

'Crimes against humanity,' 'war crimes' and risk of new ethnic violence in DR Congo, warn UN experts

Defence and security forces along with the Kamuina Nsapu and Bana Mura militias have committed "crimes against humanity and war crimes" in the of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Kasai region, United Nations experts said on Tuesday following an investigation.

"We are shocked by this disastrous situation that has claimed the lives of several thousand people and continues to rage in the region, without provoking national or international attention," said Bacre Waly Ndiaye, President of the Team of International Experts appointed by the Human Rights Council.

The experts believed that following an upsurge in violence, which has swept the Kasai region since 2016, civilian killings, including children, and atrocities – such as mutilations, rapes and other forms of sexual violence, torture and exterminations – were committed in a generalized and systematic fashion, constituting crimes against humanity.

"It is high time for justice to put an end to impunity if we do not want the ethnic dimension of the conflict to worsen," he added.

The experts revealed that two years after the conflict began, the crimes and destruction continue – resulting in some 1.4 million people internally displaced, and another 35,000 who have fled to Angola. Women have been enslaved and some abuses may also amount to ethnic persecution.

While warning of an alarming humanitarian situation that has been particularly harsh on children, the team flagged that the Kamuina Nsapu militia also recruited boys and girls.

According to the [World Food Programme](#) and the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#), about 3.2 million people continue to be severely food insecure, and malnutrition rates, especially for children, are high.

Among other recommendations, the experts demanded that the militias be disarmed and that a reconciliation process be implemented to avoid another wave of violence and allow the return of the displaced and refugees.

They emphasized that the responsibility to prosecute those guilty of international crimes – and to end the impunity that persists – lies first and foremost with the Congolese authorities.

The team proposed that the capacity of military investigative entities be built up so that the perpetrators of the international crimes committed in Kasai since 2016 – including by officials in the highest positions – can be

investigated and prosecuted.

It also called for proper care to be provided to the survivors of rapes and sexual violence.

Meanwhile, the Prosecutor of the [International Criminal Court](#), which is already investigating the situation, has expressed her concern about the acts of violence committed in the Kasai region and that she intends to monitor the situation closely.

[UN official sees 'unprecedented opportunities' to make progress on peace in Afghanistan](#)

The coming months will present critical opportunities for the international community to review assistance to Afghanistan, as the country works towards a lasting peace, stable democracy and self-reliance, the top United Nations official there told the Security Council in New York on Tuesday.

Tadamichi Yamamoto, head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan ([UNAMA](#)), briefed ambassadors on what he called the current "politically dynamic period" that has seen ceasefires by the Government and the Taliban extremist group and preparations for elections in October.

"The key political events of peace and elections are far from assured but we are seeing unprecedented opportunities to make progress to seek peace and to consolidate the political foundation for the future," he said.

The unilateral ceasefires were held earlier this month during the celebrations marking the end of Ramadan.

It was the first time in nearly 20 years that both sides have honoured a call to lay down arms.

Mr. Yamamoto reported that during the three days, social media channels were flooded with photos of representatives from the two sides embracing each other. Local authorities also allowed Taliban fighters to return to their hometowns, while some Afghan soldiers visited areas controlled by the extremists.

Afghans, including Taliban fighters, clearly want peace – *Tadamichi Yamamoto, head of UNAMA*

Despite the developments, a government proposal to extend the ceasefire was not reciprocated.

Mr. Yamamoto explained that because the Taliban's goal is to end the presence of foreign fighters in Afghanistan, it has shunned direct talks with the Government.

But, as he told the Council, ending the long-standing conflict will require talks among all parties, which of course means the Taliban and the authorities will have to meet over the negotiating table.

"What we have learned is that both the Afghan Government and the Taliban have command and control over their troops. Afghans, including Taliban fighters, clearly want peace. It is also clear that President Ghani is taking courageous steps to seek peace through talks," he said.

Meanwhile, preparations continue for parliamentary elections in October and presidential elections in early 2019.

So far, more than 7 million people have registered to vote in what Mr. Yamamoto described as "a fully Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process".

The UN has provided 23 international experts to work alongside the Independent Election Committee, with additional technical advisers currently being recruited.

Civil society representatives have also committed to monitor proceedings at all polling stations.

