The Council also acknowledges the African Initiative for a Peace and Reconciliation Agreement between the Government and all armed groups in the CAR, which is aimed at sustainably promoting reconciliation and inclusive governance.

On the security front, the Council expressed concern at the ongoing clashes between armed groups, in particular around Bambari in the Ouaka prefecture, and, most recently, in Bakouma in the Mbomou prefecture, which have caused heavy civilian losses and significant population displacement.

The Council strongly condemned violence perpetrated by armed groups and their attempts to forcefully gain control of territory and resources, and urged all armed groups, in particular FPRC and UPC, to immediately stop all violence and honour their commitment to the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation process.

The Council also renewed its support to the Secretary-General’s Special Representative Parfait Onanga-Anyanga and to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in the implementation of its mandate.

Recalling the UN’s zero tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse, the Council urged all authorized non-UN forces to take adequate measures to prevent and combat impunity for sexual exploitation and abuse by their personnel.
UN warns funding cuts threaten aid to Syrian refugees and hosts, as Brussels conference opens

4 April – As a major international conference on Syria gets underway in Brussels, United Nations agencies have warned that a sluggish financial support by Member States would put vital assistance for millions of refugees and the communities hosting them at risk.

“The situation is getting desperate,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi in a news release on the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for 2017, a funding appeal launched in January that calls for $4.63 billion in vital assistance for refugees and host communities.

To date, only $433 million, or just 9 per cent, of the amount requested has been received.

“We recognise and applaud the donations made so far, but the simple truth is that funding isn't keeping up with needs,” added Mr. Grandi.

In its seventh year, the conflict in Syria remains the largest humanitarian challenge in the world – with 13.5 million men, women and children inside Syria in need of urgent assistance. There are now more than 5 million Syrian refugees living in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and many more have made the dangerous journey to Europe and farther afield.

The Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, being held today and tomorrow, aims to rev up funding support.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) are extremely concerned by the current low funding levels.

Without additional funding, all areas of assistance will be curtailed this year. Food and cash assistance will be reduced or cut by mid-year, challenging stability and security in the region.

With the majority of Syrian refugees falling below national poverty lines, families will face the impossible choice of taking their children out of school, adding to the half a million children already missing out on education.

Support for livelihoods and job creation programmes will be slowed – at a time when unemployment is on the rise for refugees and host communities alike.

“The story is the same throughout the region – water and sanitation services, employment and housing markets are all under strain,” said UNDP Administrator Helen Clark. “UNDP and its 3RP partners are on the ground expanding infrastructure, boosting livelihoods, and fostering community development in response – but the needs are massive and we need more support.”

Speaking at a thematic session of the Brussels conference, Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien stressed the need to convert huge cash to an effective, immediate, coordinated, collective, collaborative humanitarian programme.

“Multilateral action together does create the greater impact for affected people who are suffering and need our relief action, converting huge cash to an effective, immediate, coordinated, collective, collaborative programme to save lives… and to help build a practical and hopeful future,” he told the session titled ‘Humanitarian situation inside Syria: Needs, challenges and way forward.”
“Always know that it is peace that is the best antidote to suffering,” he added.

The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs also underscored the need to ensure that food insecurity across Syria is kept in check and that effective food assistance can be provided in a way to eventually transition those in need from dependency to self-sufficiency.

Response plans must span the humanitarian-development nexus and provide a bridge towards longer-term recovery even as the most critical life-saving and protection needs are being addressed, he said.

**Australia’s Aboriginal children ‘essentially being punished for being poor’ – UN rights expert**

*4 April* – Stressing that the rates of incarceration for Australia’s indigenous peoples have reached astounding, “tsunami” proportions, a United Nations human rights expert today called on the authorities to respect the peoples’ right to self-determination, to full and effective participation in society, and to step up the fight against racism.

“High rates of incarceration were described to me as a tsunami affecting indigenous peoples […] while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up only three per cent of the total population, they constitute 27 per cent of the prison population, and much more in some prisons,” said Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people, at the end of her official visit to the nation.

The situation of youths and children from these communities is particularly concerning and the number of children being removed from their homes is increasing.

For instance, at a youth detention centre in Townsville, Queensland province, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children constituted 95 per cent of the children detained.

“These children are essentially being punished for being poor and in most cases, prison will only aggravate the cycle of violence, poverty and crime,” noted Ms. Tauli-Corpuz. “I found meeting young children, some only 12 years old, in detention the most disturbing element of my visit.”

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“As already recommended by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, I urge Australia to increase the age of criminal responsibility. Children should be detained only as a last resort,” she highlighted.

The expert also noted that Aboriginal children were seven times more likely than non-indigenous children to be in contact with the child protection system or to be subject to abuse or neglect.

*New relationship between Government and National Congress of First Peoples needed*

She also noted that while numerous policies have been adopted to address the socio-economic disadvantage of indigenous peoples, these have failed to deliver on targets in the areas of health, education and employment.

In particular, Ms. Tauli-Corpuz criticized the Government programme known as the Indigenous Advancement Strategy which was initiated in 2014 and involved a large budget cut in funding for support programmes.

“The implementation of the strategy has been bureaucratic, rigid and has wasted considerable resources on administration.
Travelling across the country, I have repeatedly been told about its dire consequences,” she said, pointing to threats that targets on closing the gap in areas such as life expectancy, infant mortality, education and employment would not be met.

Urging for a comprehensive approach including specific objectives on reduction of detention rates, child removal and violence against women, the UN rights expert also called on the Government to forge a new relationship with the national representative body for indigenous peoples, the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, and restore their funding.

In her remarks, Ms. Tauli-Corpuz also spoke of effective community-led initiatives in a range of areas including public health, housing, education, child-protection, conservation and administration of justice, and their potential in making immediate significant positive changes in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The rights expert will present a comprehensive report on her two-week long mission to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council at its session in September this year.

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

**Health care goals in Indonesia can be reached only if challenges are addressed – UN expert**

4 April – Indonesia is on track to develop a sustainable and equitable healthcare system, but problems related to access and quality of services persist, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to health, Dainius Puras, said today.

“Despite commendable efforts, availability, access to and quality of health services remains a challenge in a country where population is spread throughout thousands of islands and remote areas,” he said.

Mr. Puras urged the Indonesian authorities to address such challenges “with the highest level of political commitment so that health system guarantees all core elements of the right to health.”

Concluding his two-week visit to the Southeast Asian country, Mr. Puras stressed: “Increased investments in healthcare only make sense if the system is efficient, transparent, accountable, and responsive to those who use it.” He urged the Government to increase investment in health.

He also pointed out barriers to the realization of sexual and reproductive health rights exist in the form of violence and discrimination against women and other key populations.

“I was discouraged to hear that planning and delivery of these services and sexuality education is being influenced by certain groups who continue to oppose policies, instruments and mechanisms for the promotion and protection of sexual and reproductive health rights,” he said.

While Indonesia has a relatively low prevalence of HIV/AIDS, new infections are on the rise and those affected face stigma and discrimination, including in healthcare settings. Ethnic Papuans are twice as likely to contract HIV/AIDS as the rest of the population.

He added that improvements in drug policy need to be made, as current policy undermined public health efforts and the right to health of people who use drugs. “Criminalization of drug use only fuels discrimination, violence and exclusion driving people away from the health services they need and seriously undermining public health efforts.”
The Special Rapporteur will present a comprehensive report on his visit to Indonesia to the UN Human Rights Council in June 2018.

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