

# UN chief calls for unity in Security Council to avoid Syria situation 'spiraling out of control'

Amid the risks of the situation in Syria "spiraling out of control," the United Nations chief has appealed to the five permanent members of the Security Council to break the current impasse on reported use of chemical weapons in the war-torn country.

"I have also been closely following developments in the Security Council and regret that the Council has so far been unable to reach agreement on this issue," [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) said in a statement issued late Wednesday night.

"Let us not forget that, ultimately, our efforts must be about ending the terrible suffering of the Syrian people," he added.

Mr. Guterres said that he called the ambassadors of the five permanent Council members – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – on Wednesday to reiterate his "deep concern about the risks of the current impasse" and stressed the need to "avoid the situation spiraling out of control."

On Tuesday, the 15-member body voted on three separate draft resolutions in response to recent allegations of a chemical weapons attack in the Syrian town of Douma. None of the texts garnered enough support.

The [first draft considered today](#) – penned by the United States – which would have established a new investigative mechanism for one year, as well as identify those responsible for the use of chemical weapons, was rejected owing to a negative vote – or veto – from Russia.

Similarly, [a competing draft](#) – penned by Russia – which would have established the mechanism for one year as well but would have given the Security Council the responsibility to assign accountability for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, was also not adopted.

The Council rejected a third text – also proposed by Russia – which concerned the work of the fact-finding mission of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons ([OPCW](#)), the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which entered into force in 1997.

Despite the deadlock in the Security Council, OPCW has said that it would shortly [send a team](#) to Syria to "establish the facts" surrounding the incident.

On Wednesday, the UN [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) said that it has received reports that an estimated 500 patients at Syrian health facilities

have exhibited signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals, after the shelling of a Damascus suburb over the weekend.

WHO has demanded immediate unhindered access to the area to provide care to those affected, to assess the health impacts, and to deliver a comprehensive public health response.

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## [Syria: WHO demands 'unhindered access' to site of suspected chemical attack](#)

The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) said Wednesday that it has received reports that some 500 patients at Syrian health facilities have exhibited signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals, after the shelling of a Damascus suburb over the weekend.

"We should all be [outraged at these horrific reports](#) and images from Douma," Peter Salama, WHO Deputy Director-General for Emergency Preparedness and Response said, referring to reports from the agency's [health cluster](#) partners – a WHO-led team of 118 national and international nongovernmental organizations, UN agencies, national authorities and donors working inside Syria to provide emergency and trauma care, as well as basic health services.

According to those reports, patients at health facilities displayed signs of severe irritation of mucous membranes, respiratory failure and disruption to central nervous systems.

More than 70 people sheltering in basements have reportedly died, including 43 with symptoms consistent with exposure to highly toxic chemicals. Two health facilities were also reportedly affected by these attacks.

These detailed reports from WHO's partners come as the Security Council tried and failed on Tuesday to adopt two competing resolutions that would have established a mechanism to investigate the use of chemical weapons in Syria, as well as another concerning a fact-finding mission in the war-torn country.

[Secretary-General António Guterres](#) also [expressed his outrage](#) at reports that civilians in the enclave continued to be targeted by toxic agents, saying that any confirmed use of chemical weapons, by any party to the conflict, "is abhorrent and a clear violation of international law."

For its part, WHO demanded immediate unhindered access to the area to provide care to those affected, to assess the health impacts, and to deliver a comprehensive public health response.

WHO reminded the parties to the seven-year conflict of their obligation to

refrain from attacking medical facilities and personnel, in line with Security Council resolution [2286](#), which was adopted unanimously in 2016 and which also demanded an end to impunity for those responsible for such attacks.

The agency emphasized that any use of chemical weapons for harmful purposes is illegal under international law. Moreover, global norms against chemical weapons reflect a particular abhorrence to their disproportionate harm to the eldest, the most infirm, and the youngest among us.

WHO is currently coordinating the health cluster response for people displaced from Eastern Ghouta and stands ready to step up assistance to the newly-accessible areas there once access is granted.

