

Greek wildfire tragedy: world must 'step up efforts' against deadly fire risk, says UN disaster reduction chief

Following the death of at least 80 people due to wildfires close to the Greek capital, Athens, in recent days, the top [UN official for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) expressed her condolences and called for more investment in wildfire suppression and prevention across the world.

[Describing the loss of life](#) in Greece as a “truly heartbreaking tragedy”, Mami Mizutori, who is also UN Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction, passed on her “sincere condolences to the Greek government and people at this difficult time as the search continues for the missing.”

The fire started on Monday afternoon, and quickly spread across the small resort town of Mati, 18 miles east of Athens. The death toll is expected to rise, and hundreds have also been injured.

“We owe it to those who have lost their lives in Greece and elsewhere to step up efforts on wildfire suppression and prevention”, she added. “Investing in disaster response and preparedness are vital to this effort considering that global losses from wildfires reached record levels last year and few parts of the world are spared from this risk as climate change multiplies the threat.”

Ms. Mizutori stressed that fire hazard must be given due consideration when national and local strategies for disaster risk reduction are being developed, to meet the 2020 deadline for reducing disaster losses, as outlined in the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#).

[According to a report by the European Union](#), forests cover more than a third of the total land area of Europe. Large forest fires have repeatedly affected the continent, especially Mediterranean countries, the report says, and “human activity (whether accidental, negligent, or deliberate) is one of the most common causes”.

This year, Sweden has experienced major wildfires and 2017 saw a high number of deadly fires in Portugal, Spain and Italy. In recent years, the extent of areas devastated by fires in Europe, the western United States and south-east Australia has increased dramatically, according to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction ([UNISDR](#)).

[Proposal for Spain to reckon with its past during Franco era, welcomed by UN rights experts](#)

A group of UN human rights experts has welcomed the announcement earlier this month by the Spanish Minister of Justice that the Government is paving the way for a Truth Commission to investigate violations that occurred during the civil war and the era of dictatorship under General Francisco Franco that followed.

On 10 July, the Minister announced a series of initiatives in Congress to revise the Historical Memory Law, which would make it possible to create a new commission to examine abuse allegations buried for decades.

“We welcome the government’s initiative and celebrate the opening of the dialogue on what happened during the decades of civil war and military dictatorship in Spain,” the experts said on Wednesday.

“This decision represents a fundamental step towards the realization of the right to truth for all victims of serious human rights violations,” they added.

In the [report on his visit to the country in 2014](#), Fabián Salvioli, Special Rapporteur on the [promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence](#), called on authorities to address the demands of victims, for Spain to reckon with the era that began with the start of brutal civil war in 1936, and establish a formal mechanism for this purpose.

“We are pleased to see that the Spanish authorities decided to direct their efforts towards achieving this important goal, placing the right to truth at the top of the political agenda,” the experts continued.

The projected legislative revision will also include a proposal to remove symbols glorifying the dictatorship and re-signifying the Valley of the Fallen, a monumental memorial erected by Franco, as well as his burial site, near Madrid.

The experts stressed the importance of the processes to reflect historical and [memorial narratives](#) of past violations, emphasizing that “such processes must take place within a framework of transparency and participation of civil society, focus on the victims, provide the necessary space to present their various stories, and promote critical thinking about past events”.

The experts also welcomed the creation of a Directorate General for Historical Memory to, among other things, plan the search for missing people, publicize exhumation details and maintain an official list of victims.

In its report on its [visit to Spain in 2013](#), the Working Group on Enforced or

Involuntary Disappearances criticized the lack of a national plan to search for missing persons, the lack of coordination of exhumation and identification efforts, and the outdated mapping of graves.

“We welcome the government’s intention to assume a responsibility to actively search for missing victims and urge it to immediately adopt the necessary legislative, administrative and financial measures to effectively exercise this function,” they stressed.

In its 2017 [follow up report to the visit](#), the Working Group expressed concern over the Spanish courts’ inactivity in prosecuting the cases of forced disappearance that occurred during the civil war and dictatorship.

“We expect that the recently announced initiatives will be accompanied by progress in the judicial sphere, including regarding any criminal procedure carried out in any country for the enforced disappearances committed in Spain,” the experts added.

The independent experts encouraged the Government to involve victims’ families and their representative associations in the implementation of the proposals.

They underlined their support of the Spanish Government in implementing the initiatives, and stressed that promoting truth, memory and guarantees of non-repetition are essential to realize the victims’ human rights, and strengthen citizens’ confidence in each other and their institutions.