The UN Mission chief highlighted concerns, however, such as uneven registration in some provinces, including due to logistical or security reasons.

Mahmoud Saikal, Afghanistan's Ambassador to the UN, said "comprehensive" security arrangements have been put in place to ensure citizens can vote in safety.

"Our hope and expectation is to ensure that these elections will be transparent, credible and inclusive, in accordance with our people's demands," he added.

The security concerns come as deadly violence continues across Afghanistan, with a suicide bombing in the capital, Kabul, on 11 June being the most recent tragedy.

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UNAMA reported more than 5,600 security incidents between mid-February and mid-May this year, while 311 people have been killed by improvised explosive

devices (IEDs) – a preferred weapon of terrorist groups.

Vladimir Voronkov, head of the [UN Office of Counter-Terrorism](#), told the Council he hoped a global meeting this week at UN Headquarters in New York will boost international cooperation to tackle such threats.

“Afghanistan genuinely needs and continues to request legal technical assistance and capacity-building projects to strengthen its national criminal justice framework to combat terrorism,” he said.

Linked to this is Afghanistan’s long-standing position as a source for opium, the drug used to make heroin.

The Security Council meeting coincided with the launch of the [annual flagship report](#) by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)). It showed that global opium production reached a record high in 2017, largely driven by Afghanistan.

Mr. Yamamoto also pointed to another threat: drought, particularly in the north and west of the country.

Wheat harvests last year were nearly 60 per cent below the five-year average, and the 2018 crop is expected to be even lower.

The UN has accordingly revised a plan to address the problem, with humanitarians now seeking \$547 million to support affected populations.

[At Ministerial session, UN regional office in Beirut to focus on technology for sustainable development](#)

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia ([ESCWA](#)) is set to hold its 30th Ministerial Session in Beirut, Lebanon on 27 and 28 June with a focus on technology for sustainable development.

“We are proud to welcome the [Ministerial Session](#) back to Beirut this year, as the last one organized in Lebanon was in 2012,” said Mohamed Ali Alhakim, the Executive Secretary of ESCWA.

The theme of this year’s biennial event is technology for sustainable development and it will offer opportunities to address regional challenges, such as high unemployment rates – particularly among youth – depleted natural resources and other issues that can lead to political instability and conflict.

“Technology is a productivity enabler, a communication facilitator, a platform for unheard voices, and a tool to unleash efficiency and optimize processes in service, industry and agriculture among other sectors,” Mr. Alhakim added.

With the adoption in 2015 of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), countries identified technology as essential for eradicating poverty, growing the economy and protecting the environment, with the goal of “leaving no one behind.”

To achieve this, ESCWA, which [comprises 18 Arab countries](#), continues to insist that productivity gains from technology must be balanced with fair distribution of growth with inclusive participation at all levels.

The Ministerial Session will therefore serve as a platform to discuss critical actions required from governments, the private sector and civil society in Arab countries in response to the exponential frontier or disruptive technologies sweeping the world.

The goal is to maximize the benefits for sustainable development and lower risks of abuse and possible negative impact, working with governments in the Arab region.

“Since the industrial revolutions, technology has acquired an important role in everyday life,” Executive Secretary Alhakim stressed. “New and emerging technologies are shaping the world as we know it today with leapfrog progress, which requires institutional frameworks and multi-stakeholder cooperation that can support these changes.”

These technologies are countless and include smart phones, 3D printing, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, online education, digital economy, renewable and efficient energy sources, water management and irrigation, food production, smart cities, biotechnology and other “frontier technologies.”

The Ministerial Session is expected to feature three moderated roundtables to generate discussions with policymakers and civil society leaders. These will address integrating technology and innovation into national development planning; prerequisites for technological change to achieve inclusiveness while preserving natural resources; and policies and regulations governing frontier technologies in Arab countries to address national priorities such as youth unemployment, poverty alleviation and economic diversification.

In addition to government and civil society representatives, panelists will also include representatives from the private sector, academia and youth.

One of the five UN regional commissions, ESCWA was created in order to fulfil the economic and social goals set out in the [UN Charter](#) by promoting cooperation and integration between countries in each region of the world.

