

Migrating children and women, suffer 'sexual violence, exploitation, abuse and detention' – UN agency

28 February 2017 – A senior United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) official is calling the routes from sub-Saharan Africa into Libya and across the sea to Europe one of the "world's deadliest and most dangerous for children and women," as the agency reported that nearly half of the women and children interviewed after making the voyage were raped.

"Refugee and migrant children and women are routinely suffering sexual violence, exploitation, abuse and detention along the Central Mediterranean migration route from North Africa to Italy," UNICEF warned in a new report, *A Deadly Journey for Children: The Central Mediterranean Migrant Route* .

At the time of the report, 256,000 migrants were recorded in Libya – of who about 54,000 included women and children. UNICEF estimates that this is a low count with actual numbers at least three times higher.

In addition, it is believed that at least 181,000 people – including more than 25,800 unaccompanied children – used smugglers in 2016 to try to reach Italy. At the most dangerous portion – from southern Libya to Sicily – one in every 40 people is killed, according to UNICEF.

"The Central Mediterranean from North Africa to Europe is among the world's deadliest and most dangerous migrant routes for children and women," said Afshan Khan, UNICEF Regional Director and Special Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe.

"The route is mostly controlled by smugglers, traffickers and other people seeking to prey upon desperate children and women who are simply seeking refuge or a better life," Mr. Khan added.



In Libya, Addis, holding his 30-month-old son, Lato, sits in a cell at the Alguaiha detention centre, which houses illegal migrants apprehended while attempting the dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean Sea. Photo: UNICEF/UNI187398/Romenzi

The UNICEF report is based on a survey in the field of 122 people, including 82 women and 40 children from 11 nationalities. Among the children, 15 are girls between the ages of 10 and 17.

"Nearly half the women and children interviewed had experienced sexual abuse during migration – often multiple times and in multiple locations," according to the report, with "widespread and systematic" sexual violence at crossings and checkpoints.

In addition, about three-quarters of all the children interviewed said that they had “experienced violence, harassment or aggression at the hands of adults” including beatings, verbal and emotional abuse.

At the mercy of smugglers, children and women were left in debt and often had to agree to “pay as you go” arrangements.

In western Libya, women were often held in detention centres where they reported “harsh conditions, such as poor nutrition and sanitation, significant overcrowding and a lack of access to health care and legal assistance,” according to UNICEF.

Included in the report is a six-point agenda calling for safe and legal pathways and safeguards to protect migrating children. The UN agency is urging Governments and the European Union to adopt this agenda.

Meanwhile, in Libya, the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and partners held a five-day training for managers and staff of Libyan detention centres to promote human rights and ensure that the detainees are treated in line with international standards.

Yemen: UN verifies nearly 1,500 boys recruited for use in armed conflict

28 February 2017 – The United Nations human rights office today urged all warring parties in Yemen to immediately release child soldiers, noting that the UN has verified the recruitment of 1,476 children, all boys, between 26 March 2015 and 31 January 2017.

“The numbers are likely to be much higher as most families are not willing to talk about the recruitment of their children, for fear of reprisals,” Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), told reporters at the regular bi-weekly press briefing in Geneva.

She said her Office received numerous reports of the recruitment of children in Yemen for use in the armed conflict, mostly by the Popular Committees affiliated with the Houthis.

Since 2015, the southern Arabian nation has been in a conflict between forces loyal to President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and those allied to the Houthi rebel movement.

Just last week, OHCHR received new reports of children who were recruited without the knowledge of their families.

“Children under the age of 18 often join the fighting after either being misled or attracted by promises of financial rewards or social status. Many are then quickly sent to the front lines of the conflict or tasked with manning checkpoints,” Ms. Shamdasani said.

She reminded all parties to the conflict that the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict is strictly forbidden by international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and when concerning cases of recruitment of children under fifteen may amount to a war crime.

The conflict in Yemen has, between March 2015 and 23 February 2017, led to 4,667 civilian deaths and 8,180 injured civilians.

At the same briefing, Christophe Boulierac, spokesperson for the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), said that every 10 minutes, a child under the age of five died in Yemen from preventable diseases such as diarrhoea, pneumonia or measles, because the health system is on the verge of collapse. Some 50 per cent of the health facilities in the country were not functioning.

“The rate of severe acute malnutrition in children under five had tripled between 2014 and 2016. There are currently approximately 2.2 million malnourished children in the country, including 462,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition,” he said.

South Sudan: UN official calls for unfettered relief access to avert further catastrophe

28 February 2017 – With hundreds of thousands in need of assistance in famine-struck parts of South Sudan and rising insecurity hampering relief work, a senior United Nations relief official in the country has called on all parties to ensure that humanitarians have immediate, safe and unhindered access across the nation.

“The people of South Sudan are suffering beyond measure. [The famine] represents only the most extreme tip of the iceberg of needs in this country,” said Eugene Owusu, the Humanitarian Coordinator in the country, in a news release issued by the UN Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

On 20 February, famine was formally declared in parts of the country. A formal declaration means people have already started dying of hunger.

To avert further catastrophe, it is imperative that humanitarians are able to act swiftly and robustly, Mr. Owusu underlined.

The UN official's call follows a series of recent events which have hampered humanitarian operations and placed civilians at risk. For instance, during clashes in Jonglei state, humanitarian compounds were looted by armed actors and community members; and 28 humanitarian workers were forced to relocate from Mayendit County, one of the two counties hit by famine in Unity state, due to insecurity.

Aid workers were also denied access last week to key locations outside of Lainya town, in Central Equatoria, where tens of thousands of people in need have not been reached with aid in months.

