

[Afghanistan: top UN official denounces 'extreme' suffering of civilians in Ghazni](#)

With the death toll rising after days of intense fighting for Afghanistan's second most populous city, Ghazni, the Head of the United Nations mission in the country ([UNAMA](#)) said on Wednesday that the situation was "unacceptable" and called on warring parties to lay down their arms and seek a political solution to the conflict.

"The Taliban's attack against Ghazni city, and the subsequent fighting in densely populated urban spaces, has again caused terrible suffering to civilians caught in the conflict," said [Tadamichi Yamamoto](#), in a [statement](#).

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) ([OCHA](#)), when the fighting began, [about 270,000 residents](#) were trapped in the city, which is located about 150 km south-west of Afghanistan's capital Kabul. Many seem to have fled the town, according to sources on the ground.

In five days of hostilities, about 150 civilians may have been killed in the fighting, along with hundreds of Government and Taliban fighters.

The fighting in Ghazni must stop and the fighting in Afghanistan must stop – *Tadamichi Yamamoto*

Although hostilities reportedly subsided in the city by Monday evening, reliable sources on the ground are reporting that Ghazni Public Hospital continues to be "overwhelmed by a continuous influx" of injured members of the government forces, Taliban fighters and civilians.

From the humanitarian perspective, the situation in Ghazni "remains particularly grim", UN Special Representative Yamamoto explained. "The fighting has led to electricity outages along with water and food shortages," he noted, adding that "communication networks and media outlets have been shuttered, and roads remain blocked, preventing freedom of movement for families seeking safety."

"Humanitarian actors ready and willing to supply desperately needed assistance must be given explicit, public and absolute guarantees by all parties to the conflict that they will be allowed to operate safely, without hindrance or any attempts to interfere with distribution carried out under humanitarian principles," he stated.

In July, UNAMA highlighted the tragic toll that the conflict has had on Afghans in 2018, as the first half of the year was the deadliest for civilians since UNAMA began documenting civilian casualties in 2009. This,

despite the unprecedented but brief ceasefire between the Government and the Taliban in mid-June to mark the end of Ramadan, which was the first one to be honored in nearly 20 years of conflict.

“Equally unacceptable”, added Mr. Yamamoto, is that the fighting has “exacerbated deep-rooted wounds dividing Afghan communities at a time when cohesion is more crucial than ever before”.

The UNAMA chief appealed to all warring parties and the international community to help bring hostilities to an end. “The fighting in Ghazni must stop and the fighting in Afghanistan must stop”, he said, stressing that “the United Nations continues to maintain that there can be no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan”.

Referring to the June ceasefire, the Special Representative said that “it illustrated to all Afghans, especially those too young to have known anything but war, what peace looks like.”

He added that the UN “stands ready to support any endeavours that would advance” an Afghan-led negotiated settlement. “Confidence-building steps that immediately reduce violence are crucial, and talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban are necessary to identify and expand common ground”.

INTERVIEW: ‘Defend the people, not the States’, says outgoing UN human rights chief

His appointment by the [Secretary-General](#) back in 2014 was a landmark: he became the first Asian, Muslim and Arab ever to hold the post.

Before that, Zeid had already enjoyed a long and distinguished career, both at the UN and as a Jordanian diplomat. He served his country in several capacities, notably as Ambassador to the United States, and Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, with a stint as President of the [Security Council](#) in January 2014.

Governments are more than capable of defending themselves. It’s not my job to defend them. I have to defend civil society, vulnerable groups, the marginalized, the oppressed.

Throughout his career, Zeid has demonstrated a commitment to international law, playing a major role in the establishment of the [International Criminal](#)

[Court](#), as the first President of the Assembly of States Parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court – turning the court from an idea into a reality – and, eight years later, overseeing the legal definition of the crime of aggression and the court’s jurisdiction over it.

In his last major interview with *UN News*, the UN human rights chief tells us that the “real pressure on this job comes from the victims and those who suffer and expect a great deal from us.”

“Governments are more than capable of defending themselves. It’s not my job to defend them. I have to defend civil society, vulnerable groups, the marginalized, the oppressed. Those are the people that we, in our office, need to represent,” he adds, noting that “oppression is making a comeback”.

