

In Tanzania visit, UNHCR official stresses freedom of choice is crucial for refugee returns

Refugees should never be pressured to decide if they should return to their home countries, a senior UN official has said.

Volker Türk, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection with the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), on Thursday completed a four-day visit to Tanzania, which is hosting more than 340,000 refugees and asylum-seekers.

“Refugees need to have a meaningful choice about whether they wish to return based on the facts and realities on the ground. There should not be any direct or indirect pressure exercised on refugees to choose whether to return,” he said, according to a press release, which stated that the Government of Tanzania has assured the agency that the decision to return would be up to refugees themselves.



UNHCR Tanzania/Abdul Khalif

Deputy High commissioner for UNHCR, Volker Türk, in Nduta camp in Tanzania.

Mr. Türk met with the Tanzanian authorities and partners to discuss protection challenges and solutions for the refugees and asylum seekers who have found shelter in the country having fled conflict and persecution in their homelands.

The majority are from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with nearly 90 per cent living in three camps in the Kigoma region, located in the west.

The UN official also visited the Nduta Refugee Camp where he met with residents. He also witnessed the voluntary return process for Burundian refugees. So far, more than 42,000 Burundians have returned home, according to UNHCR.

Mr. Türk also held a meeting with UNHCR representatives who are working in countries hosting Burundi refugees, who total around 400,000.

UNHCR said the Burundi situation is one of the world's most underfunded humanitarian crises, with a \$391 million appeal only 12 per cent funded.

Mr. Türk called on the international community to address what he called "this forgotten situation".

[Terror attacks strike people 'from all walks of life, the UN included'](#)

The terrorist attack on UN headquarters in Iraq in 2003 that claimed the lives of 22 people should serve as a reminder that the organization's locally recruited staff often face the greatest dangers in the world's most hostile places, amid increasing attacks on humanitarians, the head of the United Nations in Geneva said on Thursday.

Speaking just ahead of the 15th anniversary of the Baghdad atrocity, at the UN's main [World Humanitarian Day event](#) in the Swiss city, Michael Møller said that for the fifth year in a row, more than 100 humanitarians have lost their lives while at work.

"That horrible afternoon in Iraq does not stand in isolation," he noted. "It was followed by other attacks against the United Nations. At the end of 2007 we lost 17 colleagues in Algiers. Last year alone, 148 peacekeepers and 139 humanitarian workers were killed."

Turning to the attack in Baghdad, which led to the [UN General Assembly's](#) decision in 2008 to create an annual day of remembrance for humanitarian workers on 19 August, Mr. Møller recalled UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's description of those who were killed as "the best of the best, the most committed of the committed, the hope of the UN until their lives were cut short".

The victims of the attack were also the "hope and the future" of the organization, he said, adding that "our blue flag only flies because committed people wave it".



UN Geneva/Violaine Martin

Michael Møller, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva speaking at the World Humanitarian Day event at Palais des Nations, Geneva.

The UN's top official in Geneva also noted that while many of the victims were international staff, it is the organization's local workers who "are always faced with more serious situations".

"When international staff leave following violent incidents, local staff often remain to continue the UN's work in the world's most dangerous places," Mr. Møller added.

His comments echoed a video message by [UN Secretary-General](#) António Guterres, who paid tribute to those who died "in the service of peace, development and human rights" in the attack on the Canal Hotel attack in Baghdad 15 years ago.

Their loss was not in vain, the UN chief insisted. Among the dead was [Sergio Vieira de Mello](#), who in addition to serving as the UN's top official in Iraq, was UN High Commissioner for [Human Rights](#).

"I was always impressed by the way he embodied UN values and our spirit of service," Mr Guterres said, sentiments shared by Master of Ceremonies on Thursday, Ahmad Fawzi, who was Mr. de Mello's spokesperson in Iraq, and avoided the blast after being recalled temporarily to London shortly before the attack.

"We have been targeted again and again and again," Fawzi said, noting that terror attacks had claimed thousands of lives all around the world "from all walks of life, the UN included".



