

# Senior UN official calls on Israel to halt plans for relocating Palestinian Bedouin communities in West Bank

A senior United Nations humanitarian official on Wednesday called on Israeli authorities to halt plans to demolish Palestinian-owned structures and cease plans for the relocation of Palestinian Bedouin communities in the West Bank.

“We are monitoring the situation in Khan al Ahmar closely and are [deeply concerned](#) by what we see here, and in the scores of other vulnerable Bedouin communities,” UN Humanitarian Coordinator Jamie McGoldrick said.

Mr. McGoldrick visited the Khan al Ahmar-Abu al Helu, located on the outskirts of East Jerusalem in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, with Scott Anderson, the UN [Relief and Works Agency](#)’s Director of Operations in the West Bank, and Palestinian officials.

“We call on the Israeli authorities to respect their legal obligations, as the occupying power, including through stopping the demolition of Palestinian-owned structures and ceasing plans for the relocation of Palestinian Bedouin communities,” Mr. McGoldrick stressed.

Khan al Ahmar-Abu al Helu is home to 181 people, 53 per cent of whom are children and 95 per cent of whom are Palestine refugees registered with the UN agency.

It is one of 46 Bedouin communities in the central West Bank that the UN considers being at risk of forcible transfer, due to a coercive environment generated by Israeli practices and policies, plans to move the communities from their current locations and other reasons.

Eighteen of these communities, including Khan al Ahmar, are located in or next to an area slated in part for a settlement plan – reportedly aimed at creating a continuous built-up area between Ma’ale Adumim and East Jerusalem.

Nearly all of the Khan al Ahmar community’s structures risk demolition by the Israeli authorities, including the school, initially built with donor support that serves some 170 students from the community and four surrounding ones, according to the [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#).

“The entire community of Khan el Ahmar-Abu al Helu, the vast majority of whom are Palestine refugees and who are amongst the most vulnerable Bedouin communities in the West Bank, is facing the risk of demolitions of their structures and relocation,” said Mr. Anderson.

For years, the residents have insisted on the right to return to their original lands, in what is now southern Israel, and, until this occurs, asks for international support to remain in their current location.

“The humanitarian impact of home demolition is severe and long lasting. It is well documented in previous instances that the transfer of Bedouin communities into urban settings is socially and economically non-viable. The Khan al Ahmar-Abu al Helu community has repeatedly called for the provision of suitable planning solutions and services in its current location,” Mr. Anderson added.

The visit came in advance of next week’s Israeli High Court of Justice case, which may determine the fate of the structures and Israeli relocation plan.

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## [UN hails release of more than 200 child soldiers in South Sudan](#)

Two hundred and seven child soldiers have been released by armed groups in South Sudan, part of a series of planned discharges that should see nearly 1,000 children return home over the coming months.

The move, facilitated by [United Nations Children’s Fund \(UNICEF\)](#), follows the release of 300 children by armed groups in early February.

“No child should ever have to pick up a weapon and fight” [said](#) Mahimbo Mdoe, the head of UNICEF programmes in the country.

“For every child released, today marks the start of a new life,” he said. “We are proud to support these children as they return to their families and start to build a brighter future.”

But officials also noted that thousands more children remain in the hands of armed groups in South Sudan, in violation of international law.

This week’s discharge took place in Bakiwiri, a rural community in Western Equatoria state.

The children will now undergo medical screenings and receive counselling and psychosocial support as part of the reintegration programme, said UNICEF. Once home, they will also have access to vocational training as well as age-specific education services in schools and accelerated learning centres.

Their families will also be provided with three months’ worth of food assistance to support reintegration.

Those discharged – 112 boys, 95 girls – were from the South Sudan National Liberation Movement and Sudan People’s Liberation Army-In Opposition.

## **About 19,000 children still remain in armed groups**

However, despite this release, and the one before it, there are still about 19,000 children in use by armed forces and groups in South Sudan. And with conflict lingering in the world's youngest nation, the risk that children will be used in fighting remains.

"So long as the recruitment and use of children by armed groups continues, these groups fail on their commitment to uphold the rights of children under international law," underscored UNICEF.

As peace talks resume, the UN agency has called on all parties to the conflict to end the use of children and to release all children in their ranks.

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has spent much of its short life mired in conflict, as what began as a political face-off between President Salva Kiir and former Vice-President Riek Machar erupted into full-blown war late in 2013.

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## **Justice must be done for Syria crimes, says head of UN body building cases for prosecution**

Those who committed the most serious crimes in Syria must be identified, and criminal case files must be built as the basis for prosecutions, the head of a United Nations body assisting these efforts said Wednesday.

"Perpetrators of core international crimes must be held accountable," Catherine Marchi-Uhel, head of the [International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism](#), told diplomats during an informal meeting in New York organized by the UN General Assembly, an intergovernmental body consisting of 193 Member States.

Established in December 2016 by the Assembly, the Mechanism is mandated to conduct two tasks: one, to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyze evidence of violations; and second, to prepare files to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings in national, regional or international courts, in accordance with international law.

"The horrors suffered by the Syrian people over the past seven years defy description," she said. "The continuing widespread death and suffering, including recent allegations on the use of chemical weapons, are a stark reminder of the importance of justice for victims."