When asked about whether his view of the UN and what it can achieve has diminished during his time spent speaking out loudly in defence of the abused and defenceless over the past four years, he says:

“It’s very difficult to tolerate abuse of the UN when I keep thinking of the heroic things that people do in the field, whether the humanitarian actors or humanitarian personnel, my human rights people, the people who are monitoring or observing. And I take my hat off to them. I mean, they are the UN that I will cherish and remember.”

UN News: When you compare the human rights landscape today to when you took over the UN human rights office back in 2014, what are the key differences that you see?

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein: When I took over, it coincided with the terrible videos put online by Daesh, or ISIS, which stoked a great deal of fear and horror. And we began to see a sort of a deepening of the crisis in Syria and in Iraq. And this then folded into two things:

One, a great determination to embark on counter-terrorism strategies, which we felt were, in part, excessive in certain respects. Every country has an obligation to defend its people, and the work of terrorism is odious and appalling and needs to be condemned and faced. But whenever there is excessive action, you don’t just turn one person against the State, you turn the whole family against the State. Ten or maybe more members could end up moving in the direction of the extremists.

And then, the migration debates, and the strengthening of the demagogues and those who made hay out of what was happening in Europe for political profit. As each year passed, we began to see a more intense pressure on the human rights agenda.

UN News: You have been very outspoken and you’ve called out governments and individual leaders around the world who have abused human rights. Do you see that as the most important role for the UN human rights chief?

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein: Yes. At the Human Rights High Commission, you’re part of the UN, but also part of the human rights movement and both are equally important. As I said on earlier occasions, governments are more than capable

of defending themselves. It's not my job to defend them. I have to defend civil society, vulnerable groups, the marginalized, the oppressed. Those are the people that we, in our office, need to represent.

I always felt that that is the principle task: we provide technical assistance, we collect information, we go public on it. But in overall terms, the central duty for us is to defend the rights of those most marginalized and those that need it.

UN News: what if you come under pressure to stay silent?

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein: Well, the interesting thing is that the pressure on this particular job doesn't really come very much from the governments. They all attack the office because we criticize all of them, but we also point to areas where there is improvement, and I sometimes will praise the government for doing the right thing.

The real pressure on this job comes from the victims and those who suffer and expect a great deal from us. That's the pressure that I think matters most in terms of the need to do the right thing.



UNSMIL/Abel Kavanagh

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, during an official mission to Libya. Tripoli, Libya, 10 October, 2017.

UN News: Have there been times, therefore, when you've had to compromise a bit too much and maybe even let rights campaigners down in some way?

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein: No, not in that sense because I think I've been outspoken enough and I think I broke new ground when it came to High Commissioners. I can tell you in almost every meeting I sit with governments and I say things that I know they would never have heard before from someone in the UN.

No, the enormity of the suffering of people creates a feeling of inadequacy that, no matter what I do –an interview like this, a press conference, a report – it's not going to restore a disappeared son or daughter to his or her mother. I know it won't end the practice of torture immediately. I know that the residents in an IDP [Internally Displaced Peoples] camp, are not going to next day be moved into something more improved.

And that feeling is the pressure that I'm speaking about. It's this sort of feeling that no matter what I do, it's unequal to the colossal challenge that stands before us.

UN News: Have there been times when you thought it best to use quiet diplomacy to work behind the scenes?

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein: We're always trying. We're always trying to use quiet diplomacy. I mean, we're constantly meeting with governments, and I send letters, and we conduct phone calls.

But on occasion we make a determination that we've tried these tracks, it hasn't worked, and that I'm going to go public. Sometimes, I asked my spokesperson to do it; sometimes, I ask my regional office to do it; and other times, I'll do it myself. But it's carefully thought through.

There was one foreign minister, for example, I needed to speak to. We were planning to send a technical mission to his country and, for almost a year, he avoided me. I saw him here in the GA [General Assembly] and he said, "Yes, yes, yes," and then just avoided me. So then, we got a message to him that I'm going to go public tomorrow, and he was on the phone right away.

