

# UN chief hails Libyan leaders' agreement to hold general election

An agreement by Libya's Prime Minister and a key rival military leader to improve political stability across the country through new general elections, has been welcomed by the [UN Secretary-General](#).

In a statement on Friday, António Guterres commended the progress made by Prime Minister Faiez Serraj, who also presides over the council leading the Government of National Accord, and the Commander of the Libyan National Army, Khalifa Haftar.

The UN chief's Special Representative for Libya, and head of the UN Mission, [UNSMIL](#), Ghassan Salame, hosted the meeting on Thursday between the two leaders that led to the breakthrough, in Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates.

"Both parties...agreed during the meeting on the need to end the transitional stages in Libya through holding general elections" said a statement issued by UNSMIL. "They also agreed on ways to maintain stability in the country and unify its institutions."

Mr. Guterres said that apart from the commitment to the democratic process through the ballot box, he also welcomed the "commitment to maintain stability in the country and unify its institutions".

Despite its large oil reserves, Libya has been wracked by political and economic turmoil, as multiple armed groups have competed for power and control across the country, since the overthrow of former dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, in 2011.

In early February, the UN and aid partners together with Libya's interim Government, launched a humanitarian response plan, appealing for \$202 million to bring life-saving relief to more than half a million Libyans in need.

Maria Ribeiro, UN Resident Coordinator, said in the foreword to the plan that "many Libyans get poorer every year. Basic health and education services decay, and frustrated citizens cannot understand why oil production and increased government revenue does not lead to improved living standards, security and well-being for all in Libya."

The UN chief concluded his statement on Friday by saying that he hoped "further progress can be achieved on the basis of what has already been agreed upon, with the support of the international community."

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## Syrians 'exposed to brutality every day' as thousands continue fleeing ISIL's last stand

In eastern Syria, 13,000 people have arrived at a protection camp in just the last week, after fleeing fighting in the last ISIL extremist stronghold in Deir-Ez-Zor governorate, the UN's emergency coordination office, [OCHA](#), said on Friday.

Nine in 10 of the arrivals at Al Hol camp in Al Hassakeh governorate were women and children, spokesperson Jens Laerke told journalists in Geneva.

"Many of them have arrived exhausted, hungry and sick," he said "Approximately 45,000 people have fled the Hajin and Al-Baghouz area of Deir- ez-Zor and arrived in the camp, since December. Those who are fleeing have told us of a desperate situation for civilians in the area they are fleeing from. It's affected by hostilities – civilians are being killed and injured on a daily basis – there's large-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure and shortages of food, medicine and other basic necessities."

Mr. Laerke also reported that 84 people, mainly children under-five, died either on their way to the settlement or shortly after arriving at the Al-Hol camp.

And according to aid teams there, 175 children have been hospitalized owing to complications from severe acute malnutrition.

The UN and partners are responding to growing needs at Al-Hol camp and surrounding areas by providing life-saving assistance to all new arrivals, along with food, water, shelter, and warm clothes and blankets.

### **'Staggering' levels of need prevail: new UN humanitarian assessment**

Elsewhere in Syria, a desperate humanitarian situation prevails, despite a reduction in violence in many parts of the country over the past year.

"With the crisis in its eighth year, staggering levels of need persist for people throughout Syria," according to OCHA's [Humanitarian Needs Overview](#) 2019 for Syria.

Published ahead of a conference co-chaired by the European Union (EU) and the UN in Brussels from 12 to 14 March, the OCHA document states that 11.7 million people need help inside the country. including 6.2 million who are internally displaced. A further 5.6 million are refugees.

"The population continues to look for safety in parts of the country still

affected by ongoing hostilities with significant protection needs, new and protracted displacement, increased self-organized returns and the sustained erosion of communities resilience,” it warns.

For millions of Syrians “the crisis is far from over”, it insists, with needs including food and livelihood assistance, health care, shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene support.

Education for children is also urgently required, with more than two million boys and girls out of school across the war-torn country.

