

UN Security Council urged to act against 'worst-case scenario' Syria's war-battered Idlib

A further escalation of violence in Syria's Idlib governorate could create a humanitarian emergency "at a scale not yet seen through this crisis," a senior United Nations aid official warned the Security Council on Tuesday.

John Ging, Director of Operations with the UN humanitarian affairs office, [OCHA](#), said recent intense aerial bombardment and shelling in Idlib and three other governorates in north-west Syria have resulted in death, damage and destruction, placing an even greater strain on aid workers and communities hosting displaced people.

"Humanitarian organizations are doing what they can with the resources available to them to sustain the current response and prepare for a possible further deterioration, thanks in large part to cross-border assistance and the generosity of our financial donors," Mr. Ging told the ambassadors.

"But a [worst-case scenario](#) in Idlib will overwhelm capacities and has the potential to create a humanitarian emergency at a scale not yet seen through this crisis."

Mr. Ging was speaking during the Council's monthly meeting on the Syrian conflict, now in its seventh year.

He said aid partners are finalizing a humanitarian plan to respond to the potential crisis in the north-west, which borders Turkey, in addition to carrying out their ongoing operations.

These organizations are providing a "critical lifeline" for scores of civilians, 680,000 of whom received food delivered from Turkey in July alone.

Mr. Ging reported that the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, was in Damascus that day to engage with the Government on how best to scale up humanitarian response across Syria.

Security Council engagement is also critical to preventing an escalation in Idlib and an ensuing humanitarian emergency, he added.

Quoting former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and former UN-Arab League envoy on the Syria crisis, who died earlier this month, he appealed for action.

"We call on the members of the Council to do all they can to ensure that we avoid this. In the words of Kofi Annan, 'We have the means and the capacity to deal with our problems, if only we can find the political will.'"

All sides in Yemen conflict could be guilty of war crimes, UN experts find

Parties on both sides of the conflict in Yemen have perpetrated – and continue to perpetrate – possible war crimes and other violations with a “total disregard” for the suffering of millions of civilians, United Nations-appointed human rights investigators said on Tuesday.

Created last year by the Geneva-based UN [Human Rights Council](#), the [Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen](#) analyzed violations and abuses of international human rights law, humanitarian law and criminal law, making more than a dozen visits to the war-torn country and neighbouring States.

“The Group of Eminent Experts has reasonable grounds to believe that the Governments of Yemen, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are responsible for human rights violations,” panel member Charles Garraway told reporters in Geneva.

Turning to the Houthi opposition forces, which he also described as “de facto authorities”, Mr. Garraway added that the UN panel also has “reasonable grounds to believe, that the de facto authorities are responsible, in the areas over which they exercise effective control, for human rights violations”.

The experts’ findings cover the situation in Yemen from September 2014 to June 2018.

The roots of the conflict date back to uprisings in 2011, but fighting escalated in March 2015, when an international coalition led by Saudi Arabia intervened militarily at the request of Yemen’s President against “Houthi-Saleh” opposition forces – a reference to the former Yemen President, Ali Abdallah Saleh.

In recent years, the conflict has been marked by repeated airstrikes on public spaces including market places, funerals, civilian boats, detention facilities and hospitals.

Just last week, an airstrike in opposition-held Hudaydah governorate, in western Yemen, killed at least 26 children and four women.

The report notes that coalition airstrikes have caused most direct civilian casualties, giving the UN panel “reasonable grounds” to believe that the attacks overstepped key war crimes thresholds.

“Individuals in the Government of Yemen and the coalition, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, may have conducted attacks in violation

of the principles of distinction, proportionality and/or proportions, which may amount to war crimes,” Mr. Garraway said, adding that a confidential list of names would be handed over to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)), pending further investigations.

“More information is needed on some incidents documented by the Group of Experts to establish responsibility,” the UN panel said in a statement, before calling on the Human Rights Council to renew its mandate when it meets next month.