UN Geneva/Violaine Martin

Kahtan Al-Orfali, father of Omar Kahtan Mohamed Al-Orfali, victim of the 19 August 2003 terrorist attack against the United Nations Mission in Baghdad, speaking at the World Humanitarian Day event at Palais des Nations, Geneva.

Among the other speakers at the event in Geneva was Khatan al-Orfali, whose son Omar was killed in the Baghdad attack while he was working for international aid organization Christian Children's Fund of Canada.

In a moving speech in which Mr al-Orfali said that his only son's wish had been to help others, and described the young man's joy at finding a job, he appealed for fresh information about the circumstances surrounding the attack.

"Until today we do not know how this vicious crime was committed so quickly and so easily," he said. "We still do not know who allowed the car bomb through."

And although the Canal hotel that served as the UN's headquarters was heavily protected, "we still don't know who gave the perpetrators the intel", Mr al-Orfali said, or "who financed them, what were the results of the investigation, results that we are entitled to know."

Despite the pain of his loss, and in a message of hope to the organization, he made a final appeal to the UN, "to remind this great organization that the peoples of the world still believe in the UN's humanitarian role. We expect a lot from the UN and hope it will not let us down."

UN experts cite 'possible exploitation' of workers hired to clean up toxic Japanese nuclear plant

A group of United Nations rights experts are urging the Japanese government to urgently protect tens of thousands of workers hired to help decontaminate the Fukushima nuclear plant, who are reportedly being exploited and exposed to toxic nuclear radiation.

"Workers hired to decontaminate Fukushima reportedly include migrant workers, asylum seekers and people who are homeless," said the three UN Special Rapporteurs.

"We are deeply concerned about possible exploitation by deception regarding the risks of exposure to radiation, possible coercion into accepting hazardous working conditions because of economic hardships, and the adequacy of training and protective measures," they added.

An [8.9 magnitude](#) earthquake hit Japan in March 2011, which was followed by a tsunami that inundated everything along the eastern coastline around Fukushima Prefecture.

Subsequently, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was informed of an explosion at one of the reactors in the [Fukushima Daiichi](#) nuclear power plant that leaked [radioactive material](#). Three of the reactors failed, and hundreds of thousands were evacuated from the area.

Seven years after the nuclear meltdown, contamination and exposure to radiation remain a hazard for workers trying to make the area safe.

"We are equally concerned about the impact that exposure to radiation may have on their physical and mental health," the experts asserted.

Since that time, tens of thousands of workers have been recruited under a decontamination programme.

Workers hired to decontaminate Fukushima reportedly include migrant workers, asylum seekers and people who are homeless – *UN Special Rapporteurs*.

Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare indicated on its website that 46,386 workers were employed at Fukushima during 2016; and the Radiation Worker Central Registration Centre of Japan showed that as many as 76,951 decontamination workers were hired in the five-year period up to 2016.

"The people most at risk of exposure to toxic substances are those most

vulnerable to exploitation: the poor, children and women, migrant workers, people with disabilities and older workers,” the experts continued. “They are often exposed to a myriad of human rights abuses, forced to make the abhorrent choice between their health and income, and their plight is invisible to most consumers and policymakers with the power to change it.”

The UN rights experts have engaged in [a dialogue with the Government since last year](#), taking into account a reply to their most recent concerns, including “detailed reports” flagging that decontamination contracts were granted without relevant experience.

“These arrangements, together with the use of brokers to recruit a considerable number of the workers, may have created favourable conditions for the abuse and violation of workers’ rights,” the UN experts said.

As part of its Universal Periodic Review, Japan recently agreed to follow-up on a recommendation to restore pre-radiation levels to protect the health of pregnant women and children.

The experts offered their services on how to address the ongoing issue of workers exposed to toxic radiation.

In September, one of the UN experts, Baskut Tuncak, who covers [environmental management and disposal of hazardous substances](#), will present a report to the UN Human Rights Council, calling on States and employers to strengthen protection for workers from exposure to toxic substances.