Since 2012 there have been sporadic reports of chemical events in Syria. WHO has no formal role in the forensic investigation of the use of chemical weapons. When an event is reported, WHO's role is to conduct epidemiological investigations and implement public health emergency response measures, as necessary.

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## [‘Time to move from promises to action;’ UN envoy urges Malian parties to peace accord](#)

While Malians must ensure the successful holding of elections this year, their priority should be the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement, a senior United Nations official said Wednesday.

“The peace process is complex, but it is time to move from promises to action to meet agreed deadlines,” Mahamat Saleh Annadif, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), told the Security Council, adding that advancing the peace process and holding the elections must go hand in hand.

He noted that the entire political class agreed that elections must take place on time, with the utmost transparency and credibility. Just as the 2013 elections re-established constitutional order in Mali, those in 2018 must irreversibly anchor democracy.

Presidential elections are scheduled for 29 July and 12 August, and legislative elections in November and December.

In terms of preparations, he said, an agreement is in place to revise the

electoral law and an order has been placed for eight million voter's cards.

In line with its mandate, MINUSMA has started to lend technical and logistical support, including the distribution of election materials and deployment of electoral personnel, while also preparing for any potential violence.

The Special Representative said the Security Council must call upon the Malian political class to respect the adopted timetable and encourage them along the path to consensual, peaceful and credible elections.

"The alternative would mean adding one crisis onto another, with the enemies of peace emerging the victors," he said. "They do not merit such a gift."

The security situation has deteriorated, particularly in the centre of Mali, he said, noting that an independent expert recently voiced concerns about serious human rights violations in the country.

With the UN country team, MINUSMA has launched an initiative to promote the restoration of State authority in central Mali, as well as economic growth and the provision of social services.

Emphasizing that a purely security approach is not enough, he said the Mission is continuing to support the specialist judicial system tackling terrorism, money-laundering and cross-border crime.

He emphasized the need for the training of peacekeeping troops, adding that the Mission remained about 100 armoured vehicles short. Troop- and police-contributing countries have been asked to do what they could to fill the equipment gap. Canada's offer of six helicopters, while welcome, fell short of what is needed.

Turning to the ongoing strategic review of MINUSMA, he said the Mission is awaiting the Secretary-General's recommendations with the hope that ensuing discussions will lead to a better alignment between its mandate and the realities on the ground.

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## **UN's advice for hospitals: Help mothers breastfeed to give babies best possible start in life**

Breastfeeding within the first hour of birth protects newborns from infections and saves lives, United Nations agencies said at the roll-out of their 10-step guidance to help new mothers and hospital workers embrace this practical advice and give children the best possible start in life.

The [Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding](#), issued jointly by the [UN Children's Fund](#) (UNICEF) and the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), encourages new mothers to breastfeed and informs health workers how best to support breastfeeding.

"Breastfeeding [saves lives](#)," said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. "It's benefits help keep babies healthy in their first days and last well into adulthood."

Infants are at greater risk of death due to diarrhoea and other infections when they are only partially breastfed or not breastfed at all. Breastfeeding for the first two years would annually save the lives of more than 820,000 children under age five.

Hospitals are not there just to cure the ill. They are there to promote life and ensure people can thrive and live their lives to their full potential – WHO chief

Breastfeeding also improves IQ, school readiness and attendance, and is associated with higher income in adult life. It is vital to a child's lifelong health, and reduces costs for health facilities, families, and governments. It also reduces the risk of breast cancer in the mother.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that in many hospitals and communities around the world, whether or not a child is breastfed can make the difference between life and death, and whether a child will develop to reach his or her full potential.

"Hospitals are not there just to cure the ill. They are there to promote life and ensure people can thrive and live their lives to their full potential," said Mr. Tedros.

The new guidance provides the immediate health system platform to help mothers initiate breastfeeding within the first hour and breastfeed exclusively for six months, and describes how hospitals should have in place a written breastfeeding policy, staff competencies, and antenatal and post-birth care, including breastfeeding support for mothers.

