

With fighting near industrial sites, UN expert warns Ukrainians of chemical disaster risk

10 March 2017 – Unless the fighting in eastern Ukraine is stopped and precautions are taken to secure industrial facilities in the area, the armed conflict could lead to a catastrophic chemical disaster, an independent United Nations human rights expert today warned.

Battles are now being fought in cities, close to industrial centres, with factories increasingly becoming at risk of being hit: the consequences for anyone living close-by would be severe, said Baskut Tuncak, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and hazardous substances and wastes.

Most of Ukraine's industrial facilities are located in the eastern part of the country. These include heavy industrial infrastructures operating in the mining, metallurgical, chemical and power sectors.

The presence of a range of explosive and toxic substances at these sites is a source of serious concern, according to the press release from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

As an example, on 24 February, a shell hit a building housing more than 7,000 kg of chlorine gas. While no damage was reported damage to just one fraction of the containers would have killed anyone within 200 meters and severely impact the health of anyone within 2.4 km, according to experts cited by OHCHR.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has also voiced concern about potential impact to the health of residents. According to information cited in the press release, OCHA and humanitarian partners have called for demilitarizing the areas adjacent to civilian infrastructure and for essential safety equipment to be stored at facilities out of the reach of the government.

UN human rights experts are part of what it is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, the general name of the independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. The experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work.

Turkey: UN report details serious rights violations since July 2015 in country's southeast

10 March 2017 – The UN human rights office today published a report detailing allegations of massive destruction, killings and numerous other serious human rights violations committed between July 2015 and December 2016 in southeast Turkey.

"I am particularly concerned by reports that no credible investigation has been conducted into hundreds of alleged unlawful killings, including women and children over a period of 13 months between late July 2015 and the end of August of 2016," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a news release published by his Office (OHCHR).

"It appears that not a single suspect was apprehended and not a single individual was prosecuted," he added.

During that period, Government security operations affected more than 30 towns and neighbourhoods and displaced between 335,000 and half a million people, mostly of Kurdish origin.

Mr. Zeid acknowledged the complex challenges Turkey has faced in addressing the attempted coup of July 2016 and in responding to a series of terror attacks. However, he said the apparent significant deterioration of the human rights situation in the country is cause for alarm and would only serve to deepen tensions and foster instability.

The news release said that measures taken under the state of emergency following the attempted coup of July 2016, including the dismissal of more than 100,000 people from public or private sector jobs during the reporting period, have also deeply affected the human rights situation in the southeast.

Some 10,000 teachers were reportedly dismissed on suspicion of having links with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which the Government considers a terrorist organization, without due process.

The use of counter-terrorism legislation to remove democratically elected officials of Kurdish origin, the severe harassment of independent journalists, the closure of independent and Kurdish language media and citizen's associations and the mass suspension of judges and prosecutors have also severely weakened checks and balances and human rights protections.

"The Government of Turkey has failed to grant us access, but has contested the veracity of the very serious allegations made in this report. But the gravity of the allegations, the scale of the destruction and the displacement of more than 355,000 people mean that an independent

investigation is both urgent and essential,” Mr. Zeid said.

[UN agriculture agency warns of water scarcity in North Africa and Near East](#)

9 March 2017 – Accessible fresh water in North Africa and the Middle East has fallen by two-thirds over the past 40 years, posing a huge challenge requiring “an urgent and massive response,” the head of the United Nations agriculture agency said today.

Access to water is a fundamental need for food security, human health and agriculture, and sustainable water use for agriculture requires transforming food systems and diets, said Jose Graziano da Silva, the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in a news release on his visit to Egypt.

Per capita availability of fresh water in the region is now 10 times less than the world average, he said, underscoring the need for a significant overhaul of farming systems.

A recent FAO study showed that higher temperatures may shorten growing seasons in the region by 18 days and reduce agricultural yields a further 27 per cent to 55 per cent less by the end of this century.

The rising sea level in the Nile Delta is exposing Egypt to the danger of losing substantial parts of the most productive agriculture land due to salinization.

Moreover, “competition between water-usage sectors will only intensify in the future between agriculture, energy, industrial production and household needs,” he said.

Mr. Graziano da Silva attended a high-level meeting on FAO's collaboration with Egypt on the '1.5 million feddan initiative,' the Government's plan to reclaim eventually up to two million hectares of desert land for agricultural and other uses.

Policy advice and best practice ideas on the governance of irrigation schemes is a key offering in FAO's Near East and North Africa Water Scarcity Initiative, backed now by a network of more than 30 national and international organizations.

The initiative has gained momentum, buoyed by its endorsement by the League of Arab States as well as donor support, Mr. Graziano da Silva said, noting that urgent actions supporting it include measures aimed at reducing food loss and waste and bolstering the resilience of smallholders and family

farmers.

[Next intra-Syrian talks set for late March – UN envoy](#)

9 March 2017 – The next round of the United Nations-facilitated intra-Syrian talks is expected to convene on 23 March to discuss issues related to governance, constitution, elections and counter terrorism, the UN Special Envoy for Syria has said.

“My current intention is to bring the invitees back to Geneva for a fifth round with a target date of 23 March,” Staffan de Mistura told reporters yesterday at the UN Headquarters in New York after he briefed the Security Council on the outcome of the fourth round of the discussions, which ran in the Swiss city from 23 February to 3 March.

He said the fourth round of the Geneva talks “achieved much more than many people had imagined we could have.”

“No one left, everybody stayed. They were focused, we got an agenda, we got a timeline, we got some agreement on substance,” Mr. de Mistura said, noting that the fifth round of talks will build on the outcome of the previous one and that counter terrorism is now part of the agenda laid out in UN Security Council resolution 2254.

In parallel with the UN-facilitated intra-Syrian talks, Kazakhstan has been hosting talks on a ceasefire in its capital, Astana – diplomatic efforts led by the so-named ceasefire guarantors, Iran, Russia and Turkey.

On the Astana talks, Mr. de Mistura said that although the responsibility of their success is in the hands of these guarantors, the UN dispatches a technical team to the process, because without a strong ceasefire, the UN-facilitated Geneva talks would be fragile.

The UN envoy urged the Security Council to continue to support his efforts.

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