And the lesson learned was that if you don't sometimes threaten to speak out, you don't grab their attention. And I would rather err on the speaking out part than staying silent.

I first worked with the UN in 1994, 1995 in the former Yugoslavia. And I saw what catastrophes silence can bring. And I think from that point on, I was determined not to be silent when the evidence before us was presented.

UN News: What's touched you most personally in the job? What have been those moments, the encounters with people that have meant the most to you?

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein: There have been many. I think it's very hard to listen to the suffering of people. One of the times was when I went to the Ilopango detention centre in El Salvador. [Four young women] had been sentenced to 30 years in prison. They claimed these were obstetric emergencies: miscarriages. The State claimed that these were terminations of pregnancy.

When I sat with them – I had with me a full team, my office, assistants and interpreters – I think within the space of about 10 minutes we were all weeping; we were in tears because their suffering was so extreme. One of them was telling us how her foetus was on the ground and rather than take her to a hospital, they handcuffed her and took her to prison. And I thought the cruelty, the capacity for human cruelty is amazing.

I saw the president after that and I said, “Why is it that all these girls are poor? Every single one of them?” It’s as if it’s only the poor that face these sorts of conditions. This is the point that really strikes home that time and again: the poor suffer all the consequences. And that for me was a moment that will always remain with me. And there have been quite a few like that.



OHCHR

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, meeting women during a visit to the Panzi hospital, in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, July 2016.

UN News: Is there a specific moment that stands out as being the most difficult or perhaps even the most consequential during your tenure?

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein: It’s all been difficult. When you’re defending the rights of people, and there’s so much pressure exerted upon you from this deep inner need or desire to help them, it’s all quite tough.

But I take inspiration from the amazing human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, activists in so many countries who do amazing, brave things to highlight the plight of others; to defend the rights of others. Whatever I may want to complain about day in, day out, it’s nothing compared to the pressure that these people face, confront, overcome – often they have no fear.

These are the real leaders; these are the people that inspire. Not many of the politicians who claim to be leaders and are weak and self-serving, and are leaders in name only. The real leaders are the ones who, against all odds, will do the right thing and then often pay a price for it, and be detained for it.

And I think that’s what keeps us fuelled and working on their behalf.

Again, the point to be made is that, yes, we are part of the UN, but we're also part of a human rights movement. The UN is creating order amongst States: with us, we look at the heart of the relationship between the governing and the governed and so, of course, it's going to be sensitive.

People have their rights, the States have their obligations, their commitments. And we have to defend the people.

UN News: Where do you think you've made the biggest difference, personally? And have you made mistakes?

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein: I don't know. The question ought to be addressed to civil society, victims' groups, human rights defenders. And if they said, "Zeid has done a good job," I'd be very content with that. If they said, "Zeid could have done better," I'd have to learn to live with it and accept it. It's really for them to quantify the extent to which I have achieved something or whether they think that I was able to undertake my responsibilities in the right manner.

UN News: you said that being High Commissioner for Human Rights is a unique job within the UN, and you seem to have followed a fairly similar path to your predecessors in making yourself unpopular with governments. Do you want to see your successor sticking to that path?

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein: The fundamental point that I mentioned earlier is that the States can defend themselves. Our job is not to defend the States, and the law is there for the protection of the weak, not in defence of the strong.

And so, we look at the law, we look at the obligations of States, and our job is to defend the individual victims, vulnerable communities, marginalized communities, or oppressed communities.

Oppression is making a comeback. Repression is fashionable again.

And so, I don't believe anyone holding this position – even if they felt differently – can ultimately conduct business in a manner that departs too radically from the way that I, or my predecessors, have done it. If you try to depart, it will be extremely unpleasant for you because you're going to hear it from the very people who are suffering. And there can be nothing that will tear at your conscience more, if you abandoned them. So, my belief is that the job defines the conduct.



UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferre

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, at the 38th Regular Session of the Human Rights Council. 18 June 2018.

UN News: Is there any other key advice you'd give?

