

'Protracted crisis' in Venezuela leads to 'alarming escalation of tensions': UN political chief

She said that the “grim reality” facing the country, according to available information, showed a deteriorating economy, with citizens dying of preventable causes, and 3.4 million Venezuelans so far, choosing to leave, due to conditions at home.

Exactly a month ago, I briefed the Security Council on the protracted crisis in Venezuela...Since then, we have witnessed an alarming escalation of tensions – *UN political and peacebuilding affairs chief, Rosemary DiCarlo*

Civil society groups have reported that infant mortality has increased by over 50 per cent since 2017, as have the number of infant deaths, she said, adding that data from the Pan American Health Organization ([PAHO](#)) indicate that 80 per cent of hospitals lack sufficient medicines, while up to 40 per cent of the medical personnel have left the country.

The UN now has a coordinated effort underway to deliver assistance closest to those Venezuelans in need, focused on nutrition, health and protection, under the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence said Ms. DiCarlo, which should be free “from political objectives and delivered on the basis of need.”



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, briefs the Security Council on the situation in Venezuela.

Ms. DiCarlo noted that supplies sent by Russia and China have entered the country, in coordination with the Venezuelan Government, to be “distributed to those in need.” However, food and medical supplies stockpiled by the United States and other countries at the Colombian and Brazilian borders, has been blocked from entering the country by Venezuelan authorities.

The UN has confirmed that, amid the violence that erupted over last weekend as a result of the aid blockade, four people were shot, and 64 injured near the Brazilian border, most of them by gunfire. The UN’s head of [Political and Peacebuilding Affairs](#) also quoted figures from Colombian migration authorities, claiming that 285 individuals were injured. The UN Human Rights Office ([OHCHR](#)) has received reports, said Ms. DiCarlo, that point to the involvement of pro-government armed elements in the violent attacks on protestors.



UN Photo/Evan Schneider

Elliott Abrams, United States Special Representative for Venezuela, addresses the Security Council meeting on the situation in the country.

Speaking on behalf of the United States Government, Elliot Abrams, Special Representative for Venezuela, called on the members of the Security Council to meet the growing needs of Venezuela and the region, to contribute to Venezuelan democracy and “pressure the illegitimate regime to peacefully step down.” He also questioned the value of dialogue with President Nicolás Maduro who, he said, would “rather block and burn donated medicine and bread than see it in the hands of Venezuelan children.”

The Permanent Representative for Russia, Vassily Nebenzia, described the attempt to get US aid into Venezuela as “an attempted illegal state border crossing for the delivery of unknown cargo,” adding that an illegitimate attempt had been made to transfer “unverified” supplies, that was not requested by Venezuela. Mr. Nebenzia said that if the US genuinely wanted to help the Venezuelan people, they would have operated through UN agencies. He

added that Russian has successfully delivered 7.5 tonnes of medical goods through the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), without any obstacles.



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Vassily Nebenzia, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, addresses the Security Council meeting on the situation in Venezuela.

François Delattre, France's UN Ambassador, said that Venezuela was going through the worst humanitarian crisis in its history, with a civilian population – particularly women and children – being intentionally targeted. The "Maduro regime", he said, had decided to deprive its population of international aid, and has not hesitated to kill and to wound hundreds of its own unarmed citizens, during clashes.

Mr. Delattre said that, by blocking international aid, Venezuela has brought upon itself the opprobrium of the international community, and its own people.

Speaking in the Security Council chamber on behalf of Venezuela, Foreign Affairs Minister Jorge Arreaza, said Ms. DiCarlo's briefing to the Council "was biased" and disseminated information "from one source" only. He said the US had been attempting to mount "a coup" against his country.

Referring to the attempts to move US and opposition-backed aid shipments across the border with Colombia into Venezuela, Mr. Arreaza said: "That was the last chapter of the coup on Saturday, and I can tell you, read my lips, it failed."

"Now is the time for us to return to sanity and to respect international law", he said adding that the Government was prepared to sit down and negotiate with the opposition, led by Juan Guaidó: "Among Venezuelans, we can build our own solution without intervention, interference from anyone, much less the United States," he said.

UN experts urge United Arab Emirates to release terminally ill woman to live her last days 'in dignity'

United Nations independent human rights experts on Tuesday urged the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to release from detention a terminally ill woman who they say has been “reportedly subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment” so that she can “live her last days of life, in dignity”.