It also recommends limited use of breastmilk substitutes, rooming-in, responsive feeding, educating parents on the use of bottles and pacifiers, and support when mothers and babies are discharged from hospital.

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## [Despite drop in numbers, desperate](#)

# migrants to Europe face greater perils, UN refugee agency reports

While the number of migrants and refugees reaching Europe declined last year, the dangers they faced along the journey in many cases increased, according to a new report from the United Nations refugee agency.

The number of people crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach Italy from Libya, for example, decreased by 74 per cent in the first three months of 2018 compared to the same period last year. But the share of these migrants perishing along the way more than doubled, according to the report, [Desperate Journeys](#).

Between January and March, one person died for every 14 persons successfully crossing the sea, compared to one death for every 29 arrivals in the first three months of 2017.

Furthermore, those reaching Europe in recent months arrived in extremely poor health and a significant share of them experienced trafficking, torture, sexual violence and other abuses prior to boarding boats in Libya, said the report, issued Wednesday by the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR).

Those attempting that sea journey also risk drowning aboard unstable boats, which often cram in people many times their capacity.

"Journeys to and through Europe for refugees and migrants remain fraught with danger," said Pascale Moreau, director of the refugee agency's Europe Bureau, as he [introduced](#) the report.

He underscored the importance of swift and fair asylum procedures for those seeking international protection.

"Managing borders and offering protection to refugees in line with States' international obligations are not mutually exclusive nor incompatible," Mr. Moreau said.

Many of the migrants and refugees hoping to reach Europe are seeking refuge from violence and deepening economic insecurity in their home countries, in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

While overall numbers reaching Europe were down in 2017 compared to 2016, the flow of desperate migrants to Spain climbed, and the number reaching Greece surged in the latter months of last year.

"Asylum-seekers arriving by sea to Greece faced extended stays in overcrowded and dire conditions on Greek islands," the report said.



UNHCR/F. Malavolta

Survivors of a boat that capsized in the Mediterranean over the weekend of 18-19 April 2015 arrive in Sicily after being rescued. Hundreds are missing and feared dead.

### **For many, journey ends without setting foot on European soil**

“When we reached Libya, the driver told us we had to pay another 1,500 dinars (\$1,100) per person, so 4,500 dinars for all three,” reads the testimony of 26-year-old Daniel, who left Cameroon in 2017 along with his brother and uncle hoping to reach Europe.

“We didn’t have any more money.”

Unable to pay the asking price, the three were [tortured and held captive](#) by traffickers in Libya, he said, before they were taken to Niger where he was bound into forced labour by his captors, while his family remained hostage.

There have been reports of human traffickers [demanding](#) as much as \$10,000 from individuals for transportation to Europe.

Elsewhere on the continent, increased restrictions and “push backs” facing people on the move have compelled them to take alternative and often dangerous routes to move across Europe, according to the new report. As Hungary tightened its borders, for example, more migrants are crossing from Serbia to Romania while others move from Greece through Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina to Croatia.



UNICEF/Georgiev

Walking along the train tracks connecting Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, a migrant woman carries a young boy as a young girl holds on to the back of her jacket. (file photo)

### **High risks for women and unaccompanied children**

Women, especially those travelling on their own, and unaccompanied children remain particularly exposed to risks of sexual and gender-based violence along the routes as well as in some locations within Europe, the report said.

Once children arrive in European countries, lengthy waiting periods

for asylum applications, slow family reunification processes and limited access to relocation mechanisms compound the challenges, it said.

### **Increased solidarity and responsibility-sharing needed**

Addressing the desperate situation requires wider international support for States at primary arrival points in Europe, such as arrangement of safe relocations. The European Union, it suggested, should strengthen cooperation among countries within the region.

The refugee agency also called for enhanced access to safe and legal pathways for those in need of international protection, including greater commitments to resettlement, removal of obstacles to family reunification and strengthened protection for children.