

[UN ready to assist rescue and relief effort as dam collapses in Laos, with many feared dead](#)

Following reports that dozens of people are dead or missing following the collapse of a dam that was under construction in Laos, the United Nations chief on Tuesday said that the world body stands ready to support the rescue and relief efforts, if authorities request it.

According to news reports, the collapse of the dam created flash flooding conditions that swept through Attapeu province in south-eastern Laos, submerging villages and leaving more than 6,000 homeless.

“The Secretary-General [is saddened](#) by the loss of life and significant damage caused by a break in the hydroelectric dam under construction...adding to the previous destruction caused by Tropical Storm Son,” said his Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric in a statement.

At least 20 people are believed to have died and many more who are missing are feared dead. It was reported that continuous rainstorms had caused a high volume of water to flow into the project’s reservoir, putting pressure on the dam.

The Secretary-General extended his condolences to the victims’ families and to the Government and people of the Southeast Asian country, while also expressing the UN’s readiness to support the national rescue and relief efforts if required, Mr. Dujarric said.

[Ebola outbreak in DR Congo declared over, now let’s tackle other health challenges: WHO chief](#)

The Ebola virus outbreak in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been declared over, thanks to a concerted national and international effort to contain the threat, the UN’s top health official said on Tuesday.

The countdown to the announcement began on 12 June, when the last patient was released from care after testing negative a second time for the virus, whose symptoms include major bleeding and high fever.

Speaking from the country's capital, Kinshasa, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, [Director-General](#) of the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), hailed the "tireless efforts" of local teams in combating the deadly disease, which claimed 29 lives, and infected dozens more.

Mr. Tedros also congratulated health partners, donors and the DRC Ministry of Health for working together so effectively, to end the outbreak.

Unlike eight previous Ebola outbreaks in DRC in the past four decades, this latest episode was complicated by the fact that it involved a major urban centre of more than 1 million people, Mbandaka, with a direct connection via the Congo River to the capital and to neighbouring countries, as well as extremely remote rainforest villages.

There were concerns that the disease could spread from Equateur province to other parts of DRC and neighbouring countries, Mr. Tedros said, but the threat was minimized thanks to the release of emergency WHO funding within hours of the outbreak being declared on 8 May.

WHO and partners appealed for \$57 million to stop the spread of Ebola; total funds received by all partners amounted to \$63 million.

Fighting the DRC outbreak was also made easier by the existence of a vaccine, following a major trial in Guinea in 2016, one of three countries in West Africa where Ebola claimed more than 11,300 lives between 2013 and 2016.

The absence of a cure for the disease was in part responsible for the continued reliance on traditional burial methods, WHO has said, which in some cases involved bathing in the water used to clean those who had died from the virus.



WHO/Lindsay Mackenzie

Members of the Democratic Republic of the Congo Red Cross conduct a training on safe burials in the village of Itipo (10 June 2018).

In an appeal to the authorities and health partners to transfer the momentum of fighting Ebola to other diseases in DRC, Mr. Tedros said that they could be “confident” about tackling cholera and polio, too.

“We must continue to work together, investing in strengthened preparedness and access to health care for the most vulnerable,” he said.

Looking ahead, WHO [Regional Director](#) for Africa, Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, said that DRC was in a better position to address future public health emergencies, since “more than three quarters of the 360 people deployed to respond (to the Ebola outbreak) came from within the region”.

DRC’s health professionals had also gained valuable knowledge and insight from those involved in the West Africa Ebola vaccination campaign, involving nearly 12,000 people, Dr. Moeti added.

[UN, Egypt help avert another Israel-Palestine war in Gaza that was ‘minutes away’, Security Council hears](#)

Intense diplomatic efforts by the United Nations and Egypt have helped avoid another Israeli-Palestinian war in Gaza that appeared just “minutes away” over the past weekend, a senior UN official said on Tuesday.

