

## 'Marathon of suffering' in Syria conflict, far from over: UN humanitarian advisor

The fighting in Syria "is not over" and neither is the "marathon of suffering" for millions of people in the war-torn country, a senior aid official at the UN said on Thursday.

Jan Egeland, Special Advisor to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, was speaking to journalists after a scheduled humanitarian task force meeting in Geneva.

"It's not over, and that's what I fear, people think it's over," he said, amid reports that "tens of thousands of people" from Rural Damascus were preparing to evacuate to Idlib in the north-west of the country.

"We've still only 23 per cent of humanitarian programmes funded and we're now in May," Mr Egeland said, warning that there was "no cash ...available to humanitarian actors" as "desperate, exhausted people arrive now every day in Idlib. There is no money for the operations."

He called on countries not to slow down their support "before this marathon of suffering is over."

Mr. Egeland's comments come amid ongoing aid-access challenges, in many areas of Syria, linked to mass displacement and acute needs caused by more than seven years of war.

One year ago, well over four million people lived in so-called hard-to-reach locations where aid access was extremely unreliable, and hundreds of thousands more were trapped by surrounding forces.

Today, two million people remain in hard-to-reach areas in Syria and 11,000 still live in besieged locations; but the apparent progress in terms of numbers, is deceptive, the UN Special Advisor explained:

"It is a good thing that people are not any longer living massively in besieged areas, and that much fewer people live in hard-to-reach areas. But when this comes at the cost of horrific battles in heavily populated areas, and when it comes because of agreements made by a small group of military people and politicians, too often humanitarian concerns and the protection concerns for the civilian population is lost."

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), displacement in some parts of Syria is as high as it was at the beginning of the crisis.

OCHA's records indicate that for every person who returns home voluntarily, another three people are newly displaced.

Areas of particular concern include Afrin in the north, the former ISIL stronghold of Raqqa, as well as Eastern Ghouta outside Damascus and Yarmouk in the south of the capital – where the UN has highly-restricted access.

But Mr. Egeland said his “worry number one” was Idlib, which is already home to more than two million people.

“They are living out in the open, they are living in congested displacement camps...crammed in collective centres,” he said.

“They arrive at 2am, you know, sort of every night now, just to find that they can hardly get a bed anywhere offered by completely overwhelmed humanitarian actors. So we cannot have a war in Idlib,” he implored.

Amid reports that armed groups are continuing to strike what Mr Egeland called “bad humanitarian agreements” to allow civilians to leave several conflict zones including the besieged Shia towns of Foah and Kafraya in the north-west and Yarmouk south of Damascus, he said it was important that people went to a place of their choosing.

Mr. Egeland also expressed concern for the 40,000 people living in displacement camps near eastern Ghouta – previously home to 390,000 people – amid a reported lack of freedom of movement for civilians, particularly men.

The veteran aid chief also defended the value of the UN-coordinated “deconfliction system” which offers protection to humanitarian locations whose location is communicated to warring parties.

More than 660 sites had now asked the UN to transmit their coordinates to Member States whose militaries are operating within Syria, Mr. Egeland said, and more than 500 of those requests had come this year alone.

“I’m surprised really by those who say they really want to help protect medical facilities, that they are questioning the whole value of trying to get a deconfliction system up in the Syria war, like we have it in Yemen, we have it in Afghanistan, we have it in Mali and many other conflicts,” he added.

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## **Mental health ‘neglected issue’ but key to achieving Global Goals, say UN chiefs**

Mental health remains one of the most neglected global health issues, even though it is critical to the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by world leaders, top United Nations officials have said

at an event in London.

“One in four people experience a mental health episode in their lifetime, but the issue remains largely neglected,” said UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) in his opening remarks to a roundtable discussion on mental health, co-organized by his office, the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), and the Wellcome Trust, a charitable foundation that supports scientists and researchers.

“The UN is committed to working with partners to promote full mental health and wellbeing for all,” Mr. Guterres added.

The UN is committed to working with partners to promote full mental health and wellbeing for all – *UN Secretary-General António Guterres*

The roundtable discussion, held Wednesday evening, included Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, [UN Children’s Fund](#) (UNICEF) Executive Director Henrietta Fore, and some 20 others from academia, government and civil society.

A main message coming out of the discussion was growing support for the notion that there can be “no health without mental health” and there is a need to look beyond the health sector, for creative solutions to tackle the root causes of deteriorating mental health.

Inadequate care does not come about in a vacuum, and there are societal as well as environmental factors involved, the roundtable heard.

Ms. Mohammed explained that mental health is not just an issue for the health sector because it also related to equality and basic individual rights. In this regard, she called for greater cross-sectoral investment to address the problem.

The event was held on the margins of the annual meeting of the UN Chief Executives Board (CEB) – one of the semi-annual meetings that brings together, under the chairmanship of the Secretary-General, the executive heads of 31 agencies and specialized UN organizations.

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## [\*\*UN chief condemns violence in Central African Republic capital Bangui\*\*](#)

Voicing concern over inflammatory rhetoric in the wake of widespread violence in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), United Nations

Secretary-General António Guterres has called on all actors to remain calm and to work together to bring peace to the country.

["There is no justification for incitement to violence or hate speech,"](#) said the Secretary-General in a statement attributable to his spokesperson.

At least 22 people have been killed and over 100 injured in clashes, which erupted following the arrest of a member of a criminal group by CAR's security forces.

In the ensuing violence, a church was attacked and a pastor killed. Two members of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the country, known by its French acronym MINUSCA, were also wounded – one seriously – when they were pelted with stones by a crowd.

