

Syrians still living on 'razor edge' as UN launches \$8.8 billion dollar appeal

An \$8.8 billion funding appeal has been issued by the UN to help millions of Syrians who live a "razor-edge existence" inside and outside the war-torn country, along with the communities struggling to host them.

Eight years since the war began, 12 million Syrians are either refugees or displaced inside Syria; adding up to around half the pre-war population.

Violence has lessened in recent months but the "bombs are still falling", the chair of a [Human Rights Council](#)-appointed probe, Paulo Pinheiro, told the forum on Tuesday, his comments coming amid airstrikes in opposition-held north-west Idlib governorate and reports that ISIL extremists are close to defeat in eastern Syria.

'Agonizing choices' for displaced families

"Around 70 per cent of Syrian refugees live a razor-edge existence below the poverty line," said [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#), Filippo Grandi in a [joint statement](#) on Wednesday, who recently visited Syria and Lebanon, where refugees make up a quarter of the population.

"Reduced assistance due to funding cuts means that refugees are forced to make agonizing choices every day," Mr. Grandi added, "such as taking children out of school to work, or reducing meals."

Under the UN appeal, \$3.3 billion is required for the response inside Syria, and \$5.5 billion is needed for refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries.

Warning that "the crisis is not over", [UN humanitarian chief](#) Mark Lowcock said that without "immediate and substantial" funding, life-saving assistance would likely be affected.

"Every woman, man, girl and boy in Syria who need our help" should get it, Mr. Lowcock insisted.

Echoing that message, Mr. Grandi insisted that Syria's neighbours "who have been sheltering millions of Syrian refugees for the past eight years" require "no less support".

UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)) Administrator, Achim Steiner, also warned of "soaring" poverty inside Syria, before highlighting the need to support Syria's neighbours too.

"In Syria, poverty is soaring, basic service infrastructure is damaged or

destroyed, and the social fabric is strained to the limit,” Mr Steiner said. “Host governments and communities in countries neighbouring Syria need our support to stay the course in extending their generosity to refugees while at the same time maintaining the momentum of their own development path.”

‘Bombs are still falling’, Human Rights Council hears

At the Human Rights Council, the head of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria spoke of the “staggering” number of desperate Syrians forced to flee violence.

“Bombs are still falling and civilians continue to pay with their lives for the objectives of the parties to the conflict”, Paulo Pinheiro said, noting that ongoing hostilities “threaten the lives and livelihoods of those daring to return”.

Insisting that the conflict – now in its ninth year – continues to cause scores of civilian casualties, Mr. Pinheiro said that Syria’s displaced population continues to face many other problems, including in areas retaken by Government forces.

“Persecution, discrimination, and other forms of ill-treatment continue in Idlib, Douma, Dara’a, and northern Homs,” he said. “Arbitrary arrests and detentions continue in Government-controlled areas, including eastern Ghouta, Dara’a, and northern Homs.”

Executions and deaths in detention have also continued, the [Commission](#) chair said on Tuesday, detailing “ad hoc and anti-terror courts of the Syrian Government”, along with “makeshift justice mechanisms” of armed groups and terrorist organisations.

Speaking as the concerned country, the Syrian delegation criticized what it called the politicized climate of the debate and insisted that its Government was simply trying to protect Syrian citizens from terrorism.

[In South Sudan, mothers teaching daughters ‘safer’ ways to survive rape](#)

Sexual attacks in South Sudan are so common that mothers now teach their daughters how to survive the ordeal of being raped, in such a way as to minimize the violence. That’s according to Yasmin Sooka, chair of the [UN Commission on Human Rights](#), who was [speaking on Tuesday](#) in front of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, during its latest session.

She said that “the protracted conflict in South Sudan has had the most

profound impact on women and girls, who have suffered sexual violence, including multiple rapes, at the hands of both government forces and opposition forces.”

The Commission, she added, has documented countless incidents of “brutal rapes including multiple gang rapes, sexual slavery, abductions, forced marriage, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, and mutilation of sexual organs, as well as killing.”

The on-going culture of sexual violence on all sides, comes despite the signing of a [Revitalized Agreement last September](#), which Ms. Sooka said had led to an “overall improvement” in peace and security, although fighting has continued in Yei state.

The world’s youngest country has become riven by civil conflict between forces loyal to the President and his former Vice-President, since 2013, leading to thousands of deaths, more than 2.2 million refugees who have fled across the border, famine in some areas, and a devastated economy.

‘Every societal norm’ being broken

“The Commission was outraged by the testimony of many South Sudanese women who said that the risk of rape is so high in going out of the Protection of Civilians sites to forage for food and collect wood”, said Ms. Sooka, “that they have had to teach their daughters how to respond to their rapists...to minimize the violence.”

