

Amid rise of 'fake news,' authorities should ensure truthful info reaches public – UN, regional experts

10 March 2017 – Noting growing prevalence of “fake news” and propaganda in both legacy and social media, United Nations and key regional human rights experts have called on State actors to ensure that they disseminate reliable and trustworthy information, including about matters of public interest, such as the economy, public health, security and the environment.

“State actors should not make, sponsor, encourage or further disseminate statements which they know or reasonably should know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate a reckless disregard for verifiable information (propaganda),” read a Joint Declaration issued last week by the experts.

The Declaration was made by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye, along with his counterparts from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR).

“‘Fake news’ has emerged as a global topic of concern and there is a risk that efforts to counter it could lead to censorship, the suppression of critical thinking and other approaches contrary to human rights law. In this Joint Declaration, we identify general principles that should apply to any efforts to deal with these issues,” explained Mr. Kaye in a news release issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The Declaration also identifies applicable human rights standards, encourages promotion of diversity and plurality in the media and emphasizes the particular roles played by digital intermediaries, as well as journalists and media outlets, and notes that they should consider including critical coverage of disinformation and propaganda as part of their news services in line with their watchdog role in society, particularly during elections and regarding debates on matters of public interest.

It also notes that States have a “positive obligation” to promote a free, independent and diverse communications environment, including media diversity, which is a key means of addressing disinformation and propaganda.

Further, the Declaration notes that all stakeholders – including intermediaries, media outlets, civil society and academia – should be supported in developing participatory and transparent initiatives for creating a better understanding of the impact of disinformation and propaganda on democracy, freedom of expression, journalism and civic space, as well as appropriate responses to these phenomena.

UN Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based 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.

Vigilance against Zika virus should 'remain high,' UN health agency says in new guidance

10 March 2017 – Although a decline in cases of Zika virus infection has been reported in some countries, there is still a need for heightened vigilance, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported today, issuing fresh guidance on the virus that has been linked to birth defects and neurological complications.

The new WHO data also lists countries where the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito is present, but where there is no sign of the Zika virus.

The insect is considered to be the main transmitter of the disease, which has been identified in more than 80 countries to date.

As such, WHO says that overall, the global risk assessment has not changed and “the [Zika virus] continues to spread geographically to areas where competent vectors are present.

The current data adds some 70 countries to the list of those considered to be ‘at-risk.’ These are countries where there’s no sign of the virus, but where the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito is present; it is considered to be the main carrier of the virus.

Speaking to *UN News* in Geneva, WHO technical Officer Monika Gehner said: “[The new guidance] helps us because now we can assess risks more precisely. Now, even if you do not have Zika virus transmission, but if you have the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, you are at risk of Zika virus transmission.”

She went on to stress that amid surging global travel, “a traveller who is infected with Zika virus may go to an area in a country and in fact mosquitos that are established there, and a mosquito can then transmit to other people and so on, so you have a cycle of transmission.”

The aim of this new WHO guidance is not to spread alarm. Instead, it’s a call to governments to do more to prevent the spread of Zika.

This requires greater surveillance of mosquito populations and research into suspected Zika infections, as well as better diagnostic techniques and

updated health advice to at-risk communities and travellers.

[UN agency spotlights role of Governments in preventing child exploitation in tourism](#)

10 March 2017 – The United Nations-backed meeting on tourism has spotlighted the leading role of Governments in preventing all forms of child exploitation in the leisure travel industry.

“There is a bright and black side to tourism [...] We cannot allow the tourism infrastructure to be used for this and shouldn’t have any issues in exposing such situations,” said UN World Tourism Organization (WTO) Secretary-General Taleb Rifai in a press release.

Mr. Rifai was addressing the 32nd meeting of the UNWTO World Tourism Network on Child Protection held yesterday in Berlin, Germany.

The meeting was attended by the Ministers of Tourism of Ghana and Sudan and was an opportunity to share best practices from a number of countries, including India, Kenya, Maldives, Myanmar, and Uruguay.

The meeting highlighted cross-government coordination and commitment as well as cross-sectoral cooperation as key factors to advance child protection in tourism.

The World Tourism Network on Child Protection, formerly the Task Force for the Protection of Children in Tourism, is an open-ended network featuring the multi-stakeholder participation of a range of tourism stakeholders, from governments, international organisations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to tourism industry groups and media associations.