RELATED: Famine declared in region of South Sudan – UN

“I implore all parties to this conflict to uphold their responsibilities under international humanitarian law, place the plight of the people first, give aid workers unfettered access, and protect civilians,” Mr. Owusu added.

“Time is of the essence, and lives are in the balance, so it is critical that these words be translated into concrete actions on the ground immediately.”

The news release also noted that President of South Sudan provided reassurances that all humanitarian organizations will have unimpeded access to needy populations across the country.

According to OCHA, insecurity and lack of access have complicated an already worrying situation: more than 100,000 people face starvation in the famine-declared parts of the country, and a further one million are on the brink of famine. There are also fears that by the height of the lean season in July, some 5.5 million people could face severe food insecurity across the country.

Additionally, since December 2013, about 3.4 million people have been displaced, including about 1.5 million who fled as refugees to neighbouring countries.

Against this backdrop, humanitarian organizations have appealed urgent funds to respond to the escalating crisis, with \$1.6 billion required to provide life-saving assistance and protection to some 5.8 million people across South Sudan in 2017.

[Kosovo: Talks between Belgrade and Pristina are 'essential' to peace, UN](#)

envoy tells Security Council

27 February 2017 – There is no alternative to dialogue, the head of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Kosovo today told the Security Council, citing the importance of high-level talks between Belgrade and Pristina, and calling for continued international engagement to maintain peace and stability in Kosovo and the wider Balkans region.

Addressing the Council, Zahir Tanin, the head of the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) said the resumption of high-level dialogue between Belgrade, and Pristina was an "essential step" to chart a path out of a deteriorating situation and to publicly reconfirm their commitment to work together.

"Stability in Kosovo, normalization of relations between Pristina and Belgrade, are part of the wider effort to improve stability in the Western Balkans," said Mr. Tanin, who is also the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Kosovo.

He urged the 15 Council's members to "hold leaders to their words" to maintain "a sincere and consistent" commitment to dialogue, implement the agreements reached and avoid making statements which threaten the potential of progress to be made.

Mr. Tanin also highlighted also the international expectations of Pristina and Belgrade: non-confrontation, resolving issues through dialogue, and placing the objective improvement of the lives of people ahead of more limited and parochial calculations.

The statement comes as Belgrade is engaged in a political campaign for the presidential elections scheduled for April.

The senior UN official warned against allowing electoral politics to disrupt vital processes and progress: "Normalization of relations, reconciliation, and justice all belong to that broader horizon."

Among other issues in his presentation to the Council, Mr. Tanin noted the importance of improving the social and economic situation in Kosovo. He underlined that "addressing unemployment, making progress in the rule of law and fighting corruption remain central for all people in Kosovo."

At the very start of his speech, Mr. Tanin expressed his profound sadness at the passing of Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, the Representative of Russia to the United Nations, who died suddenly last week.

In Geneva, UN urges upholding human rights amid rising populism and extremism

27 February 2017 – Disregard for human rights is a “disease,” United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today told the opening session of the UN Human Rights Council, urging Member States to uphold the rights of all people in the face of rising populism and extremism.

Addressing the top UN human rights body for the first time since becoming Secretary-General, Mr. Guterres appealed to world governments to speak up for human rights in an “impartial way.”

“Disregard for human rights is a disease, and it is a disease that is spreading North, South, East and West,” the Secretary-General told the high-level segment of the 34th regular session of the Human Rights Council, alongside UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein. “The Human Rights Council must be part of the cure.”

Having lived under the dictatorship of Portugal’s António de Oliveira Salazar, Mr. Guterres explained that he was 24 before he knew democracy. Denying his compatriots their human rights had oppressed and impoverished many of them, resulting in a mass exodus, and also brought bloody civil wars to Portugal’s former colonies in Africa.

Calling today’s world “more dangerous, less predictable, more chaotic,” the Secretary-General called for making prevention a priority, tackling root causes of conflict and reacting early and more effectively to human rights violations.

He highlighted the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the treaties that derive from it, and urged the Council to be “fully engaged” on the issues that require their attention.

“We are increasingly seeing the perverse phenomenon of populism and extremism feeding off each other in a frenzy of growing racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred and other forms of intolerance,” Mr. Guterres said.

“Minorities, indigenous communities and others face discriminations and abuse across the world,” he added, noting abuse targeting refugees and migrants, and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and/or intersex (LGBTI).

Among other issues raised, Mr. Guterres also called for protection of the human rights defenders and of journalists who are “essential” to the checks and balances of any society.

In his address, UN High Commissioner Zeid denounced “reckless political

profiteers who threaten the multilateral system or intend to withdraw from parts of it.

We have much to lose, so much to protect, the UN High Commissioner said.

Without a commitment to fundamental human rights, to the dignity and worth of the human person and to the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, our world will become chaos, misery and warfare, he warned. Of all the great post-war achievements, it is this assertion of the universality of rights in human rights law that may be the most noteworthy.

Speaking directly to the political actors, Mr. Zeid said the sirens of historical experience ought to ring clear and pledged that we will not sit idly by in the face of violations.

Our rights, the rights of others, the very future of our planet cannot, must not be thrown aside by these reckless political profiteers, he added.

For his part, the President of the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly, Peter Thomson, called for greater dialogue and cooperation for peace among Governments, the UN system, civil society and the private sector.

He lauded the Human Rights Council as essential to bridging divides, and called for advancing with common purpose towards sustainable peace.

Just as the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda recognizes human rights as a cornerstone for sustainable development, so too does the concept of sustaining peace, stated Mr. Thompson, urging the Council members to put forward their best ideas, well-honed skills and most determined will to defend the place of human rights in the drive to implement sustainable development and sustaining peace in today's challenging times.