Joining Mr. Salvioli in welcoming the proposed new commission were Bernard Duhaime, Chairperson-Rapporteur, [Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances](#); and Karima Bennouna, Special Rapporteur in the field of [cultural rights](#).

[Cameroon violence needs urgent investigation, says UN rights chief Zeid](#)

Persistent reports of grave human rights abuses in Cameroon – including a widely shared video showing the alleged execution of a woman, child and baby – must be investigated by the authorities urgently, [UN rights chief](#) Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said on Wednesday.

Amid a backdrop of protests in the English-speaking north-west and south-west regions of the West African country, that escalated in late 2017 into clashes between State military forces and armed groups, Zeid condemned an ambush on a

Government convoy that took place earlier this month.

But he cautioned that the Government's "heavy-handed response...will only make matters worse for the women, children and men caught in the middle".

To date, the violence has forced more than 21,000 people to flee to neighbouring countries, according to UN humanitarian staff, while 160,000 have been internally displaced, many reportedly hiding in forests to protect themselves.

I am deeply worried that these killings ... may not be isolated cases
– *UN human rights chief, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein*

"There are reports that armed elements have carried out kidnappings, targeted killings of police and local authorities, extortion and have torched schools," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said. "There are also reports that Government forces are responsible for killings, the excessive use of force, burning down of houses, arbitrary detentions and torture."

To prevent the situation from deteriorating further, Zeid urged the Government to launch independent investigations into alleged violations by State security forces and abuses by armed elements.

In a statement, the High Commissioner also noted serious violations in the far north of the country, where the authorities continue to confront the terrorist group Boko Haram.

Zeid said that he was "utterly appalled" by a video reportedly showing members of State armed forces executing a woman, a child and a baby who were accused of belonging to the separatist militants, and insisted the Government had an obligation to investigate the crime.

"I am deeply worried that these killings captured on camera may not be isolated cases," he said.

Given the seriousness of the reported violence by State and armed actors, the UN official added that it was "regrettable" that the Government had failed to grant the UN Human Rights Office ([OHCHR](#)) access, despite repeated requests.

"We will now need to explore other options, including remote monitoring," Zeid noted.

[Acute lack of funding threatens](#)

critical aid for Palestinians : UN agency

Despite major fundraising efforts, [UNRWA](#) – the UN agency tasked with providing life-saving support to Palestinian refugees – is facing the “largest ever reduction in funding” in its history which is threatening the very existence of many of its critical assistance programmes.

“As we continue to pursue every avenue of support to overcome a severe financial crisis, UNRWA, its dedicated staff, and the refugees have only one option: to face up to this situation together and preserve the most important work we do,” said UNRWA Spokesperson Chris Gunness on Wednesday in a press statement.

Following the United States decision to cut back its funding for UNRWA this year by US\$300 million dollars, the agency worked to mobilise political and financial support around the globe in order to maintain its operations and continue providing essential services to its beneficiaries.

The agency’s emergency assistance programmes are currently critically underfunded in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, said Mr. Gunness. In the West Bank owing to a lack of funding, UNRWA will discontinue its cash-for-work activities at the end of July, he added, and limit the provision of assistance only to the most vulnerable.

“We are still in crisis. Let no one claim otherwise”, stressed Mr. Gunness. “But we are also determined to maintain core services to the millions of Palestine refugees who rely on us in Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory, and Syria, and preserve what we can of our emergency assistance.”

A \$90 million respite

To address the increasingly “alarming” economic situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the [World Bank](#)’s Board recommended on Wednesday that US\$90 million be allocated to support economic recovery and job opportunities for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, representing a major increase from its yearly allocation of \$55 million.

“This significant increase in funding comes at a critical time when urgent interventions are required to prevent renewed conflict and to boost Palestinian economic opportunities and livelihoods”, said Nickolay Mladenov, [Special Coordinator](#) for the Middle East Peace Process. “It is particularly vital for Gaza which is on the verge of a total economic and social collapse”, he added.

According to the World Bank, about 30 per cent of Palestinians overall are unemployed. The situation is even more dire in Gaza, where half of the

population is jobless and where restrictions on trade and resources are leading to a continuing decline in productivity.

“Our assistance intends to provide hope and prospects for Palestinians, especially the youth, and to break the vicious cycle of unemployment, poverty, and instability,” said Marina Wes, World Bank Country Director for the West Bank and Gaza.

