

[Colombia: New Congress marks rebel group's transition 'from weapons to politics', says UN](#)

Celebrating the holding of the first session of a new Congress in Colombia, the United Nations has said that the inclusion of former rebels in the legislative body marked their transition “from weapons to politics”.

In a press release issued Friday, the [UN Verification Mission](#) in Colombia and other UN operations there said they “celebrate [the installation today of the Colombian Congress](#) resulting from the most participative and peaceful legislative elections in decades”.

They added that the inclusion in the Senate and House of Representatives of the political party of the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (FARC-EP) “marks this group’s transition from weapons to politics and the country’s transition from conflict to the search for reconciliation”.

In 2016, the Government and the FARC-EP signed a peace agreement, ending their 50-year conflict. In mid-March this year, the first congressional elections after the peace deal were held, drawing millions of Colombians to the polls.

The UN entities noted the challenges of violence and poverty persist in rural areas of the country, and hoped that “in a climate of national harmony, the work of a new Congress will be decisive for the extension of state presence under the rule of law and the consolidation of peace across Colombia”.

[E-Governance: A powerful tool to combat, mitigate and sustainably manage disaster risks](#)

E-governance plays a critical role in building inclusive, resilient societies both before and in response to disasters, according to a United Nations report issued this week.

The [2018 E-Government Survey](#) highlights the complex challenges and varied opportunities of deploying e-government services.

Contributing to the global report, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific ([ESCAP](#)) highlights that the use of information and communications technology during all phases of disaster risk management presents “substantial opportunities to [reduce disaster risks](#), enhance coping capabilities, and provide inclusive preparedness and response.”

Several regional case studies illustrate that it is critical to integrate emerging innovations in digital technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI), social media, space applications and geospatial information for e-resilience efforts.

To ensure undisrupted services and information to citizens before, during and after disasters, the report also reiterates the urgency of embracing e-resilience in e-government initiatives.

The findings and recommendations come against the backdrop of several recent disasters, such as landslides in Japan, an unrepresented heatwave in Pakistan and monsoon flash floods in Bangladesh and India, all of which serve to remind us how disaster risk is outpacing disaster resilience in Asia-Pacific.

As the Asia-Pacific region is among the world’s [most disaster-impacted](#), governments have stepped-up disaster risk reduction efforts through digital connectivity and innovations.

“Digitally-driven emerging frontier technologies, such as AI, are expected to offer unparalleled levels of data availability, insights and coping capabilities to support countries address this formidable challenge and advance the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), said ESCAP.

Broadband connectivity for all remains critical to the success of e-governance.

Towards this end, ESCAP continues to support the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative to seamlessly increase the regional availability, affordability and resilience of broadband networks as a platform for e-resilience.

Its implementation will be reviewed and discussed by countries and partners in Bangkok, from 27-28 August, followed by an ESCAP intergovernmental meeting of the Second Session of the Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation on 29 to 31 August 2018.

[**UN agriculture agency digs in to help**](#)

forests and farms build resilience to climate change

Millions of small-scale farmers will be better equipped to withstand the negative impacts of climate change while at the same time improving livelihoods, thanks to a new global push by the United Nations agriculture agency announced during World Forest Week.

On Friday, the Food and Agriculture Agency ([FAO](#)) and partners launched the second stage of a successful international partnership that supports forest and farm producer organizations across Africa, Asia and Latin America during the gathering, known as [COFO 24](#).

The [Forest and Farm Facility initiative](#), or FFF, began in 2013 as a way to help rural women's groups, local communities and indigenous peoples' institutions, among others, bolstering their technical and business capacities to fight climate change and improve food security.

The initiative's second phase is now being rolled out over the next five years across 25 countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa, from the original pilot group of ten.

"These groups make up a large proportion of the rural poor and rely on farming, forests and agro-forestry systems to grow food and make a living. Rendering their lands resilient to climate change is key to their livelihoods and identity," said Daniel Gustafson, FAO's Deputy Director-General for Programmes.

The initiative scales up the effort to help forest and farm producers develop climate resilient landscapes, strengthen enterprises and generate work opportunities for women and youth, and encourage better policies to help the rural poor, according to FAO.

Some 1.5 billion forest and farm producers make up 90 per cent of the world's farmers, which provide about 80 per cent of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa's food supplies. That adds up to 500 million family farms and 30 percent of forests in the global south.

The FFF's second phase will provide financial and technical support to strengthen organizations which represent forest and farm producers. It will also increase access to markets, finance and training – with a focus on vulnerable groups, such as women and youth.

