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'We must not let 2017 repeat tragedies of 2016 for Syria' – top UN aid officials

16 January – While efforts to fully implement a ceasefire in Syria continue, senior United Nations humanitarian officials today appealed for immediate, unconditional, and safe access to reach the children and families who are still cut off from relief aid across the Middle Eastern country.

“We must not let 2017 repeat the tragedies of 2016 for Syria,” said a joint statement signed by World Food Programme (WFP) Executive Director Ertharin Cousin, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Executive Director Anthony Lake, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Margaret Chan, and UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi.

The statement was issued in the Swiss town of Davos, ahead of the World Economic Forum (WEF) from 17 to 20 January 2017, which is expected to be attended by top leaders from the business and political circles.

According to the statement, in Syria today, there are 15 besieged areas where up to 700,000 people, including an estimated 300,000 children, still remain trapped, and nearly five million people, including more than two million children, live in areas that are extremely difficult to reach with humanitarian assistance due to fighting, insecurity and restricted access.

“All over Syria, people continue to suffer because they lack the most basic elements to sustain their lives – and because of the continued risk of violence. We – indeed, the world – must not stand silent while parties to the conflict continue to use
denial of food, water, medical supplies, and other forms of aid as weapons of war,” the statement stressed.

The statement also noted that children are at heightened risk of malnutrition, dehydration, diarrhoea, infectious diseases, and injury. Many need support after being exposed to traumatic events, violence and other violations. “Tragically, far too many children have known little but conflict and loss in their young lives,” it warned.

“The horrors of the siege of the eastern districts of Aleppo have disappeared from the public consciousness – but we must not let the needs, the lives and the futures of Syria's people fade from the world's conscience,” the statement added.

**UN envoy in Yemen meeting with President, senior officials to push for greater aid access**

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16 January -- The United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, is today in Aden, highlighting the need for a truce to allow in humanitarian aid and move along the peace process.

“We are encouraging the parties to commit to restoring the 10 April Cessation of Hostilities and take immediate measures which will prevent further deterioration of the economic and humanitarian situation,” the Special Envoy said referring to an agreement by Yemeni parties in 2016, but whose terms and conditions have since been violated.

“The current political stalemate is causing death and destruction every day,” the UN Special Envoy said. “The only way to stop this is through the renewal of the Cessation of Hostilities followed by consultations to develop a comprehensive agreement.”

“Yemen's political elites have a responsibility to shield people from further harm, protect their country's future and commit to a peaceful settlement,” he continued.

Earlier today, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed arrived in the eastern Yemeni city for meetings with President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Prime Minister Ahmed bin Daghr and Foreign Minister Abdel Malik Mekhlafi, according to a UN spokesperson.

The visit follows a week of meetings with senior officials from the Governments of Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar in Riyadh, Muscat and Doha, respectively.

In a meeting with President Hadi, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed said he discussed the key elements of a comprehensive agreement, based on consultations in Kuwait, which would help bring an end to the war and Yemen's return to a peaceful and orderly transition.

“I asked the President to act swiftly and engage constructively with the UN's proposal for the sake of the country's future,” Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed said, stressing that a peace agreement, combined with a well-articulated security plan and an inclusive government formation is the only way to end the fighting.

According to the UN spokesperson, the Special Envoy will travel to the capital city of Sana'a in the coming days to share the same message with the Representatives of Ansar Allah and General People's Congress.
Ongoing violations of child rights highlighted as UN monitoring body opens annual session

16 January – Children face the ongoing violations of their rights worldwide, including poverty, violence and discrimination against them, a senior United Nations human rights official told the body that monitors implementation of a global treaty on the matter.

“Indeed, your achievements and the challenges you face sit against a disturbing background of ongoing violations of the rights of children,” Kate Gilmore, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, said at the opening in Geneva of the 74th session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which will run through 3 February 2017.

These violations include child poverty, violence against children in all its forms as well as discrimination against girls, children born outside of wedlock, children with disabilities, and migrant, asylum seeking, stateless and refugee children, she added.

The Committee is the body of 18 independent experts that monitors implementation of the eponymous Convention by its State parties. It also monitors implementation of the treaty's Optional Protocols, on involvement of children in armed conflict, and on sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

On 19 December 2011, the UN General Assembly approved a third Optional Protocol on a communications procedure, which will allow individual children to submit complaints regarding specific violations of their rights under the Convention and its first two optional protocols. The Protocol entered into force in April 2014.