UN global counter-terrorism strategy review an 'overarching vision for the future': Assembly President

While there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to address the challenges posed by terrorism worldwide, international cooperation is key to counter the scourge, the President of the United Nations General Assembly said on Tuesday, as the body adopted a review of the UN's global counter-terrorism strategy.

["We will be stronger if we work together ... this Strategy gives us an opportunity to do so,"](#) said [Assembly President](#) Miroslav Lajčák.

"It sets our common goals; allows us to prioritise; and gives us an overarching vision, for the future."

In his remarks, Mr. Lajčák also said that UN's role regarding counter-terrorism is a "tricky one."

Noting that international terror groups did not exist when the Organization was established more than 70 years ago, events in recent past – in particular the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City – underscored the scale of the threat.

"Since then, we have been working to find the right balance, for the role of the UN, and we need to keep working on this," he said, noting also that many of the world body's members are reaching out to the Organization for support.

We will be stronger if we work together ... this Strategy gives us an opportunity to do so – *Assembly President Lajčák*

At the same time, the UN system has also evolved to better respond to the changing dynamics, he added, highlighting the Secretary-General's reform initiative and the establishing of a UN Counter-Terrorism Office.

'We cannot afford to become complacent'

Further in his speech, the Assembly President also warned against complacency, particularly as terrorist groups continue to employ newer and more destructive methods, with no regard for the "laws of humanity."

By working together, he added, the international community can create opportunities to address such evolving threats: "There will be new dynamics; new technology and new threats. But also, new opportunities for solutions," said Mr. Lajčák.

“We need to work with each other ... we need to pool our capacities and experiences, and, we need to deliver a strong message: that we do not – and will not – accept international terrorism.”

The resolution – adopted by consensus by the 193-member General Assembly – underlines the importance of multilateral efforts in combating terrorism and refraining from any practices and measures inconsistent with international law and the principles of the Charter.

It also calls on the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly, no later than May 2019, a report containing concrete recommendations and options on ways to assess the impact of, and progress made, implementing the UN’s counter-terrorism strategy.

[Ebola Outbreak in Democratic Republic Congo is ‘largely contained’: WHO](#)

Almost two months after the start of the latest [Ebola](#) outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), United Nations health experts announced on Tuesday that the deadly disease has “largely been contained”.

A total of 55 cases of Ebola have been recorded during the current outbreak of the often-deadly viral infection and 28 people have died, according to the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#).

Ebola is endemic in DRC and has been identified there nine times, since 1976. Before the current outbreak in Equateur Province, the most recent episode of the disease was in 2017, in northern Likati province. Four people died and four survived, according to WHO.

Spokesperson Tarik Jasarevic said that the development was an “important step” but “it is not the end”.

Experience has shown us that it only takes one case to set off a fast-moving outbreak – *Tarik Jasarevic (WHO)*

“We are cautiously confident regarding the situation and know that a continued aggressive response is required,” he said, adding that “experience has shown us that it only takes one case to set off a fast-moving outbreak.”

Ahead of the WHO announcement, there were fears that the disease might continue its spread from rural north-western DRC, along the key Congo River transport route, to the capital Kinshasa, which is home to 10 million people; and also spread to neighbouring countries.

Those concerns were based on the grim toll and progress of the Ebola epidemic in West Africa between 2013 and 2016, which killed more than 11,000 people in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

To counter the threat from the current outbreak – and making use of a new vaccine – the UN agency and Doctors Without Frontiers (MSF) quickly coordinated over an inoculation programme that began in the DRC city of Mbandaka, where around one million people live.

This was followed by another round of preventive vaccination in and around the town of Bikoro to the south, where the initial Ebola victims were identified.

According to WHO, the last confirmed case of Ebola in DRC was on 6 June.

Since then, all probable and suspect cases have been declared negative.

A key tactic used to counter the spread of the haemorrhagic disease has been contact-tracing.

During this current episode, WHO and MSF have traced contacts of those who are suspected of having the disease, administering more than 3,200 vaccinations.

The last 161 people to have come into contact with suspected Ebola virus carriers will finish their mandatory follow-up period on 27 June, at which point they will be declared virus-free, WHO says.

Meanwhile, on the ground in DRC, health teams are following as many as 20 suspect cases a day, said Mr Jasarevic: “We need to keep the work going in DRC to make sure that all suspect cases are being looked for and make sure that there are no new cases.”