So that forest and farm producers can better manage their land to withstand climate impacts, FFF will roll out adaptation and climate resilience activities as well.

"Forest and farm producers are more powerful when organized," stressed Mr. Gustafson.

“By building their capacity, the Forest and Farm Facility initiative will help more producers and their organizations withstand the effects of climate change, create opportunities for their most vulnerable members, access benefits, and influence policies to better address their needs,” he concluded.

[Refugee health services on track despite record level of displacement, says UN agency](#)

Despite record numbers of people fleeing conflict and natural disasters globally, vital health services have been largely able to cope, the United Nations refugee agency has said; although communicable diseases, anaemia and stunting remain areas of concern.

The [annual review](#) of health cover in dozens of emergencies and ongoing operations, published by the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#), depicts the trends in the agency’s 37 key operations.

In 2017, a year in which wars and persecution drove global forced displacement to a new high, the mortality rate for children under five in post-emergency situations averaged [0.4 deaths per 1,000 refugee children](#) every month, sustaining the declining trend observed since 2011.

There have been improvements in reproductive health service cover. Out of a total of nearly 97,000 births, nine out of 10 deliveries were conducted by a skilled health worker – a 25 per cent increase from 2016.

Health facilities for refugees and displaced people also hosted more than eight million clinical consultations last year in 21 countries, which is a 10 per cent increase from 2016.

Nine in 10 of the refugees who were treated suffered from at least one form of communicable disease, UNHCR said, highlighting the importance of investing in prevention.

Some 65 per cent of UNHCR’s refugee operations reported measles vaccination coverage rates among children under one year of age, above 90 per cent – against an international standard of above 95 per cent.

Overall, more than 160,000 children in this age group were vaccinated against measles in routine programmes; a 15 per cent increase from 2016.

Access to HIV treatment was sustained with over 10,000 refugees enrolled in

HIV treatment programs a threefold increase from 2015. Overall, 62 per cent of the surveyed refugee sites met the global acute malnutrition standards, showing a slight improvement from 2016.

Despite the largely positive results, there is still significant concern about continued high levels of stunting – or impaired growth – which in children under-five, was found to be at an acceptable level in only a quarter of managed sites.

Only three per cent of surveyed sites met anaemia standards with prevalence below acceptable standard of 20 per cent.

Given the record levels of forced displacement globally this year, UNHCR's budget requirements are at a record high of \$8.275 billion. However, as of mid-2018, only 33 per cent of these needs are funded.

Syria: Scaled-up assistance, 'sustained access' needed to 140,000 made homeless, says UNHCR

Following a Government-led assault on Syria's opposition-held areas, an estimated 140,000 people in the country's south-west remain homeless and in need of help, the United Nation Refugee Agency ([UNCHR](#)) said on Friday, calling for sustained access to displaced communities.

"A new scaling-up of assistance is needed and UNHCR continues to advocate for [sustained access](#) for humanitarian actors," UNHCR spokesperson Andrej Mahecic told reporters at the regular press briefing in Geneva, explaining that the UN and other partners have reached tens of thousands.

During the first six months of this year, amid continued fighting and new displacements, nearly 13,000 refugees from neighbouring countries and another 750,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) are estimated to have returned to Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Rural Damascus, Damascus, south-west and north-eastern Syria.

Mr. Mahecic pointed out that the UN's has continued to enhance its humanitarian response for IDPs, returnees and other crisis-affected communities.

"In anticipation and recognition of this dynamic, UNHCR ramped up its capacity inside Syria already in 2017 to support refugees and internally displaced people who return spontaneously," he stated.

In recognition of Wednesday's announcement of a joint Syrian-Russian initiative to set up a refugee centre in Syria to help those wishing to return home, UNHCR said that while it has not yet seen any details of the plan, it is ready to engage in discussions with both Governments and prepared to work with them towards finding solutions that meet international refugee and human rights standards.

"Refugees always have a right to return," underscored Mr. Mahecic, adding that they should not be pressured, rushed or prematurely pushed into leaving the countries where they have found shelter.

"UNHCR stresses that any plan that aims to enable refugees to exercise this right must be aligned with international standards – meaning that returns must be voluntary, they need to take place in safe and dignified conditions, and need to be sustainable," he spelled out.

Into its eighth year, the Syrian conflict continues to exact a [terrible toll](#) on the country's civilians. Over half of the population has been forced from their homes, and many have been displaced multiple times.