The worsening of the global migration and refugee crisis has had a devastating impact on the rights of millions of children worldwide, including their rights to life, survival and development, she said. One in every eight migrants is a child, and one in 200 children is a refugee. Moreover, some 26 million children today are displaced by conflict.

The scenes of a toddler lying dead in the mud and the body of a boy washed up on a Turkish beach are “tragic evidence of the world's failure to fulfill its obligations to the world's children,” she warned.

As for the work of the Committee, she noted that last year the expert body reviewed and adopted its concluding observations on 36 States parties' reports, reducing the backlog of pending reports from more than 80 to the current average of 40.

Although the Convention is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty, a large number of reservations remain, some of which go against the object and purpose of the Convention, she noted. Ratification of the third Optional Protocol on a communications procedure is still very low, with no new ratifications since last session, she added.

As for the global study on children deprived of liberty, commissioned by the UN Secretary-General, support from Member States has been inadequate, despite the number of efforts requesting voluntary contributions for the study.
New UN manual aims to address management of violent extremists in prison settings

16 January – Highlighting the challenges brought on by and the need to address violent extremism and radicalization in prisons, the United Nations agency mandated to prevent international crime and assist criminal justice reform unveiled a new manual that offers practical advice on managing violent extremist prisoners, disengaging them from violence and facilitating their social reintegration upon release.

The Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons, launched today by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) aims to strengthen key components of prison management, including training of prison staff, risk management and rehabilitation efforts.

“It also cautions against generalized assumptions regarding a very complex topic, as well as against 'quick fix solutions' when it comes to the management of violent extremist prisoners,” said UNODC in a news release announcing the manual.

In addition to loss of life and economic damage, violent extremism – a challenge confronting many countries around the world – can divide communities and give rise to increasingly reactionary and extremist views. On top of these challenges, management of such violent elements who end up in custody of the State is equally important and urgent.

Speaking at the launch, the Deputy Executive Director of UNODC, Aldo Lale-Demoz, drew attention to the need to integrate interventions for violent extremist prisoners in broader prison reform efforts.

“Overcrowding, poor prison conditions and infrastructure, insufficient prison management capacity as well as corruption, for example, are all factors which will poison attempts to effectively prevent and counter violent extremism in prisons,” he said.

Also at the launch event, held in the Austrian capital, Vienna, participants underscored the importance of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners – informally dubbed the Nelson Mandela Rules – for prison management.

They added that the overarching framework equally applied to violent extremist prisoners.

The Standard Minimum Rules constitute the universally acknowledged minimum standards for the management of prison facilities and the treatment of prisoners. Originally adopted by the UN Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders in 1955, the revised Rules were launched in October 2015.
Killings, rapes in South Sudan continued 'unabated' after July 2016 violence, UN reports

16 January – Hundreds of people were killed in South Sudan during an outbreak of violence last July and more than 200 people were raped, according to a United Nations report today released which emphasizes the need for accountability and justice for those human rights violations.

The report by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the UN human rights office (OHCHR) found that throughout the fighting that occurred between 8 and 12 July 2016 between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), “the belligerents blatantly ignored international human rights law and humanitarian law.”

“The fighting that erupted in July 2016 was a serious setback for peace in South Sudan and showed just how volatile the situation in the country is, with civilians living under the risk of mass atrocities,” said the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

The report his office co-authored found that SPLA and SPLM/A-IO showed “complete disregard of civilians” continuing to target women and children, and in particular, Nuers with tribal markings on their foreheads, after 12 July, and that six months later, “there remains widespread impunity, as violations continue unabated.”

“Information documented and verified by the Human Rights Division suggests that hundreds of people including civilians were killed and many more wounded during the fighting in various areas of Juba,” the report stated.

“UNMISS documented 217 victims of rape, including gang-rape committed by SPLA, SPLM/A-IO and other armed groups during and after the fighting between 8 and 25 July. According to victims' testimonies and witnesses' accounts, most cases of sexual violence were committed by SPLA soldiers, police officers and members of the National Security Services (NSS).”

UNMISS and OHCHR urge the Transitional Government of National Unity to “break the cycle of violence and impunity,” including through the establishment and operationalization of the Hybrid Court for South Sudan by the African Union.

The report also recommends that the State ensure that all victims of human rights violations and abuses, as well as violations of international humanitarian law, have access to an effective remedy, just and fair reparation, including compensation and rehabilitation.