In a [statement](#), the experts said that Alia Abdulnoor, who is suffering from breast-cancer, was reportedly being held in an unventilated, windowless hospital room, chained to her bed and under armed guard.

She was arrested in July 2015, and charged with “financing terrorism” after she had helped raise funds for needy Syrian families in the UAE and war-affected women and children in Syria, said the experts.

“We are extremely concerned about the physical and mental integrity of Ms. Abdulnoor, and about reports that the conditions of detention are causing her unnecessary pain,” said the three UN Special Rapporteurs.

The experts said they had received information that for six months, Ms. Abdulnour was held in secret detention and solitary confinement following her arrest, where she was threatened and subjected to severe physical and psychological humiliation. Under torture, the critically ill woman was forced to sign a written confession.

“We would like to remind the United Arab Emirates that torture and ill-treatment is universally and absolutely prohibited and that any statement made as a result of torture shall not be invoked as evidence,” the experts spelled out.

Now in its final stage, Ms. Abdulnour’s cancer has spread to her vital organs. In November, her deteriorating health prompted the authorities to transfer her to Mafraq Hospital in Bani Yas, Abu Dhabi.

While the authorities have rejected her family’s many requests that she be released on medical grounds, the last one submitted on 10 January, resulted in her transfer to Tawam hospital, in Al Ain, where reports say she continues to be denied appropriate medication to reduce her pain.

Torture and ill-treatment is universally and absolutely prohibited
– *UN experts*

“We call on the authorities to release Ms. Abdulnour and to allow her to live her last days of life in dignity and with her family at home,” said the experts.

“We also call on the State to investigate alleged acts of torture and ill-treatment, and to prosecute the suspected perpetrator(s) in line with its obligations under international human rights law.”

The UN Special Rapporteurs – [Dainius Pūras](#), Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; [Nils Melzer](#), Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; and [Fionnuala Ní Aoláí](#), Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism – carry out their work under the [Special Procedures](#) of the Human Rights Council, based in Geneva.

The experts work on a voluntary basis, are not UN staff, and do not receive a salary.

[Syria still suffering ‘staggering levels’ of humanitarian need, Security Council hears](#)

Speaking on behalf of UN emergency relief chief Mark Lowcock, Reena Ghelani, OCHA’s Director for Operations and Advocacy, said that this year, an estimated 11.7 million people will require life-saving humanitarian assistance across the country.

- Some 25,000 people displaced from this the south-eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate to the Al Hol camp.
- The humanitarian situation in Rukban continued to deteriorate, additional humanitarian assistance is being prepared to accommodate 42,000 people.
- Heavy flooding in the north-east and north-west destroyed IDP camp shelters and secondary displacements of already extremely vulnerable people.
- In Idlib, changes in control in some areas, led to funding suspensions, reducing health services cover for some civilians.
- Humanitarian organizations continued to report attacks on educational and medical facilities, include eight incidents targeting schools and hospitals.
- UN humanitarian assistance fed an average of 3.37 million people each month and provided treatment for nearly three million people.
- The UN and NGOs continued to deliver assistance to more than 700,000

people each month in the country's north-eastern part.

Nearly eight years on since mass-protests first began against the Syrian Government in 2011, she painted a picture of what life is like for some 41,000 displaced mainly women and children in Rukban camp, near the Syria-Jordan border, calling it "a dire humanitarian situation" where people struggled for survival, face hunger and lacked the most basic necessities.

Although the UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivered essential aid, as part of the largest convoy of the entire war – vaccines and logistical items in 133 trucks during a 10-day mission earlier this month – "the gravity of the situation for civilians in Rukban means that sustained humanitarian access is needed moving forward", she explained, noting that supplies are expected to last "only 30 days."

Moreover, she flagged that internally displaced persons (IDPs) expressed concerns over their lack of documentation, safety and security, worrying particularly about detention and military conscription.

The UN remains "extremely concerned" for civilians who remain in the last ISIL-held areas in south-eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, and for those who were able to flee the fighting, Ms. Ghelani told the Council.

She pointed out that since late last year, over 37,000 people fled from Hajin to the Al-Hol camp some 300 kilometres to the north, where "three-quarters of the total population...is now made up of women and children under the age of five." Moreover, thousands more are expected to arrive at in the coming days.

