

Celebrate love, strengthen partnerships to end AIDS epidemic by 2030 says UN agency

Marking the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, the United Nations is calling for strengthened partnerships to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people and their families.

“Stigma, discrimination and social and physical violence against sexual and gender minorities prevent them from accessing health services,” Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS ([UNAIDS](#)), said in a message for the Day, which goes by the acronym IDAHOT.

“[Everyone has the right to health](#), no matter their gender or sexual orientation,” he added.

The IDAHOT celebration of sexual and gender diversity, is commemorated globally each year on 17 May. This year’s theme is alliances for solidarity to bring respect for LGBTI people and their families

According to UNAIDS, men who have sex with men and transgender women are among the communities most affected by HIV worldwide.

More than 40 per cent of countries criminalize same-sex sexual relationships, driving gays and lesbians underground, and blocking access to health and social services, which leaves LGBTI people vulnerable to poor health and homelessness.

To end AIDS, it is essential to ensure that people can access HIV prevention technologies free from discrimination – including condoms, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), and quality HIV treatment and care.

[UN Women](#), the [UN Development Programme](#) and UNAIDS are working with the Global Network of People Living with HIV to end all forms of HIV-related stigma and discrimination.

Requiring support across the board, and civil society leadership, the initiative will contribute to achieving the UN Member States’ commitment to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

Increasing political commitment and investments for the health and well-being of some of the most vulnerable people in society, will help to ensure that no one is left behind: “We need zero discrimination for everyone, everywhere,” stressed Mr. Sidibé.

Emergency meeting called as Ebola moves to Congolese city – UN health agency

The World Health Organization (WHO) is convening an emergency meeting on Friday to “consider the international risks” of the latest outbreak of the deadly disease Ebola, which has now moved to an urban area of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

One new case of Ebola virus disease has been confirmed in Mbandaka, a city with a population of about 1.2 million, WHO confirmed on Thursday, raising fears that despite a rapid response by authorities, the outbreak has not been contained.

So far, 23 have reportedly died. Until Thursday, the more than 40 confirmed cases were all located in the area around Bikoro, close to the Congo River, and around 150 kilometres (about 95 miles) from the provincial capital Mbandaka, which is a busy port city.

[“This is a concerning development](#), but we now have better tools than ever before to combat Ebola,” said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of WHO.

“WHO and our partners are taking decisive action to stop further spread of the virus,” he added.

“The arrival of Ebola in an urban area is very concerning and [WHO and partners are working together to rapidly scale up](#) the search for all contacts of the confirmed case in the Mbandaka area,” WHO Regional Director for Africa, Matshidiso Moeti, said in a statement.

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The meeting of the Emergency Committee will decide whether to declare an official public health emergency, which would trigger more international involvement and free up more resources to deal with the outbreak.

Apart from WHO and other UN agencies, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), as other humanitarian organizations, have teams on the ground, working to contain the outbreak.

Response scaled up

The UN health agency is deploying around 30 experts to conduct surveillance in Mbandaka and is working with the DRC's Ministry of Health advising communities on prevention, treatment and reporting of new cases.

WHO-partner, MSF, has also deployed its teams and is working with UN agencies to strengthen health capacity to treat Ebola patients.

Isolation zones have been set up in Mbandaka's main hospital, and in Bikoro. Special Ebola treatment centers are also being established in Mbandaka and Bikoro, which will have capacity to treat 20 patients each.

In the next few days, MSF plans delivery of several tons of supplies, including medical kits; protection and disinfection kits; logistic and hygiene kits; and palliative drugs to Mbandaka.

Ninth outbreak in the country

This is the ninth outbreak, since the discovery of the Ebola virus in the country in 1976.

The virus is endemic to DRC, and causes an acute, serious illness, which is often fatal if untreated. The virus is transmitted to human through contact with wild animals and can then be passed from person to person. Ebola is fatal in about 50 per cent of cases.

An outbreak in West Africa that began in 2014 left more than 11,000 dead across six countries, and was not declared officially over by WHO until the beginning of 2016.

[First symptoms](#) generally include the sudden onset of fever, fatigue, muscle pain, headache and sore throat. This is followed by vomiting, diarrhoea.

[Obese people more likely to smoke, says new gene research: WHO](#)

New research indicates that people who are genetically prone to being overweight have a higher risk of taking up smoking – and they are likely to smoke more than average – UN scientists said on Wednesday.

According to Dr. Paul Brennan from [IARC](#), the International Agency for Research on Cancer, around 70 genes have been identified for the first time that could explain this behaviour. IARC is a [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) agency, mandated to conduct research on the causes of cancer, and its

prevention.

The study, which is being published on Thursday in the *British Medical Journal*, and funded by Cancer Research UK, found that increased body mass index (BMI), body fat percentage and even waist circumference, were associated with “a higher risk of being a smoker, and with greater smoking intensity, measured by the number of cigarettes smoked per day”.

“Based on genetic markers of obesity, the study allows us to better understand the complex relationship between obesity and important smoking habits,” said Dr. Brennan, a genetic epidemiology expert with IARC, and one of the authors of the study.