In August of last year, Zainab Hawa Bangura, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Sexual Violence in Conflict, urged the South Sudanese Government to protect its citizens.

“The women and children of South Sudan do not deserve [to be treated like] this,” Ms. Bangura told UN Radio Miraya. “Those who think they will get off 'scot-free' must be joking because we will go after them. It doesn't matter who they are or where they are. We will go after them and hold them accountable for these crimes.”
UN refugee agency lauds Europe's rescue efforts in Mediterranean amid 'tragic start' to New Year

16 January – The United Nations refugee agency praised the Italian Coastguard in coordination with Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, for rescuing some 1,500 people from boats on the Mediterranean struggling in rough weather throughout the weekend.

“In what is already a tragic start to 2017 on the Mediterranean Sea, I am really heartened to see the first priority of saving lives in action through the rescue efforts of the Italian Coastguard and Frontex who have braved such extreme weather to rescue so many people,” said Vincent Cochetel, Regional Refugee Coordinator for the Refugee Crisis in Europe.

In the wake of at least one known shipwreck of an over-crowded and flimsy vessel off the coast of Libya, at least eight bodies were recovered by European authorities. According to the Italian Coast Guard, on Saturday a French ship operating under Frontex sighted and rescued four people on the high seas 30 to 40 miles, or between 48 and 64 kilometres, from Libyan shores.

“The survivors – whether refugees or migrants – have gone through unimaginable physical and psychological suffering,” said Cochetel, adding that UNHCR will work closely with authorities to refer them to health services.

Early reports from survivors say that at least 100 people were on board a dinghy that collapsed off the Libyan coast – between Tripoli and Misurata. That same day, the Italian Coastguard rescued another 34 people close to oil platforms some 55 miles (88 kilometres) from the Libyan coast.

Italian authorities also reported that three survivors from another rescue operation had died from hypothermia, while another two were suffocated on board a dinghy.

Survivors and victims from recent rescue efforts have disembarked in Lampedusa on Saturday and in the port city of Messina, on the north east coast of Sicily, on Sunday.

UNHCR staff assisted during both the operations and mourning of the victims.

Last year was the deadliest year on record on the Mediterranean Sea with more than 5,000 deaths recorded – as compared to the 3,771 documented in 2015.

The deadly start to 2017 highlights the urgent need for States to increase pathways for admission of refugees, such as resettlement, private sponsorship and family reunification, so they do not have to resort to dangerous journeys and the use of people smugglers.
UN Data Forum explores ways to improve and modernize national statistical systems

16 January – With the statistical community facing myriad challenges as countries begin to implement the new 15-year global plan for sustainable development, it is imperative to modernize, improve capacity and cooperate at a truly global level, the top United Nations economic and social affairs official told a gathering of more than 1,500 data experts today.

“Success requires that all communities represented in this room fulfill a critical role and find ways to work together and create partnerships and synergies,” Wu Hongbo, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said at the opening plenary of the UN World Data Forum under way in the South African city of Cape Town.

Mr. Wu stressed that accurate, reliable, timely and disaggregated data is essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted at a UN summit in September 2015.

“This Forum takes place at a crucial time for strengthening data and statistical capacity around the world. We have begun the second year of implementing the 2030 Agenda, an agenda that will guide international development efforts and national policy making through 2030,” he said.

In particular, National Statistical Offices (NSOs) have a key role to play, and therefore it is also essential to strengthen national statistical capacities in countries where financial and human resources for statistics are lacking, he added.

The Forum will also serve as a launching pad where diverse data producers and users can get behind the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, which will be formally approved by the UN Statistical Commission at its 48th session in March this year.

This Plan calls for the full, active and focused commitment of government, policy leaders and the international community to undertake key actions under six strategic areas: coordination and strategic leadership; innovation and modernization of national statistical systems; strengthening of statistical systems; dissemination of data on sustainable development; building of partnerships; and mobilization of resources.

In addition to the opening plenary, titled 'Harnessing the Power of Data for Sustainable Development,' today's events included sessions on big data innovations; state of the art in data visualizations and dashboards to support the 2030 Agenda; rethinking capacity development; recent initiatives to improve capacity on migration and refugee statistics; and integrating human rights with data collection and dissemination.
UN mission in South Sudan confirms discussions on regional protection force continuing

15 January – The United Nations peacekeeping mission in South Sudan has confirmed that it continues its discussions with the transitional national unity Government on a 4,000-strong regional protection force, which was authorized by the Security Council last August but has yet to be deployed.