In the statement, the UN chief also called on the national authorities to investigate the attacks and promptly bring those responsible to justice.

He reaffirmed his support to the country and to MINUSCA's role to protect civilians and stabilize the country.

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## [Women journalists in Afghanistan defiant in the face of violence](#)

The dangers of working as a journalist in Afghanistan have been dramatically underlined by an attack in the capital Kabul on Monday in which nine Afghan photographers and reporters were killed. They had gone to report on a suicide attack, and were targeted by a second suicide bomber when they arrived on the scene.

The cold-blooded murder took place just days before World Press Freedom Day marked annually on May 3rd.

Outside the Afghan capital, the dangers of reporting the news, particularly as a woman, have never been so apparent.

Sediqa Sherzai is the news director of Radio-TV Roshani, a media organization in Kunduz in the north of Afghanistan. Her female reporters are under constant threat not only from insurgents but also from men who do not want women to work in the media.

"When insurgents seized Kunduz in 2015, they came immediately for our station because they didn't like our content focused on women's rights," she said. "Even though most of our reporters fled in advance of their arrival. They looted our equipment and destroyed what they could not take."

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## **Elections**

Despite the challenges of working as a woman in the media in a conservative and conflict-affected country, Sediqa Sherzai is committed to ensuring that the voices of Afghan women are heard ahead of the country's elections slated for October this year.

In the volatile province of Kunduz where some territory is beyond government control, women say they fear to speak to the media and talk about human rights, much less advocate openly for democracy and change. Even Sediqa Sherzai and her staff of women shy away from photographs, cautiously protecting their identities.

Elections are considered essential to solidify fragile the social and human rights advances made during the last 17 years. The struggle for full women's suffrage in Afghanistan, reminiscent of similar fights in centuries past in other nations, has gained broader international support in the last two decades.

## **UN in Afghanistan**

Pushing for change, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has supported initiatives that offer space for Afghan women from across all sectors of society to advocate against oppression and conflict, and also to stand up for basic human rights, including their right to vote.

UNAMA's chief, Tadamichi Yamamoto, said on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day that the UN continues to push for the government "to implement measures to improve journalist safety and foster an open media where no voice is silenced through fear."

Women don't want to talk because they are under threat, but also because of traditional restrictions, including fathers and husbands forbidding them from talking – *Journalist Sediqa Sherzai*

Ms Sherzai said the unwritten code to silence women runs deep in Kunduz. "Women don't want to talk because they are under threat, but also because of traditional restrictions, including fathers and husbands forbidding them from talking."

As news director in a city besieged by war, she faces the dilemma of trying to dispatch reporters to the field. "We can't say we are accurately reflecting the views of women when even our own female reporters are under constant threat," she said.

## Democracy

Even if Kunduz, a bustling city of some 500,000 citizens, was not enduring near-constant conflict, there would still be immense obstacles standing in the way of women's full participation in democracy, according to media officials and human rights advocates.

"This is a pervasive issue across our society as even highly literate men in business and in government don't want their women to vote," said Lida Sherzad, an advocate working with the Afghanistan Women's Network (AWN). "There is an immense price to pay in terms of psychological damage and pressure on women, including their children, and these mothers are asking me why they should even participate in elections if no one is protecting them."

The right for women to vote goes hand in hand with several of AWN's efforts to create new social networks and connect different groups of women in a common effort to speak out for women's leadership and to end violence against women.

Women's rights advocates say that while progress has been slow at times, the last 17 years have witnessed immense gains for Afghan women, who under Taliban rule in late 1990s and through most of 2001 were confined to their homes and prevented from obtaining an education.

Many women working in the media in Kunduz left during the Taliban rule, but Sediqa Sherzai said that stand' if the insurgents re-enter the city for a third time in five years, she will "defend the station if necessary."

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## [South Sudan: UN Mission chief urges warring parties to abide by truce agreement](#)

The surge of violence in South Sudan's Unity region will likely continue despite the ceasefire accord signed last year by warring parties, the top United Nations official in the African country said on Tuesday.

"All sides need to [abide by what they agreed to](#) and have their actions on the ground carefully monitored and scrutinized," said David Shearer, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN peacekeeping mission in the country, known as UNMISS, referring to the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed in December 2017.

"The intensification of the conflict is having a serious human impact. Hundreds of people are sheltering next to the UN base," he said. "We saw

tukuls (huts) burnt to the ground. We were told that elderly people and children had been killed and medical clinics ransacked.”

Mr. Shearer made his comments during a visit to Leer and Dublual in the Unity region to see first-hand the impact of the deteriorating security situation on communities.

“I met a little girl who had been shot through her stomach and back. She is just one example of dozens of people injured and killed over recent weeks,” said Mr. Shearer. “We also know that hundreds, if not thousands, of people have fled into the swamps and are surviving on wild vegetables and fruit.”

Mr. Shearer and his mission team met with both Government and opposition leaders in the area, urging them to lay down their weapons, reconcile, and work together to build durable peace.

He said the signing of the Agreement last year had given the peace process momentum, but that it was at risk of unravelling without genuine political will.

“Earlier this year it felt like we were moving in the right direction. But after seeing the effects on civilians of this conflict, I believe there is a real risk that the situation will deteriorate further and undermine the chance for lasting peace.”

Mr. Shearer said UNMISS would continue to fulfill its mandate.

“Our job is still to protect people and help them get through these dark times so that the peace process can work and we can find a durable solution. We will do all we can to support the people of South Sudan,” he said.