He added that the study showing the relationship between body mass and smoking, also suggested that there was possibly a “common biological basis for addictive behaviours, such as nicotine addiction and higher energy intake”.

Dr. Brennan also noted that in understanding the link better, it could also be useful as a tool in helping people to stop smoking – a habit that kills more than 7 million people each year, according to WHO.

It is well established that smokers have a lower body weight on average than non-smokers, possibly due to reduced appetite, but that many gain weight after they stop smoking.

“However, among smokers, those who smoke more intensively, tend to weigh more,” said IARC.

IARC Director, Dr. Christopher Wild, said that “prevention of smoking is key to reducing the global burden of cancer and other chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes”.

He added that obesity was among the most important preventable causes of those chronic illnesses. “These new results provide intriguing insights into the potential benefits of jointly addressing these risk factors.”

[Leading Palestinian legislator calls for ‘new international engagement’ in two-state solution](#)

Describing a viable two-state solution to end the Palestine-Israel conflict as “very much in doubt”, a leading Palestinian legislator called on Wednesday for “new international engagement” to move the process forward.

In an interview with *UN News*, Hanan Ashrawi, an Executive Committee Member of the Palestine Liberation Organization, described the deaths and injuries of Palestinians at the Gaza border on Monday as a “massacre”, adding that Palestinians everywhere were one people, who “share the same pain, the same sorrows, the same aspirations, the same hopes”.

The veteran peace negotiator and legislator, is at UN Headquarters in New York, to take part in a forum organized by the [UN Committee](#) on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

Following the United States decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem this week – and act which she described as “becoming complicit in the occupation” – she said Palestinians “want a new multilateral mechanism; we want a new international engagement.”

She said that peace negotiations with Israel since the early 1990s, brokered by the US, had not worked: “The US certainly has joined Israel as a partner in crime. It has joined Israel in violating international law and the resolutions of the Security Council on Jerusalem and so on. So, what we need to do is to bypass these obstacles...and to find a sort of global forum for the solution,” she said.

Asked if a two-state solution with both countries living side-by-side in peace, was still possible, Ms. Ashrawi said: “This is very much in doubt, it’s very questionable. Unless there is the will to engage, to intervene effectively – not just to end settlement activities but to begin to dismantle settlements – Israel will have succeeded in super-imposing Greater Israel on all of historical Palestine.”

Asked for her view on calls from senior UN officials for Hamas in Gaza to stop inciting any violence at the border, she said the militant group was being used as a “convenient scapegoat” to deflect blame and accountability away from Israel.

“It is not Hamas who is responsible for the killing fields that Israel has carried out in Gaza. The people who are on this march to return; these unarmed civilian protests against the moving of the American embassy – against the moving of American embassy...these are expressions of will by the Palestinian people, who are protesting, demonstrating on their own lands, she said, adding that “they are sending a message not just to Israel but to the rest of the world that we are a people who are alive and we want to live, and we want our freedom and we want our rights. This is not a sort of incitement or instigation by Hamas.”

[**UN envoy ‘encouraged’ by Astana talks**](#)

on avoiding 'worst-case scenario' in Syria's Idlib

The United Nations Special Envoy for Syria on Wednesday detailed his most recent efforts to revive stalled peace talks which could end the brutal conflict that has been raging there for more than seven years.

“As instructed by the Secretary-General, I have been consulting with a broad spectrum of relevant stakeholders and proactively identified options for a meaningful re-launch” of the complex UN-led efforts in Geneva, to forge a lasting peace, said Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, briefing the Security Council via video-link.

Since January 2016, the Geneva-based envoy has conducted several rounds of negotiations between the warring Syrian parties – talks known as the Geneva process. The last meeting took place in Vienna, in late January.

The talks focus on how Syria will be governed; a timetable and process to draft a new constitution; and the holding of elections as the basis for a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned process, to end the brutal conflict.

Mr. de Mistura said he had been on a “tour” of consultations over the past two weeks, meeting with the Syrian Government and opposition, as well as Security Council members. He had also held talks with members of the Arab League, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, the European Union’s High Representative – as well as key European governments -Turkey, Russia and Iran.

“I returned to Geneva with a mixed picture,” he said, explaining that significant differences still remain between key actors, but all agree on the need to de-escalate the fighting and form a UN-sponsored constitutional committee.

They also agree on the need to create a “safe, calm and neutral environment”, he said, that enables the achievements of objectives in the political process and the need to respect Syria’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence.

“But these commonalities risk getting lost, especially in the absence of serious international dialogue,” Mr. de Mistura warned, adding that careful but proactive high-level diplomacy is required more than ever.

His office is assessing a number of creative options to revive and advance the Geneva process, he said.

Regarding the northern rebel-held area of Idlib, Mr. de Mistura said that if the Syrian government’s previously-used tactic of bombing a rebel territory followed by negotiations and then mass evacuations is repeated in Idlib, it could affect “six times” more people than the battle to retake the suburbs of

Ghouta, near the capital Damascus.

“If we see a Ghouta scenario in Idlib, this could be six times worse, affecting 2.3 million people,” Mr. de Mistura said.