“There is little evidence of any attempt by parties to the conflict to [minimize civilian casualties](#). I call on them to prioritize human dignity in this forgotten conflict,” said Kamel Jendoubi, chairperson of the Group.

According to UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)), since March 2015 up to 23 August 2018, 6,660 civilians were killed and 10,563 injured; however, the real figures are likely to be significantly higher.

Despite official meetings with coalition officials in Riyadh and Oman, Mr. Garraway said that insufficient information had been provided about how airstrikes are planned and carried out.

“If there are systemic flaws in the targeting process, causing civilian casualties beyond what one would expect, then that process needs to be examined,” he said. “And where there are flaws they need to be addressed and amended. We have seen no sign that there has been any attempt to do that.”

According to the UN panel, more than 22 million people remain in need inside Yemen; almost all of them are women and children.

Even before the conflict, Yemen was one of the poorest countries on earth, importing almost all of its food, fuel and medicines. In November 2017, civilians were weakened further by a “total blockade on all the borders of Yemen, preventing all humanitarian aid and commercial trade, including food and fuel, from entering the country”, the Group of Experts’ report noted, adding that restrictions continued into June.

The Houthi opposition’s role in causing “the majority” of reported civilian casualties from shelling and restricting food and aid access is also highlighted, particularly to civilian populations in Taiz, a strategically important city located between Sana’a and the port cities of Aden and Hudaydah.

[International tourism arrivals hit](#)

record high in 2017, UN agency reports

The number of people travelling abroad has hit its highest level since 2010, according to data from the Tourism Organization ([UNWTO](#)), a specialized agency of the United Nations.

The latest edition of its [Tourism Highlights](#), published on Monday, shows international arrivals reached 1.323 million last year.

The figure represents an 84 million increase over 2016, and a new record, with the sector also recording “uninterrupted growth” in arrivals for eight consecutive years.

Europe and Africa led the regions with increases in arrivals, with growth of eight per cent and nine per cent, respectively.

WTO added that tourism is the world’s third largest export category, earning \$1.3 trillion in receipts in 2017: an increase of five per cent.

Meanwhile, total exports from international tourism stood at \$1.6 trillion, or an average of \$4 billion a day: that is, seven per cent of the world’s exports.

“These strong 2017 results were driven by sustained travel demand for destinations across all world regions, including a firm recovery by those that have suffered from security challenges in recent years,” WTO said in a press release.

“Strong outbound demand from virtually all source markets, including rebounds from major emerging economies Brazil and the Russian Federation, benefited both advanced and emerging destinations.”

Seven of the 10 top tourism destinations are also leaders worldwide in both international tourist arrivals and international tourism receipts: China, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

China also was responsible for generating nearly one-fifth of the world’s total tourism spending in 2017. Citizens of the world’s most populous country spent \$258 billion on international travel last year.

WTO added that so far, 2018 shows international tourism continues to grow, “with a year-on-year increase of 6% in arrivals between January and April.”

Respect for fundamental rights and freedoms key for peaceful polls in DRC – UN mission chief

Confidence and consensus around key issues are still required ahead of this year's presidential and legislative elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Security Council heard on Monday.

Leila Zerrougui, head of the UN Stabilization Mission in the country, known by its French acronym, [MONUSCO](#), briefed ambassadors on the latest developments related to the December vote, which will mark the first peaceful transfer of power in the country.

However, key concerns persist, including disputes over the eligibility of candidates, the use of voting machines, women's participation, targeting of political activists and human rights defenders, insecurity, and what Ms. Zerrougui [called](#) "the perceived credibility" of the electoral process.

"It is also imperative that respect for fundamental rights and freedoms is assured throughout the territory of the DRC in a consistent manner, so that all Congolese citizens can participate freely and fairly in all stages of the electoral process moving forward," she said, speaking via videoconference from the capital, Kinshasa.

"A failure to allow for political engagement and participation as foreseen by the Congolese constitution, could jeopardize the peaceful nature and the credibility of the polls."