The two other UN experts in discussion with the Japanese Government are Urmila Bhoola, [Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery](#), and Dainius Puras, who champions [the right to physical and mental health](#).

[‘Passport to dignity’ that schools represent may expire fast, without emergency funding warns UN Palestine refugee agency](#)

A lack of funds means that the new school term for over half a million Palestinian students could be cut short after just one month, says [UNRWA](#), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees.

The agency’s 711 schools, providing free basic education for Palestinian refugee children in the West Bank – including East Jerusalem – Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria – will open as planned in September.

UNRWA operations have been hit hard by the United States decision at the beginning of the year to cut back its funding of the Agency by around \$300 million. It constituted the largest ever reduction in funding in UNRWA's history, leading to a severe financial crisis which threatened the existence of many of its critical assistance programmes; forcing cutbacks to its cash-for-work activities; and limiting the provision of assistance to only the most vulnerable.

For Palestinians an education is a passport to dignity. This is not a good outcome, but it's the best possible outcome – *Chris Gunness, UNRWA*

Since then, UNRWA has mobilised \$238 million of additional funding from around the globe, but the money received so far only covers the Agency's services until the end of September. Another \$217 million is still needed to ensure that the schools stay open until the end of the year.

Speaking to UN News on Thursday, UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness said that, despite the shortfall, the Agency felt obliged to open the schools on time: "For Palestinians an education is a passport to dignity. This is not a good outcome, but it's the best possible outcome because the alternative would have been terrible, particularly for the next generation of Palestine refugees," he said.

"We are doing everything in our power to work with the donor community to ensure that we can implement and honour our historic mandate and mission," added Mr. Gunness.

A meeting of UNRWA's Advisory Commission in Amman, Jordan, on Thursday was called to discuss ways to secure the resources needed to keep the schools running.

Pierre Krähenbühl, Commissioner-General of the Agency, underlined the risks to regional stability posed by school closures and the importance of providing schooling for affected children, saying that "it is crucial to protect the fundamental right to education for Palestine refugee girls and boys, and the community's unwavering attachment to learning and the development of skills."

Mr Krähenbühl called on Member States that have pledged funds, to transfer them as soon as possible, and for others to consider joining the effort to preserve UNRWA's vital services to a very anxious Palestine Refugee community.

UN condemns 'heinous' suicide attack on education centre in Afghanistan

The perpetrators of Wednesday's "heinous" suicide bombing that killed students at an education centre in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, must be brought to justice, the UN Secretary-General has said.

Nearly 50 people were killed in the attack which António Guterres has condemned in the strongest terms, according to a statement issued on Thursday by his spokesman.

Most were teenagers studying for university entrance exams.

"Those responsible for this heinous attack must be held accountable. The targeting of civilians, in particular children, is unacceptable," the statement said.

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The [Security Council](#) has joined Mr. Guterres in expressing sympathy to the families of the victims of what they described as "the heinous and cowardly terrorist attack."

The 15 ambassadors reaffirmed that any acts of terrorism are criminal and unjustifiable, regardless of motivation.

Meanwhile, the Secretary-General is also urging warring parties in Afghanistan to step up efforts towards achieving peace following deadly fighting in Ghazni.

António Guterres conveyed his condolences to families who have suffered from attacks by the Taliban, which launched an assault on the eastern city on Friday.

At least 400 people have been killed in the siege, around a quarter of them civilians, according to media reports. The UN chief stated that the targeting of civilians and of civilian facilities are clear violations of international humanitarian law.

He stressed the "urgent need" for an immediate ceasefire and the opening of talks between the sides to negotiate a sustainable peace.

"The warring parties must do everything feasible to ensure that no civilians are further killed or injured by the fighting, and must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian assistance so that it can reach

Ghazni," he added, according to a statement issued late on Wednesday by his spokesman.

The Secretary-General also underlined that there is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, and called for a peaceful settlement to the fighting "in the interest of building a more stable and prosperous future for all Afghans."