The rights expert also noted that thousands of youngsters had been recruited by commanders who promised them that they could loot villages and rape women and girls, in lieu of payment.

“These are not random incidents of sexual violence but a systematic widespread pattern and characteristic of the conflict in South Sudan, where rape and sexual violence are used as a tactic of warfare against women and girls by all of the warring parties to sow terror and fear amongst the civilian population”, said the Commission Chairperson.

“No one is safe – not young boys, the elderly or the disabled, as the belligerents break every societal norm that has long held the people of South Sudan together.”

Responding to the claims, South Sudan’s Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Paulino Wanawilla Unango, insisted that sexual offences were punishable under national law.

Mr. Unango also told the Human Rights Council that there had been “no serious military engagement” between Government forces and any other armed group.

Europe and UN form bulwark against 'might makes right' worldview, EU foreign affairs chief tells Security Council

Ms. Mogherini said that the EU is investing in cooperation with the UN system as never before, and reminded the Security Council that EU Member States collectively contribute one-third of the UN peacekeeping budget, which is "more than any other global power."

Explaining that EU cooperation with the UN and Africa goes well beyond peacekeeping, Ms. Mogherini said that the current approach of the EU is to act as a "partner of equals" with the continent, rather than simply as a donor, setting common priorities and collaborating closely with the African Union and United Nations. Working together in this way, the three organizations have helped some 30,000 African migrants, formerly held in Libyan detention centres, to voluntarily return home, or find international protection, she said.

She described the United Nations as the key partner for the EU on conflict resolution in Africa, and said that "wherever there is a peace process and a UN peacekeeping mission, the European Union is there to support politically, financially, and with our own missions."

Examples of EU-UN cooperation:

- Syria: the EU and UN are co-chairing the third Brussels conference on the future of Syria and the region,
 - Libya: The EU and UN are members of the "Libya Quartet," (EU, UN, League of Arab States and African Union), which is coordinating action to bring peace to Libya,
 - Venezuela: the EU is working with UN agencies to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those in need,
 - Mali: the EU is supporting the UN mission in Mali with European training and capacity building missions,
 - [Sustainable Development Goals](#): the EU is strongly committed to the full implementation of the SDGs
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Political power of women suffering 'serious regression', General Assembly President warns

The former Ecuadorian Minister of Foreign Affairs who leads the 193-member world body, pointed out that in 2105 it would have taken 30 years to close the gender gap, but now, she told the [Commission on the Status of Women](#) (CSW), if current trends continue, gender parity will not be reached for "107 years".

She commended the under-appreciated women of past who "were made invisible, erased from history", saying they "have been protagonists in the destinies of entire nations; of culture and political thinking; science and innovation; and the most significant social changes".

"We don't know anything about many of them" she continued. But for those we do, we must recognize their bravery and "the immense contribution" they made to humanity. "Today we are here for them", she underscored.

Ms. Espinosa praised the leap forward towards full gender parity at the UN, under [Secretary-General António Guterres](#), saying it was a "testament to the fact that when there is political will, and leadership, it is possible to change the course of history".

'Push back against the push backs'

Mr. Guterres informed the high-level event that "for the first time in history, the UN Senior Management Group is comprised of more women than men", adding "we have achieved another first – parity among the Resident Coordinators – our leading officials on the ground."

He noted that resistance and obstacles remained to further progress at the UN, promising that: "We will push back against the pushbacks, and we will not give up until we reach parity across the board".

While the UN was on its way "to reaching parity at all senior levels by 2021", Mr. Guterres lamented that it was far from the case elsewhere.

women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions in every region of the world – *UN chief*

Women and girls represent [half of the global population](#), yet, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions in every region of the world.

As of October, only nine per cent of Member States had a female Head of State or Government and only 24 per cent of parliamentarians were women, according to the UN.

Moreover, in 31 States, women account for less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses, with four chambers lacking any women members at all. And among the 2018 “Fortune 500” rankings of leading US businesses, only 24 have women CEOs and 12 companies have no women at all on their board.

“We need parity to change power relations”, Mr. Guterres said in conclusion, thanking the gathering “for powering the change our world needs”.

“Without women in politics, sustainable development, human rights and peace, will be seriously jeopardized,” she stated. We need more women in politics”.

‘Obligated to be changemakers’

Speaking on behalf of [UN Women](#), Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said it was “unprecedented” for women to currently hold the presidencies of the General Assembly, Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), UN Women’s board and CSW chair, along with the Deputy Secretary-General post.