MONUSCO is providing technical support for the elections, which are set to take place on 23 December. While the DRC authorities have not requested external logistical or financial support, Ms. Zerrougui underscored her mission's readiness to assist.

The DRC ranks among the world's largest countries, and nearly 20,000 people have registered as candidates in the provincial elections, while more than 15,220 will take part in the legislative race.

Ms. Zerrougui reported that incumbent Joseph Kabila will not be in the running, having "respected his commitment not to be a candidate". Though first elected in 2006, President Kabila has been in power since 2001, following the assassination of his father, Laurent-Desire Kabila.

Nineteen men will vie for the presidency as the sole woman candidate, Marie-Josée Ifoku, was deemed unsuitable to stand. Three former presidents, as well as former vice-president and ex-rebel leader [Jean-Pierre Bemba](#), were also among the six persons excluded from taking part in the race.

Overall, women account for roughly 12 per cent of those seeking office in the

DRC, a source of concern for Solange Lwashiga Furaha, spokesperson for the local civil society group *Rien Sans les Femmes* (Nothing Without Women), which has been advocating for gender equality at all levels of decision-making.

“The fact that there is less than 15 per cent of women is a significant issue,” she said, speaking alongside the UN mission chief.

“Most of society in DRC are still reticent about women being able to vote. There is lack of resources within the electoral campaigns, there is lack of resources to encourage voters to go out and vote for women, and there are also problems surrounding the voting machines.”

The Security Council also heard from Monseigneur Marcel Utembi, president of the National Episcopal Conference of the Congo (CENCO), who praised the “peaceful climate” in which the registration of candidates took place.

CENCO facilitated a December 2016 agreement that allowed President Kabila to stay in power beyond the end of his second term, which would have expired at the end of that year.

Speaking from Kisangani, Monseigneur Utembi listed recommendations for the authorities, including taking measures to reduce tensions in the wake of the vote.

“The credibility of elections depends to a great extent on the observation of these elections by national and international groups who have an interest in doing so,” he said.

“CENCO wishes to contribute to observation of the next elections, and we plan to use more than 1,000 observers over the long-term, and more than 40,000 over the short-term. It is counting on the support of the Independent Electoral Commission to accredit all of these observers, who will be well-trained, and to also give them the opportunity to also carry out this important work, which will undoubtedly contribute to reducing tensions in the post-electoral climate.”

Lack of access to clean water, toilets puts children's education at risk, says UN

Millions of children are going to school without basic hygiene facilities, and the goal of universal access to basic water, sanitation and hygiene remains “a huge challenge,” the United Nations warned on Monday

A new joint UN agency study, [Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools: 2018 Global Baseline Report](#), says that good hygiene facilities in schools provide the basis of a healthy learning environment, and that girls are more likely to attend when they are on their period.

Moreover, children who pick up good hygiene habits at school can reinforce positive life-long behaviours in their homes and communities, says the report.

However, millions of children are going to school without basic hygiene facilities: over 30 per cent of schools worldwide do not provide safe drinking water; a third of schools do not provide the most basic of toilet facilities (such as septic tank, pit latrines or composting toilets); and nearly 900 million children go to schools with no handwashing facilities with soap and water.

The annual report is produced by the [World Health Organization/UN Children's Fund Joint Monitoring Programme](#), or JMP, which has been monitoring global progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene since 1990.

It looks at the progress made towards reaching the targets of two of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs): [Goal 6](#) (Clean water and sanitation), and [Goal 4](#) (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all).

Commenting on the report, Kelly Ann Naylor, Global Chief of [Water, Sanitation and Hygiene at UNICEF](#), said that "If education is the key to helping children escape poverty, access to water and sanitation is key to helping children safely maximize their education. To neglect this is to be careless with the well-being and health of children,"

Universal access to basic water, sanitation and hygiene in schools is part of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), but achieving this ambitious target presents a huge challenge. The JMP has designed tools to make it easier to track progress across countries, towards a basic level of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene service.