“After intense efforts by the United Nations and Egypt, I can report that the situation is [calming down](#), although tensions remain,” Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East peace process, told the Security Council via video link from Jerusalem.

He said that “last Saturday we were [minutes away](#) from another devastating confrontation between Israel and Hamas in Gaza”.

The enclave bordered by Israel and the Mediterranean has been controlled by a Palestinian militant faction, Hamas, since 2007. Israel has blocked the movements of Palestinians from Gaza.

The UN has said the root causes of the intractable conflict there include a more than 50-year occupation by Israel of the Palestinian territory; its years-long blockade of Gaza; Hamas’s continuing control of the enclave, and the division between Palestine’s two political factions, Fatah and Hamas.

Briefing the Council on recent developments around Gaza, Mr. Mladenov said that “over the last two weeks, the situation quickly spiralled out of control, nearly to a point of no-return”.

The past month, he said, has witnessed one of the largest escalations since the most recent 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict.

Nineteen Palestinians, including seven children, were killed by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Gaza, during protests, clashes, and airstrikes, and over 1,000 were injured.

One IDF soldier was killed by gunfire from Gaza last week, while four Israeli civilians and an IDF soldier were moderately injured, respectively, by rocket fire and a hand grenade attack.

Hamas and other militants fired 283 rockets and mortars from Gaza towards Israel, while The Israeli Air Force (IAF) fired some 189 missiles and artillery shells against targets in Gaza.

Mr. Mladenov said he travelled to Gaza on 15 July and earlier on Tuesday, in an urgent effort to de-escalate tensions, appealing to Palestinian factions not to provoke incidents at the fence, to immediately stop the firing of rockets and mortars and to stop the incendiary kites and balloons. And he appealed to Israel to reopen the crossings, stop shelling, particularly in populated areas, and to exercise restraint towards Gaza.

"I returned to Jerusalem from Gaza just an hour ago and am hopeful that with collective efforts by all sides we can avoid another war, allow Palestinians in Gaza and Israelis in communities across the border to sleep in peace and begin addressing all humanitarian issues," he said.

On Sunday, the UN [warned](#) that supplies of emergency fuel provided by the world body for critical facilities in Gaza are running out.

Mr. Mladenov said that on Tuesday, the first 100,000 litres of much-needed fuel were allowed through the Kerem Shalom crossing, to be distributed by the UN to hospitals and emergency services.

Turning to the Syrian Golan Heights, he said that recent developments on the Golan have heightened tensions.

He said that a few hours ago, the Israeli Defence Forces reported that it fired two missiles, which shot down a Syrian fighter jet that they claim had infiltrated nearly two kilometres into Israeli airspace.

"We are closely monitoring the situation," he said.

[More 'political commitment' needed](#)

urgently for HIV prevention: UNAIDS chief

As HIV infections continue to rise, [UNAIDS](#) – the UN agency leading the global effort to end the public health threat posed by the virus – called on Tuesday for countries to boost prevention measures and continue facilitating access to treatment.

Around 1.8 million people became newly infected with HIV and around 50 countries experienced a rise in new HIV infections during last year, according to Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS, who was speaking at the ongoing International AIDS Conference in the Netherlands.

“Health is a human rights imperative and we are deeply concerned about the lack of political commitment and the failure to invest in proven HIV programmes, particularly for young people and key populations,” said the UNAIDS chief, in a press release. “If countries think they can treat their way out of their epidemics, they are dangerously mistaken,” he added.

According to [a new UNAIDS report](#), 47 per cent of new HIV infections globally affect key vulnerable populations, such as sex workers, and people who inject drugs. Although a combination of HIV prevention approaches could mitigate this – such as harm reduction, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), better social care and condoms – many countries are unwilling to invest in approaches which they view as culturally or religiously inappropriate.

In some Southern African countries for example, where HIV prevalence can be as high as 70 per cent among sex workers, it is reported that condoms are often confiscated by the police, said the agency.

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, one third of all new HIV infections occur among people who inject drugs, as the criminalization of drug use often leads them to use unsterilized needles.