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein: I would always say be in good health because it is a demanding job, and it is taxing. Whoever takes this job has to be ready for it. Some jobs in the UN system are viewed as sinecures, retirement posts for national officials. This is not one of them. This requires complete commitment.

UN News: For you, where to next? And as a seasoned ex-diplomat with so much UN experience, how has doing this job changed your view of the world?

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein: I don't know, maybe I'll be a journalist!

I've been away from my family; I need to spend time with them and then I'll look and see what new direction I'd want to take myself. But I need a rest as well.

UN News: having walked this tightrope, do you feel perhaps a little more appreciative of what the UN does, or perhaps a little less?

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein: No, if I were to, in the future, think of the UN, I would think of the moments in the field where I see the UN doing amazing things.

It's very difficult to tolerate abuse of the UN when I keep thinking of the heroic things that people do in the field, whether they be humanitarian personnel, my human rights people, the people who are monitoring, observing, with some threat to themselves: I take my hat off to them. They are the UN that I will cherish and remember.

To the outside world, the jargon, the terminology, seems inaccessible. I think that the work that UN personnel do in the field is much more understandable. That's how I entered the UN, in the field, and that's how I got to know it. And I think that's where the UN has enormous impact and needs to continue to make the investment and do the right thing.

And you can also hear Zeid articulating his passion for international justice in a recent [UN News podcast](#) in which he interviewed Ben Ferencz who, at 99 years of age, is the last surviving prosecutor of the post-war Nuremberg military tribunals and was one of the leading campaigners for an international court.

[Caspian Sea deal an invaluable step towards easing regional tensions, says UN Chief](#)

António Guterres, the [UN Secretary-General](#), has welcomed the historic signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, which took place on Sunday, marked by a ceremony which brought together the leaders of the five countries bordering its coastline.

The region has been a subject of dispute, ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Up until that time, the Caspian – the largest enclosed body of water on earth – was shared by just two states, the USSR and Iran.

Today, Iran has to share it with Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, all of which have different, and divergent, interests as far as the sea is concerned. Furthermore, one major sticking point has been whether to define the Caspian as a lake (which would mean it is divided equally between all five countries), or a sea (and therefore governed by the [United Nations Law of the Sea](#)).

A UN Spokesperson said that the Secretary-General hailed the document as a demonstration of the importance of regional cooperation, vital for maintaining international peace and security, and congratulated the five signatory countries for their landmark achievement.

The spokesperson added that the Secretary-General believes the Convention should prove invaluable in regulating a wide range of longstanding issues among the Caspian Sea littoral States, and is a significant step in the easing of regional tensions.

Whilst many issues are a long way from being resolved, the accord reportedly takes a compromise approach, dividing the seabed into territorial zones (as

is the norm with a lake) and the surface as international water (as is the norm for an officially designated sea). It is believed that further talks will be needed to deal with a number of outstanding issues.

[Multilateralism: The only path to address the world's troubles, signals Guterres](#)

As the world's problems grow, multilateralism represents to best path to meet the challenges that lie ahead, said United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on Tuesday, launching his annual report.

The [Report of the Secretary-General](#) on the Work of the Organization for 2018, also tracks the progress made over the last year in maintaining peace and security, protecting human rights, and promoting sustainable development.

"I started my tenure calling for 2017 to be a year of peace, yet peace remains elusive," said the UN chief in the report's introduction, noting that since January last year "conflicts have deepened, with grave violations of human rights and humanitarian law; inequality has risen, intolerance has spread, discrimination against women remains entrenched and the impacts of climate change continue to accelerate."

"We need unity and courage in setting the world on track towards a better future," stressed Mr. Guterres, crediting the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) for generating coordinated efforts by Member States and civil society to "alleviate poverty and build peaceful, prosperous and inclusive societies."

Wide-ranging reform

The most comprehensive reform of the UN development system in decades already underway, led by Mr. Guterres and his deputy, [Amina Mohammed](#), aims to strengthen the Organization's capacity to support Member States in achieving the 17 SDGs.

While the report points to gains, such as increased labour productivity, access to electricity and strengthened internet governance, it also illustrates that progress has been uneven and too slow to meet the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development Goals within the given time frame.