Ms. Marchi-Uhel said the communities most affected by these events have been “understandably” disillusioned by the prospects of accessing that justice.

So, by establishing the Mechanism, the Assembly took a crucial step towards ensuring accountability for these crimes.

She called on all UN Member States to provide all the support needed for the Mechanism to fulfil its important tasks, by committing funding, preferably on a multi-year basis, and continuing to support regular budget funding for the Mechanism.;

She also urged countries to implement any changes to national legislative frameworks that may be required to facilitate cooperation between States and the Mechanism, and share relevant material about international crimes committed in Syria, including material previously provided to the Joint Investigative Mechanism and to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and its Fact-Finding Mission.

Further, she asked nations to consider entering into cooperative agreements with the Mechanism to provide witness protection and support services.

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## [UN-sponsored group tightens controls on spread of crop-attacking pests](#)

With an estimated \$220 billion of the global harvest lost to plant pests each year, the agency charged with fighting this scourge has adopted new standards and measures to safeguard internationally traded agricultural and forestry products.

Preventing the introduction of plant diseases and pests to new environments is “[challenging work](#) with high stakes,” the deputy head of the UN agriculture agency, Maria Helena Semedo, said in Rome Wednesday at the annual meeting of the [International Plant Protection](#) Convention (IPPC).

“Each year an estimated 10-16 per cent of our global harvest is lost to plant pests – a loss estimated at \$220 billion,” said Ms. Semedo, the Deputy Director-General of the UN Food Agriculture Organization (FAO). The agency oversees implementation of the plant protection treaty as part of its mandate to fight world hunger and promote the development of farming and forestry.

Crop pests are “dangerous hitchhikers,” as experts put it, that can wreak havoc on biodiversity, food security and trade by jumping borders through trade in infected fruits, crops, seeds and even ornamental plants. The wooden containers and boxes they travel in can act as vectors, while timber and wood products like furniture can also harbour stowaways.

For instance, oriental fruit flies, or *Bactrocera dorsalis*, which originated in Asia, have now spread to at least 65 countries, and their presence in Africa costs the continent an estimated \$2 billion in annual losses because other countries have banned the import of fruits from afflicted countries.

New measures adopted by the IPPC include a stronger standard for the use of heat vapour to kill oriental fruit flies. The control technique outlined under the new measure kills 99.98 per cent of the bug's eggs and larvae.

IPPC endorsed new diagnostic protocols for sudden oak death, a fungi-like organism of unknown origin that attacks a wide range of trees and shrubs in nurseries, introduced into western North America and western Europe through the ornamental plants trade.

The latest rules also include cold treatment techniques that freeze and kill pests, those that raise temperatures past their survival threshold, as well as a new diagnostic protocol for tospoviruses, which affect 1,000 plant species and are causing devastating losses, especially to tomato, potato and squash and cucumber yields.

Since its establishment in 1952, the IPPC has promulgated some 100 standards covering a broad range of phytosanitary issues, and it also runs numerous programs to share best-practices and build the capacity of developing countries to manage plant diseases and pests, both at home and in trade flows.

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## [Mediator seeks 'relaunch' of UN-led Syrian talks](#)

A renewed United Nations-led diplomatic push is under way for a "meaningful relaunch" of [intra-Syrian talks](#) by the Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, his office has announced.

In a [statement](#) released on Wednesday, the veteran negotiator is said to be engaged in "high-level consultations [...] with the aim of proactively ascertaining the options" for kick-starting the UN-facilitated political process as called for in Security Council [resolution 2254](#) (2015).

Agreed by the 15-member body in 2015, that text calls for free and fair elections for all Syrians and a newly-drafted constitution, as the basis for a Syrian-led, Syrian owned process to end the conflict.

More than seven years of war there have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, displaced millions and levelled entire cities.

Since January 2016, the Special Envoy has conducted several rounds of negotiations between the warring Syrian parties, the last of which was held in Geneva in December 2017, followed by Vienna talks in late January.

So far this week, Mr. de Mistura has met foreign ministers from several countries participating in the League of Arab States summit in Saudi Arabia.

He was due to hold discussions with senior officials in Turkey on Wednesday, before heading to Russia and Iran for more high-level meetings, according to his team.

Mr. de Mistura is also expected to consult European ministers and senior representatives from the United States at a conference in support of Syria and the region, including bolstering the UN-led political process, taking place in Brussels next week.

The statement by the Office of the Special Envoy follows a warning by the UN Secretary-General last weekend that tensions risk escalating beyond Syria.

Antonio Guterres's call came in response to air strikes by the United States, France and the United Kingdom, that followed an alleged chemical weapons attack on opposition-held territory outside the capital Damascus 11 days ago.

Earlier today, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons ([OPCW](#)) reported that a UN-led security team sent to assess the sites of the suspected attacks and prepare for the arrival of OPCW inspectors [came under small arms fire](#) and an explosive was detonated.

"At present, we do not know when the [Fact-finding Mission] team can be deployed to Douma," OPCW chief Ahmet Üzümcü said. The team is to look into the alleged use of toxic chemicals, reportedly chlorine, at the sites, which reportedly left dozens dead.