Gay men and other men who have sex with men, accounted for 57 per cent of new HIV infections in Europe and North America in 2017, and 41 per cent in Latin America. However, the criminalization of same-sex intercourse in many countries often prevents access to HIV services for these groups.

“If countries don’t provide comprehensive sexuality education, condoms, harm reduction or pre-exposure prophylaxis for key populations, this will ultimately translate into more new HIV infections, higher future treatment costs and a higher burden for health-care budgets and systems,” said Mr. Sidibé.

To urgently address this “HIV prevention crisis” and increase political commitment for HIV prevention, a [Global HIV Prevention Coalition](#) of United Nations Member States, donors, civil society organizations and implementers was established in 2017 that includes the 25 countries which bear the highest

HIV burden. Their goal is to [reduce new HIV infections by 75 per cent by 2020](#).

According to UNAIDS, countries and cities that have adequately invested are seeing results. Helsinki in Finland and San Francisco in the United States, are stark examples where bold policies for HIV prevention have led to sharp declines in the number of new infections.

The UN agency stresses that women and youth need targeted approaches as they are often more vulnerable and, therefore, more at risk of exposure.

While most countries have significantly scaled up their HIV treatment programmes, some to the extent of reaching 80 per cent of people living with HIV with antiretroviral therapy, many are not being diagnosed and treated soon enough, allowing transmissions to occur before they start treatment or if treatment is interrupted.

[UN rights office appeals for peaceful Zimbabwe elections amid reports of intimidation](#)

Zimbabwe's upcoming presidential elections must be peaceful and credible, the UN Human Rights Office, [OHCHR](#), said on Tuesday, amid increasing reports of voter intimidation and coercion linked to the ruling ZANU-PF party.

Ahead of the 30 July poll, OHCHR spokesperson Liz Throssell said that UN staff were not in a position to verify the reports, which have nonetheless surfaced in a context of a "widening of the democratic space" in the country.

"We note the signing of the peace pledge by the political parties on 26 June, under the auspices of the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission," she told journalists in Geneva. "We welcome their commitment to promote a climate of peace and tolerance, accept the results of the elections or challenge the results through the due process of law."

The frontrunners in the election are President Emmerson Mnangagwa from the ruling ZANU-PF party and his opponent, Nelson Chamisa, head of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

Robert Mugabe, the country's former leader, resigned under pressure last November after 37 years in power.

Noting a "cautious optimism" surrounding the elections amid political rallies and peaceful demonstrations in the capital, Harare, the OHCHR spokesperson

added that it was to be welcomed that international human rights organizations and national rights monitors were present, too.

“The run-up to elections previously in Zimbabwe were very different, very much marred by violence. From what we have been seeing, what we have been monitoring, there has not been that scale of violence. In fact, civil society, people that our colleague has spoken to, have expressed this cautious optimism. It’s far from perfect, but there are encouraging signs.”

Despite these positive developments, several rural areas – Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Midlands and Manicaland Province – have been linked to “an increasing number of reports” of harassment and coercion of voters, Ms. Throssell cautioned.

These reports of intimidation linked to ZANU-PF and traditional leaders who support the ruling party have been made by civil society organizations and cannot be verified by OHCHR, which has just one staff member in the country.

The issue of verbal attacks against women has also been a feature of the election campaign, taking place largely on social media and in local languages.

“From what I understand from information I’ve been given, there’s about 15 per cent of the candidates that are women,” Ms. Throssell told UN News. “Now the kind of disparaging language is really not going to come of any surprise to you – it’s targeting them on the basis of them being women. Calling them bra-burning feminists, calling them, sort of, substandard candidates, attacking them personally.”

The OHCHR appeal to Zimbabwe’s Government, political parties and other institutions follows concern over Zimbabwe’s alleged human rights violations and level of electoral violence in the past.

The international community imposed sanctions on the country in the early 2000s, following reports of election-rigging and suppression of the opposition.