We need unity and courage in setting the world on track – *UN*

Secretary-General

For example, in 2015, three out of 10 people did not have access to safe drinking water, and 60 per cent lacked safe sanitation. Moreover conflicts, disasters and climate change are also adversely affecting populations.

The report underlines the importance of building stronger multilateral partnerships with Member States; regional and international organizations; and civil society; to “find solutions to global problems that no nation alone can resolve.”

Although the 2018 [High-Level Political Forum](#) on Sustainable Development of 2018 reflected some positive initiatives, it also showed the urgent need to step up efforts in areas such as energy cooperation, water and terrestrial ecosystems.

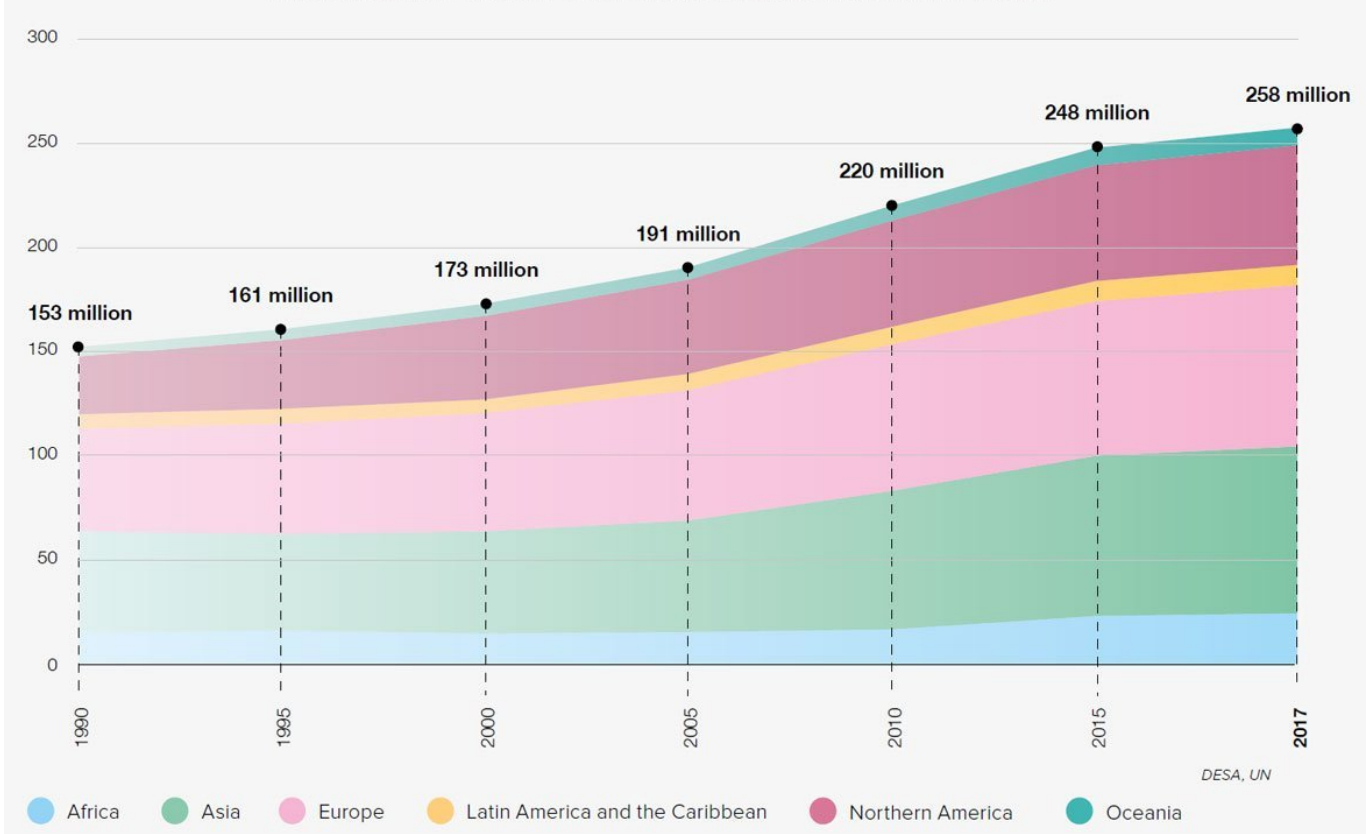
According to the report, “partnerships are key to achieving the SDGs” – and as of June, 3,834 partnerships had been registered with the [Partnerships for the SDGs](#) online platform from different sectors across all the 17 goals.