“People continue to be exposed to brutality every day,” the Needs Overview cautions. “Women, children, adolescent girls, older people, widows and female-headed households, and people with disabilities, face distinct protection risks and have specific needs.”

In addition, it warns, more than 10 million people are estimated to live in areas contaminated by explosive hazards “of all kinds”.

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## [Laws must protect, ‘not reject’ says UNAIDS chief on Zero Discrimination Day](#)

While the dignity of every person is enshrined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), “human rights violations are happening all over the world because of discriminatory laws and practices,” said [Michel Sidibé](#), Executive Director of [UNAIDS](#).

“[Laws should protect, not reject](#). Every person has an equal right to be treated with dignity and respect,” he declared.

Last year at least 20 countries set travel restrictions against HIV-positive people; some 29 States required a husband or partner’s consent for a woman to access sexual and reproductive health services; 17 countries criminalized transgender people; and same-sex sexual relations were criminalized in at least 67 nations and territories worldwide.

And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

For certain groups, 59 countries instituted mandatory HIV testing for marriage, work or residence permits; 45 States imposed laws requiring parental consent for below-18-year-olds to access HIV testing services; and 33 countries imposed the death penalty for drug offences.

But the news was not all bad. Last year some countries made landmark

decisions to change discriminatory laws and bills.

India's Supreme Court struck down the section of its Penal Code that criminalized same-sex sexual relations; the Philippines lowered the age to 15 for voluntary HIV testing without the need of parental or guardian consent; and Malawi removed provisions from a draft bill that would have criminalized HIV non-disclosure, exposure and transmission.

"All countries must carefully examine their laws and policies in order to ensure equality and protection for all people, without exception," asserted Mr. Sidibé.

**A discriminatory law may be amended or abolished:**

- Through parliamentary processes and parliamentary votes, which require awareness-raising among parliamentarians.
- Through a petition and request for a national vote or referendum.
- Through legal action by affected individual or organizations.

"Zero Discrimination Day is every day," he said urging worldwide joint action to change discriminatory laws.

UNAIDS has identified a range of laws that are discriminatory, impede access to health and social services, restrict freedom of movement and violate human rights.

Combating discriminatory laws requires raising awareness and mobilizing action.

On Zero Discrimination Day, UNAIDS is proposing specific actions that individuals, civil society organizations, parliamentarians and donor organizations can take to change these laws. They range from being an ally to someone affected by a discriminatory law to joining a non-governmental organization, tabling amendments to laws and calling for legislation reviews.

As part of the [Global Partnership for Action to Eliminate all Forms of HIV-Related Stigma and Discrimination](#), UNAIDS is actively working with United Nations partners, governments and civil society organizations to make the change.

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## [Trees in 'green' Cameroon refugee camp, bring shade and relief from 'helter-skelter' of life](#)

The land is sandy, dry and scorched by the searing sun of the African Sahel,

but that has not stopped the planting of some 50,000 trees at a camp for Nigerian refugees in the far north-east corner of Cameroon.

Small trees, including neem, acacia, moringa, leucaena and moringa, dot the landscape of the Minawao camp where some 56,000 Nigerians have sought shelter from violence in their homeland. They have escaped the terror and brutal treatment meted out by the outlawed Boko Haram extremist group which has been attacking villages along the border with Cameroon for over a decade.

As in all refugee camps, life can be tough, but the residents of Minawao told UN News during a visit to the camp in February, that they have been working to plant trees in order to create a greener and more environmentally-friendly camp.

“When there are no trees,” explained refugee representative Luka Isaac, “you can’t rest, you have to run around helter-skelter looking for shade in order to relax.”

When the refugees started arriving in Minawao in May 2013, some 30 kilometers from the Nigerian border, the local environment bore the full force of their presence. “Most people thought they would be here for just two or three months,”

“So, they ripped up trees for firewood and left nothing but sand and rocks,” Luka Isaac told UN News.