The new injection of funds, which will be used in partnership with the Palestinian Authority, will be handed over in the form of grants from its dedicated trust fund in the region.

A new grant to fund an emergency cash-for-work programme, will provide training and work experience to youth and women with university degrees – 60 per cent of whom are unemployed – to provide social services for the most vulnerable. The funds will also support infrastructure rehabilitation, including solid waste recycling, as well as making water supplies more secure, and renewable energy provision.

[Ending marginalization of persons with disabilities ‘a matter of justice’, UN-backed summit told](#)

Ahead of the Summit, Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed cited the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development and a universally-adopted [UN Convention](#) as well-established commitments for advancing the rights of persons with disabilities.

“But too often,” she said, “this political commitment has [not translated into significant improvements](#) in the lives of the 1.5 billion persons with disabilities across the world.”

Moreover, women and girls with disabilities suffer the “double discrimination” of sex and disability, she noted.

Ms. Mohammed noted that later this year, UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) would issue a first-ever report on Disability and Development, to serve as a baseline for information about persons with disabilities in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)).

“While Governments must lead, transformation requires the efforts of all of society,” she said, adding that young people, persons with disabilities, civil society and the private sector were among others working towards change.

“This Global Disability Summit is a timely opportunity to identify exactly how to change this situation as we implement the 2030 Agenda and to create value through inclusion and diversity as a human capital and cultural resource,” emphasized the deputy UN chief, as she urged “meaningful participation and results-based collaboration” and on “stepping up disability inclusion in SDG implementation.”



UNICEF/Rebecca Vassie

Members of the disabled community play a game of football in Kayunga District, Uganda.

Acknowledging that there is more to do to make the world “a more equal and just place,” Achim Steiner, Administrator of the UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)), told the participants at the Summit how the UN is looking to better address disabilities in all settings, “to ensure that persons with disabilities are given [equal access](#) and voice in society, so that they can realize their fullest possible potential.”

He linked the path to realizing the SDGs to a world free from marginalizing persons with disabilities.

“To realize the promise of the 2030 Agenda – and its core pledge to leave no one behind – it is essential that all peoples, particularly those facing discrimination and exclusion, have access and voice and can participate equally in every aspect of life,” Mr. Steiner stressed.

“This is a matter of justice, and equal opportunity, as well as economic growth. The costs of exclusion are simply too high.”

“‘Nothing about us without us’ is the mantra of the disability movement,” he stated, adding: “The UN system – stand behind this, and with all of you, as we move this important agenda forward together.”



UNICEF/Khudr Al-Issa

8 year old girl, who was paralysed by an exploding bomb and lost the use of her legs, sits in a wheelchair next to her 5 year old sister, near their home in east Aleppo, Syrian Arab Republic. 11 December 2017.

Children in the fore

Painting a grim picture of the challenging situation for children with disabilities, Henrietta H. Fore, Executive Director of the [UN Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#), said prejudice, stigma, or inaccessible learning preventing half of all those children from attending school, while the half that do, lack a quality education.

This, she said, is “a tragic waste of potential – for these children and for their societies and economies.”

“As a global community, we will not achieve [SDG 4](#) – education for all – if we continue failing these children. Not just getting them into school, but improving the quality of their education,” Ms. Fore stated.

To help offset some of these challenges, the Global Partnership for Assistive Technology provides life-changing support – including wheelchairs, prosthetics and hearing aids – to 500 million people globally by 2030, she explained.

“For children with disabilities, these technologies help them see themselves, from an early age, as able – able to do the things they want to do. Move. Play. See. Hear. Interact. Learn. Communicate,” she elaborated.

Children with disabilities living through conflict or disaster face a double disadvantage. Sharing the same dangers of violence, hunger and safety threats, they also face unique challenges, including “lack of mobility because of shattered infrastructure, difficulty fleeing harm and the prejudices that keep them from accessing the urgent assistance they need,”

flagged Ms. Fore.

“This Summit is an opportunity to translate our commitment to children with disabilities into a reality around the world, no matter where they live,” concluded the UNICEF chief.

For his part, UN [Emergency Relief Coordinator](#) Mark Lowcock told the gathering that worldwide, at least 15 per cent of the more than 130 million people who need humanitarian aid have disabilities.

“There is no silver bullet,” he said, “but the central, fundamental requirement is to include disabled people and their organizations in planning for and implementing responses to humanitarian crises,” which will “make for a better, more effective and humane response.”

The Summit is co-hosted by the Governments of Kenya and the United Kingdom, and the International Disability Alliance.