"Response efforts are being scaled up in Al Hol camp, but also in Hajin and surrounding areas, despite considerable security challenges," she stated. Adding that the UN had established a transit centre midway between Hajin and Al Hol.

Meanwhile, although the demilitarized-zone agreement between Turkey and Russia to protect millions of civilians in [Idlib](#) staved off an immediate escalation of fighting in the last rebel-held enclave in Syria, dozens of civilians have still died or been injured due to conflict increased fighting over the last few weeks.

She thanked donors for their generous \$5 billion support in 2018 and urged Member States to "ensure timely funding" for humanitarian operations in Syria and neighboring refugee-hosting countries in 2019.

"The [pledging] Conference in Brussels on 12-14 March will be a critical marker in this regard", Ms. Ghelani said.

Yemen sanctions renewed

Earlier on Tuesday, the Security Council adopted a resolution renewing for a year, financial and travel ban sanctions against any actors who threaten the peace, security and stability of Yemen.

The Council also reaffirmed a 2015 arms embargo against the Houthi rebel group and forces loyal to the deceased former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and his son Ahmed Saleh.

In addition to renewing the sanctions, it extended the mandate of the Yemen Panel of Experts until March 2020, requesting that an update be presented to the Yemen Sanctions Committee by the end of July, and a final report to the Council by 28 January next year.

Last week, the Council issued a [press statement](#) stressing the “critical importance” of the parties’ implementing their commitments under the [Stockholm Agreement](#), and called for “the immediate implementation” of the first phase of the redeployment of forces.

[With 10 million Yemeni’s ‘one step away from famine’, donors pledge \\$2.6 billion](#)

Speaking on the sidelines of a pledging conference in Geneva, Mr. Guterres welcomed the generosity of Member States, who pledged 30 per cent more than during last year’s conference to raise life-saving funds for Yemen.

The UN chief also announced that the [World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#) has been able to reach the so-called Red Sea Mills food stores in the key port city of Hudaydah, where more than 50,000 tonnes of wheat – enough to feed 3.7 million people for a month – has been trapped for months, due to fighting between coalition forces backing the Government, and Houthi rebels who control the city and port.

The UN emergency food assistance agency confirmed the information but has yet to announce if its stocks are fit to eat, after months without access.

The highest contributors at the conference – at \$500 million each – were Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, supporters of the internationally recognized Government of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

“The donors have pledged 30 per cent more than last year to help address the dramatic humanitarian situation in Yemen,” the UN Secretary-General said. “From \$2 billion in the pledging conference of 2018, to U\$2.6 billion in the pledging conference of 2019. Several countries have naturally increased their contributions, but I think it is fair to say that the two most relevant elements in this increase came from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.”

Nearly four years since fighting escalated in Yemen, civilians continue to

suffer most.

“Tens of thousands of people have been killed or injured since the conflict escalated, many of them civilians,” Mr. Guterres said. “Many more have died from preventable diseases, exacerbated by malnutrition.” He noted that around 20 million are unable to “reliably feed themselves or their families”, adding that “almost 10 million are just one step away from famine.”

360,000 Yemeni children ‘fighting for their lives every day’

Highlighting the impact on the youngest Yemenis, the UN chief noted that “children did not start the war in Yemen, but they are paying the highest price. Some 360,000 children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition, fighting for their lives every day. One credible report puts the number of children under-five who have died of starvation, at more than 80,000.”

Conference co-host Sweden’s Foreign Minister Margaret Walstrom described a similarly dire situation in the country, which was already one of the poorest in the world before violence cut desperately needed imports of food, fuel and medicine.

Citing the latest food security data, which is known officially as the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) index, she said: “We must now face the shocking fact that 240,000 people, according to newly published IPC report, are in Category 5, meaning that they are facing starvation. Ten million people don’t know where to find their next meal, and as so often is the case, women and girls find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation...Women eat last and least.”

Speaking on behalf of second co-host Switzerland, Vice-President Simonetta Sommaruga confirmed that the Confederation’s near \$15 million contribution for 2019 would focus on the protection of civilians and sustainable support for Yemen:

“Our strategy for co-operation, which covers four years, is up to 54 million francs in total,” she said. “In Yemen, Switzerland is focusing on the areas where it has particular expertise such as the water sector, protection of the civilian population and food security.”

Referring to the UN-brokered ceasefire agreement signed between the Yemeni Government and Houthi opposition in December, Mr. Guterres acknowledged that significant challenges remained in implementing a withdrawal from the key Red Sea port of Hudaydah.