While observing that “there are changes”, she flagged some of many challenges, such as that only 10 countries have gender-equal cabinets and only five per cent of all corporate CEOs are women, adding “and these numbers are coming down”.

Because our institutions were “made for men and by men”, we need to make changes otherwise “we are slipping on the job”, Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka said.

“We therefore, are obligated to be changemakers wherever we are and open paths for other women and lift as we climb”, the UN Women chief stated.

Many speakers highlighted how women are held to a different standard, including having to meet certain requirements when it comes to how they look in public.

Katrín Jakobsdóttir, the Prime Minister of Iceland, noted that just 10 minutes before taking the podium, she had been asked where the Prime Minister of Iceland was. For her part, Marta Lucía Ramírez, Vice-President of Colombia, said that until she introduced legislation to change it, women were prohibited from rising to the rank of General in the Armed Forces.

Only one-in-five ministers is a woman

We need “bold moves” if “we are to dramatically increase women’s representation in decision-making” concluded Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka.

[DR Congo: ‘New waves of violence’ likely, UN warns, unless State acts to prevent intercommunal reprisals in Yumbi territory](#)

“New waves of violence” could erupt “at any time” in western Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the UN rights office [warned on Tuesday](#), unless the Government acts to ease “tensions and resentment” between the two communities involved.

Several days of planned and orchestrated killings took place in Mai-Ndombe province, in Yumbi territory at the end of last year, where hundreds of men, women and children were killed. The final assessment of a UN [probe](#) into the events of 16-18 December, says the violence may amount to crimes against humanity.

Preliminary results of the investigation [released last month](#), found evidence of extended attacks carried out between 16 and 18 December 2018, in four locations. Initially, it was reported that 890 people had been killed and thousands displaced as a result of clashes between the Banunu and Batende communities, UN Human Rights Office ([OHCHR](#)) spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani told journalists in Geneva.

“We’ve been able to verify fully that at least 535 men, women and children were killed and 111 others were injured in Yumbi town, Bongende village and Nkolo II village,” Ms. Shamdasani said.

These figures “are most likely an underestimate”, she continued, as the bodies of other victims “are believed to have been thrown into the Congo River”.

Thousands still displaced in Republic of Congo

The [OHCHR](#) spokesperson also explained that it was not possible to confirm the number of persons still missing as an estimated 19,000 people were displaced by the violence, 16,000 of whom crossed the Congo River into the Republic of the Congo.

According to the investigators – who come from the UN’s DRC peacekeeping mission, [MONUSCO](#), and the OHCHR team in the vast country – the violence was

triggered by a dispute over the burial of a Banunu chief, reportedly on Batende land.

The attacks were “strikingly similar” and characterized by their extreme violence and speed, leaving little time for people to escape”, Ms. Shamdasani said, noting that Batende villagers were “equipped with firearms, including hunting rifles, machetes, bows and arrows, and gasoline”.

Among the report’s findings are witness testimonies that victims were asked if they were ethnic Banunu, before being killed.

No proof of election link to gruesome attacks

Ms. Shamdasani highlighted other alleged “horrors” in the report, including how a two-year-old child was thrown into a septic tank and a woman raped after her three-year-old child was decapitated and her husband killed.

Faced with such evidence, the OHCHR officials highlighted the investigation’s conclusion that the crimes documented in Yumbi “may amount to the crimes against humanity of murder, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, as well as persecution”.

Asked whether there was a possible link between the intercommunal attacks and elections that were due to take place in December – but which were postponed to the end of March because of the violence – she said that no concrete proof had been found.

“There are going to be elections held in this territory on 31 March,” she said, “but of course these people who’ve been displaced and who’ve had to flee across the border to the Republic of Congo, will probably not be able to vote because of ongoing fears of violence and reality this impossibility for them to get back to their homes.”

‘Police left before attacks began’

Turning to the responsibility of the DRC Government to protect its citizens, Ms. Shamdasani insisted that there were “clear indications that there were rising tensions”.

She added: “There were police that had been deployed, but they left before the attacks actually took place, so there was a clear absence of preventive action.”

As for now, the final UN report states that “tensions and resentment between the two communities, combined with rumours of reprisals, could give rise to new waves of violence at any time.”

The UN Special Representative, and head of [MONUSCO](#), [Leila Zerrougui](#), called on the Government to take urgent measures to restore State authority in Yumbi territory, and to create conditions for the safe and voluntary return of the displaced.

“The neutral presence of State institutions, including the police, is

important to maintain law and order and prevent the risk of further violence”, she added.

In addition to an appeal to hold the perpetrators responsible for their actions, Ms. Shamdasani repeated the call by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Michelle Bachelet](#), for a truth and reconciliation between the Banunu and Batende communities to prevent further violence.