Luka Isaac, a Nigerian refugee representative in the Minawao camp in Cameroon, stands beneath a tree he planted. UN News/Daniel Dickinson

## **Deforestation**

The uprooting of trees in Minawao is a part of a wider problem of deforestation in north-east Cameroon, where the fragile landscape has been degraded by unsustainable cultivation practices and rising temperatures caused by global warming.

The arrival of close to 60,000 extra people has also put a huge pressure on a region where natural resources are scarce and desertification is already under way.

### **‘Make Minawao green again’**

The “Make Minawao green again” project aims to reverse deforestation both in the camp and surrounding villages. The project led by Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and supported by [UNHCR](#), the UN Refugee Agency, has so far planted 50,000 trees over a 600 hectare area; it is hoped that an additional 5000 trees will be planted every year. Some are planned in groves, others are located in front of dwellings.

The different species of trees have been chosen for a number of reasons,

according to LWF's Luc Pemha. "They are mostly very quick to grow," he said "When they are mature some can provide firewood, others, like neem, have medicinal properties. We are hoping also in the future to plant fruit trees which will provide food."

Across Minawao camp, the inhabitants are able to find shade and a respite from the midday sun under small trees planted just two years ago. Smaller saplings are protected by netting or the thorny branches of the acacia tree. "The people who live here and in the surrounding villages have seen the difference the trees can make to everyday life," said Mr. Pemha, "so they respect them and allow them to grow."

UNHCR, which runs the camp, has one eye on the present and one on the future. "It's important that we create a sustainable environment which benefits both host and refugee communities," said Fanta Nifaboum, the agency's deputy chief in Maroua, Cameroon. "And when the refugees ultimately return home, they will leave behind a greener and more developed village."

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## [Venezuela must guarantee judicial impartiality – UN human rights expert](#)

As political tensions continue to escalate in Venezuela, a United Nations independent human rights expert has called on the Government to "take all necessary measures to guarantee judicial independence," following concerns that some pressure may have been placed on the country's justice system "to act against the political opposition".

"All Venezuelan State institutions must respect, promote and guarantee the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, including judges and prosecutors, so that that they can maintain their independence in the face of undue pressure," said the expert, Diego García-Sayán, who specializes in safeguarding the independence of judges and lawyers around the world. "It is essential that the Constitution and human rights treaties are respected," he added.

"I am concerned that pressure is being put on the judicial system to act against the political opposition."

Tensions started escalating at the end of January, when Mr. Guaidó, head of the country's National Assembly, challenged the legitimacy of the sitting President, Nicolás Maduro, and was declared interim president by the National Assembly. President Maduro has been in power since 2013 and was sworn in again for a second term on 10 January.

"The measures taken against Guaidó and the pressure being exerted on him are

unacceptable,” stated the UN human rights expert, deploring the criminal investigation that is being conducted, “as this could be politically motivated,” he explained.

Mr. García-Sayán further noted that “statements already made by Tarek William Saab, a leading supporter of the incumbent President Maduro, about the Guaidó investigation may already be affecting the legal presumption of innocence” and that “the equitable, independent and impartial administration of justice, requires prosecutors to work in a way that is fair and which avoids any discrimination.”

Mr. García-Sayán called on Venezuela to “organise its State apparatus in a way that is compatible with its international obligations to guarantee the rule of law, the independence and impartiality of the judiciary and international human rights standards”.

He added that “in accordance with the human rights treaties to which it is a party, Venezuela must adopt all legislative, administrative, judicial and other measures necessary for the establishment of an independent and impartial judiciary and the proper administration of justice.”

On Sunday, the UN human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, expressed grave concern over other human rights violations taking place in the country, highlighting the killing and injuring of civilians due to [excessive use of force](#) by the Venezuelan security forces.

The UN humanitarian coordination office ([OCHA](#)) has been documenting the [humanitarian crisis](#) in the country: infant mortality has increased by more than 50 per cent since 2017; four in five hospitals lack the necessary medicines and staff to be operational. To date, the UN refugee and migration agencies ([UNHCR](#) and [IOM](#), respectively), estimate that the number of Venezuelans to have fled their country [stands at 3.4 million](#).