With regard to technology, last October a joint meeting of the Economic and Social Council ([ECOSOC](#)) and the Second Committee welcomed [Sophia](#), the first robot to sit on a UN panel. This gave a glimpse into the advances being made in the realm of Artificial Intelligence.

Turning to young people, [UN Youth Envoy](#), Jayathma Wickramanayake, of Sri Lanka, is continuously advocating for their needs and rights, including in decision-making processes at all levels, and in strengthening the UN system’s coordination on delivering for youth, and with their increased participation.

The UN report also spoke to the growing scale, complexity and impact of global migration. In July, the General Assembly agreed a [Global Compact](#) for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which will be presented for adoption in December at an [Intergovernmental Conference](#) in Morocco.

THE WORLD'S MIGRANT POPULATION REACHED A NEW HIGH IN 2017



United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization.

[Ebola in DR Congo: conflict zones could constitute 'hiding places' for the deadly virus – WHO chief](#)

Following a two-day mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Head of the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) on Tuesday repeated his call for warring parties in conflict-riven North Kivu to stop fighting, and allow health teams access to areas affected by the recent Ebola outbreak in the region.

[Speaking at a press briefing in Geneva](#), WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, stated that his visit to Beni and Mangina – epicentre of the outbreak which started about a week ago – left him “more worried” than he had been over containing the outbreak on the western side of the country, which officially ended late last month.

We are asking the international community to help in ensuring access into the inaccessible areas – *Tedros Adhernom Ghebreyesus, WHO Chief*

“What makes the outbreak in Eastern DRC or Northern Kivu more dangerous, is that there is a security challenge. There is active conflict in that area,” he stressed, noting that since January, the area had seen more than 120 violent incidents, including killings and kidnappings of civilians.

Referring to the areas where armed groups are operating, he said they could be “hiding places” for the virus. “We have difficulty accessing those areas, and people in those areas will have difficulty moving to places where they can get the support they need,” he explained.

“We are asking the international community to help in ensuring access into the inaccessible areas,” Mr. Tedros pleaded. “We also call on the warring parties for a cessation of hostilities because the virus is dangerous to all, it doesn’t choose between this group or that group,” he stressed.

According to WHO and the Ministry of Health, the number of cases so far stands at 57 confirmed or suspected cases, with 41 deaths, already surpassing the previous Ebola outbreak in the country’s Equateur Province, with 53 cases and 29 deaths. In addition, WHO reports that the number of women infected in Kivu so far is much higher than the number of men infected.



MONUSCO/Alain Coulibaly

In addition to the lack of access, the head of WHO cited several factors that complicate the operational environment for Ebola responders, including the high population density in North Kivu, which was not an issue in Equateur Province; as well as large-scale population movements within the region and across borders with neighbouring countries which continue. Some one million people have been internally-displaced so far by fighting.

Mr. Tedros also reported that seven health workers have been infected to date, explaining that this presents additional challenges for the response.

Mr. Tedros assured that, although all these factors render this outbreak “more difficult to manage,” WHO is continuing to provide support to the Ministry of Health and “doing all we can to be more aggressive than the

virus". Case-finding efforts have led to the identification of over 600 potential virus carriers so far; vaccinations and treatment programmes are underway, and awareness-raising has been stepped up within affected communities, through radio broadcasts and other community-wide communication.

In his statement, Dr. Ghebreyesus commended the partnership and joint efforts by the Government of DRC, WHO, the UN stabilization mission in-country ([MONUSCO](#)), [UN Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#) and various international non-profit organisations in order to defeat the virus.

Thanking donors for their efforts and support in helping defeat the previous outbreak in the Equateur Province, he concluded by calling on the international community to "speed up the financing" to respond to this new crisis.