The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) “confirms that in preparation for the arrival of the Regional Protection Force, it continues to be engaged in discussions with the Transitional Government of National Unity as to the various modalities for the new Force, including where they will be deployed in Juba,” said a statement issued by the Mission's Office of the Spokesperson.

The confirmation followed various media reports, including those suggesting that the Government may have changed its position on the deployment of the Force.

The Mission's attention has been drawn to recent statements reported in the media concerning the deployment of the Regional Protection Force, said the spokesperson's statement.

“It may be recalled that the United Nations Security Council in its Resolution 2304 decided that UNMISS force levels should be increased to a ceiling of 17,000 troops, including 4,000 for a Regional Protection Force. This was reaffirmed by the Security Council in its recent Resolution 2327, renewing the United Nations Mission in South Sudan for one year,” the spokesperson's statement added.

Further in the statement, the Mission noted that the Transitional Government of National Unity confirmed its “unconditional” consent to the deployment of the Regional Protection Force by communique to the Security Council on 30 November 2016, and in renewing the UNMISS mandate, including the deployment of the Regional Protection Force, the Council reaffirmed that the security situation in South Sudan remains fragile, with serious consequences for the civilian population.

In early July last year, close to the fifth anniversary of the country's independence, the youngest nation was plunged into fresh violence due to clashes between rival forces – the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), loyal to President Salva Kiir, and the SPLA in Opposition, backing former First Vice-President Riek Machar. That led to deaths and injuries, including many civilians and several UNMISS peacekeepers, jeopardizing the peace agreement between the political rivals in August 2015, which formally ended their differences.
UN Data Forum opens in South Africa to harness power of data for sustainable development

15 January – The inaugural United Nations World Data Forum kicked off today in the South African city of Cape Town, bringing together more than 1,500 data experts from more than 100 countries, with the aim of building broad consensus on how to harness the power of data for sustainable development.

Organized by the UN in cooperation with the South African government, the four-day gathering also aims to rally support behind a new global action plan.

“The Forum comes at a crucial time for strengthening data and statistical capacity globally. Countries all around the world are mobilizing to carry out the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which they adopted at a UN summit two years ago,” Wu Hongbo, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, told a press conference at the opening of the Forum.

“The Forum comes at a crucial time for strengthening data and statistical capacity globally. Countries all around the world are mobilizing to carry out the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which they adopted at a UN summit two years ago,” Wu Hongbo, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, told a press conference at the opening of the Forum.

“To do so, it is essential to have accurate, reliable, timely and disaggregated data. We need to track the unprecedented range of economic, social and environmental goals that are integrated under sustainable development. This will require everyone in the statistics and data community – from governments, the private sector, the scientific and academic communities and civil society -- to find ways to work across different domains and create partnerships and synergies,” he added.

The 2030 Agenda was adopted by world leaders in September 2015 at an historic UN summit. A key component of the agenda is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which came into force on 1 January 2016, and which set out new 15-year targets for global efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

Mr. Wu stressed that the 2030 Agenda also poses enormous challenges for the global statistical community, to modernize and improve our capacity, so that all national statistical offices become the new data hubs for data sources from across many different data systems and provide the necessary data to inform policies, and for national, regional and global monitoring.

“To make this happen, we will need governments, international organizations, businesses, academia and civil society to join forces and work together,” he said.

The Forum will preview the Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, which has been prepared over the past year by a high-level group of experts responsible for statistics and data policy in their countries.

The Plan calls for a commitment by governments, policy leaders and the international community to undertake key actions under six strategic areas, including: coordination and leadership; innovation and modernization of national statistical systems; dissemination of data on sustainable development; building partnerships; and mobilizing resources. It will be formally approved by the UN Statistical Commission at its 48th session in March this year.

Jeff Radebe, the Minister in the Presidency for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, and Chairperson of the National Planning Commission of South Africa, said open government cannot succeed without open data that is freely accessible to all citizens, and that “numbers will form the bedrock of a better life for all.”

According to the Forum’s organizers, the event will also provide an opportunity for major producers and users of data and statistics to come together to launch new initiatives and innovative solutions that will deliver better data on health, education, income, environmental indicators and other aspects of sustainable development.

The substantive part of the Forum will start on Monday, with close to 100 sessions and parallel events scheduled through
Wednesday, including data labs and interactive knowledge-sharing spaces, as well as more traditional keynote speeches and panel discussions.