Since 2007, its mandate has been to prevent all forms of youth exploitation in the tourism sector, such as sexual exploitation, child labour and child trafficking.

The activities of the World Tourism Network on Child Protection are co-ordinated by the UNWTO Secretariat.

As fresh violence in Yemen sends thousands their homes, UN agency urges international support

10 March 2017 – With tens of thousands of civilians forced to flee their homes following a spike in fighting across western and central Yemen, the United Nations refugee agency today appealed for more international support, as well as unrestricted access within the country so that it can reach those now facing “abysmal conditions.”

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 62,000 Yemenis have been displaced over the last six weeks.

“A number of those displaced, including many children, have been reported as suffering from malnutrition, while others are distressed and in need of psycho-social assistance,” William Spindler, a spokesperson for the UN agency, told journalists at a media briefing at the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG) today.

“Many of those displaced are in urgent need of food, shelter and medicine and lack adequate water and sanitation facilities. A number of women also reported psychological distress and malnutrition.”

Facing danger from both the sky and the land

A 28-year-old mother of three who fled her home in Al Mokha (western Yemen) with her husband and children, and another family, crammed into a vehicle for a 150-kilometre, eight hour journey.

This is what she said:

“We faced danger from both the sky and the land. We hid at home for most of the time, but when we were nearly killed and our house damaged by the fighting, we just had to leave.

We couldn’t take anything with us – no food, clothes or any belongings because there was hardly any space for the people.

When we arrived in Hudaydah we had nothing, but the community have been so generous. Even though they are also suffering, they gave us a place to stay and helped us out.

Life is too hard. We don’t have enough food and water and we are sick. Many people and their children have infections, and fear has made our bodies and minds weak. ”

UN response

Together with its partners, UNHCR has stepped up their efforts to help those newly displaced. The response, however, has been hampered by ongoing fighting and restricted access such as in Taiz governorate, which has the highest number of recent displaced.



Much of Taiz, Yemen, has been destroyed by two years of fierce fighting.
Photo: ICRC/Khalid al-Saeed

“Whilst [our] assistance has previously reached Taiz, intensified hostilities at present are hampering access,” Mr. Spindler added, noting similar problems in Dhamar governorate, bordering capital Sana’a.

“[We] continue to advocate for unfettered access and [are] trying to mobilize a response with all national actors on the ground,” he stressed.

At the same time, local host communities are also stretched to capacity and are buckling under the strain of hosting additional, newly displaced populations.

Not including the tens of thousands newly displaced, the governorates of Taiz, Hudaydah and Ibb between them host 25 per cent of Yemen’s total displaced population – more than half a million individuals.

Budget shortfall by 93 per cent

UNHCR too is struggling to cope with the crisis and calling for international support to help its efforts.

Its 2017 budget for Yemen, so far, is only seven per cent funded, leaving it with resources only sufficient to deal with urgent emergency needs and restricted to new waves of displacement.

“We are no longer able to support regular distributions including to internally displaced Yemenis living in collective centres and informal settlements,” said Mr. Spindler.

Before the latest surge, Yemen already had more than two million internally displaced people and one million who provisionally returned to their places of origin but still needing humanitarian assistance.

[Colombian fighting displaced more than](#)

900 families since January – UN agency

10 March 2017 – Despite a peace agreement, ongoing fighting in the Colombian Pacific Coast has displaced more than 3,500 people so far this year – many of them from the Afro-Colombian or indigenous communities, the United Nations refugee agency today announced.

The violence comes despite a peace agreement signed last November between the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or FARC.

“Since the signing of the peace agreement, increased violence by new armed groups has resulted in killings, forced recruitment – including of children – gender-based violence and limited access to education, water and sanitation, as well as movement restrictions and forced displacement of the civilian population,” said William Spindler, the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, Mr. Spindler said that the families most affected are from the Chocó, Cauca, Valle del Cauca and Nariño departments.

About 13 per cent of the 7.4 million internally displaced persons in the country are from the Afro-Colombian communities and indigenous peoples.

The UN refugee agency reiterated the need to ensure that the civilian population has access to protection and assistance.

“At the same time, any eventual returns of IDPs to their areas of origin need to take place in conditions of safety and dignity,” Mr. Spindler stressed.