UN Photo/Jean Marc Ferre

Secretary-General António Guterres during press conference after on the High-Level Pledging Event for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen 26 February 2019.

“We had an important moment in Stockholm, in which it was possible to agree on a ceasefire in Hodeida and a number of other aspects,” he said. “We know that there is a hope for the end of the conflict, but we know that we are also facing many obstacles in the implementation of the [Stockholm Agreement](#).”

Mr. Guterres also rejected suggestions that the UN was ignoring human rights concerns in Yemen while the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE “and other countries”, provided military support for the Government of Yemen: “We are not disregarding the war that exists and the fact that a number of countries, not only the one that you mentioned, have had direct impact on that war,” he said.

“Obviously, what we want is to end the war and to end all the consequences of the war: the people that are killed, the people that suffer from all other kind of impacts. Independently of that, today we had the pledging conference to address humanitarian needs.”

The 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen requires \$4 billion to reach 21.4 million people who are barely surviving. More than half of the funding is destined for emergency food aid for 12 million people – a 50 per cent increase compared to last year.

'Informing is not a crime' UN chief calls for better protection of journalists, press freedom

Paying tribute to reporters around the world who “put their lives on the line” to tell important stories, UN chief António Guterres lamented on Monday that freedom of the press was increasingly “shrinking” worldwide, and called on decision-makers to better protect journalists and media workers.

“We’ve come a long way towards realizing freedom of expression, and other fundamental freedoms. The right to access to information is entrenched in law in over a hundred countries,” said Secretary-General Guterres during the event, which marked the 70th anniversary of the Geneva Association of UN Correspondents ([ACANU](#)). “But despite these advances, in recent years, civic space has been shrinking worldwide at an alarming rate”, he explained.

In just over a decade, more than 1,000 journalists have been killed while carrying out their work. In nine out of 10 cases, no one was held accountable. Last year alone, the UN agency advocating for freedom of the press, [UNESCO](#), reported that at least 99 journalists were killed and thousands more were attacked, harassed, detained or imprisoned on spurious charges, without due process. Women journalists are often at greater risk of being targeted, including through online threats of sexual violence.

The Secretary-General stressed that the vast majority of those detained and attacked are local journalists working in their own countries and communities, and that “most of the journalists and media workers killed, injured and detained were covering politics, crime, corruption and human rights,” not conflict.

Calling this state of affairs “outrageous,” the UN chief stated that “when journalists are targeted, societies as a whole pay a price” as “no democracy is complete without press freedom”.

“Journalism and the media are essential to peace, justice, sustainable development and human rights for all – and to the work of the United Nations,” he noted, paying tribute to reporters who “go to the most dangerous places on earth, to bring us important information, to give a voice to people who are being ignored and abused, and to hold the powerful to account”.

“In the two years since I became Secretary-General, the media has brought to light dramatic human suffering in conflict zones, major cases of corruption and nepotism, ethnic cleansing, premeditated sexual and gender-based violence and more, from every corner of the globe,” said Mr. Guterres. “In some cases, these reports were the basis for further investigations by independent observers and human rights reporters”.

The UN chief called on Governments and the international community to “protect journalists and media workers, and to create the conditions they need to do their essential work, and to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of attacks on them”.

The United Nations [General Assembly](#), the [Security Council](#) and the [Human Rights Council](#) have condemned attacks on journalists and expressed their support for media freedom through many different frameworks and processes, including the [UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#), a strategy to support the environment journalists need, to perform their vital work. In addition, the UN General Assembly has designated 2 November as the [International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists](#).

Deploing the increasing amount of misinformation in the digital age, Mr. Guterres went on to explain that the UN is stepping up its work in media and information literacy, to help people with the knowledge and skills they need to detect deliberate disinformation, counter hate-speech and defend media freedom. The organisation is also working on monitoring violence against journalists, “an important indicator for sustainable development”.

Finishing on what he termed “a positive note,” the UN chief said that the digital age is also full of opportunities.

“There are many clear signs that the public is starting to understand how important it is to look for information sources that are authoritative,” said Mr. Guterres. “The public will always need reliable information and analysis provided by free and diverse media,” he noted.

“Your work reminds us that truth never dies, and that our attachment to the fundamental right that is freedom of expressions must also never die... Informing is not a crime,” he concluded.