

Mass evacuations from Syria's war-ravaged cities 'desperate measures in desperate times,' says senior UN adviser

In Syria, the mass evacuation of civilians is threatening to leave aid workers "overrun" and "acutely underfunded," as details emerge of the unparalleled destruction in urban areas like the former ISIL-held city of Raqqa, UN senior adviser Jan Egeland said on Wednesday.

"This is the very [wrong time to turn our back on civilians](#)," he told journalists in Geneva, highlighting that aid projects in Syria are now less than eight per cent funded.

Mr. Egeland, who had earlier attended a scheduled meeting of the UN-supported humanitarian task force on Syria, said that more than half a million men, women and children had been displaced in the last three months in and around Idlib, from Eastern Ghouta, and from the district of Afrin in northern Aleppo.

He described mass evacuations of civilians as "desperate measures in desperate times" adding that they had played their part in ending battles in urban areas in Syria.

But they have also contributed to a desperate humanitarian situation.

In Idlib Province alone, some 1.5 million people were now displaced in various locations, making it "the biggest refugee camp on earth in many ways," said Mr. Egeland, who is the Senior Advisor to UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura.

Mr. Egeland also provided details about the destruction of Raqqa city, once the stronghold of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) extremists, saying that it was even worse than in Aleppo and Homs, two other once-vibrant Syrian cities that have seen massive destruction over the course of the seven-year conflict.

On the final push for Eastern Ghouta, just outside the Syrian capital, Mr. Egeland said that there had been "no recent reports of fighting and air raids" and "hopefully the battle is over now in the heavily populated areas."

Until recently more than 400,000 people had been besieged for years in parts of Eastern Ghouta.

The area has been subject to a Government-backed offensive launched in mid-February and now only 130,000 people still live there, Mr. Egeland said.

Of that number, around 80,000 have gone to shelters in Government-held areas of Rural Damascus and one-third have left voluntarily – an important indicator of freedom of movement, the humanitarian official added.

Referring to “ongoing negotiations” between the Syrian government and armed groups over the evacuation of those left in opposition-held locations of Eastern Ghouta, Mr Egeland said he hoped that people would be allowed to stay if they wished.

He also called for an amnesty “for those who put away arms”.

In Raqqa city in northern Syria, Mr. Egeland said that 100,000 people had returned there to live, and the same number were outside the city hoping to return home.

What awaits them is almost total devastation, he added, citing a new report compiled by 25 UN experts used to working in conflict situations but who were nonetheless shocked by the destruction they encountered.

Homes were “still full of bombs” and children were “still being maimed and killed,” according to Mr. Egeland, who also highlighted that there is only one hospital in Raqqa and almost no public services.

Australia-bound asylum-seekers left mentally scarred by years of detention on Pacific islands, warns UN refugee official

A senior UN refugee agency official warned on Wednesday about the “shocking” effects of long-term detention on Australia-bound asylum-seekers who are being held on remote Pacific islands.

Indrika Ratwatte said the situation in Nauru, as well and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, was as bad as he had seen in his 25-year career.

Both locations have been used to house more than 3,000 men, women and children from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, since Australia implemented its offshore processing policy in 2013.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva after returning from Nauru last week, Mr. Ratwatte, who heads the Asia and Pacific bureau of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), described the “shocking” psychological and the mental toll on refugees and asylum seekers.

Children have been particularly affected, he said:

“I have seen a little girl for example who was 12 years old in a catatonic state who has not stepped out of her room in a month [...] clinical psychiatrists and professionals have determined that around 80 per cent of the asylum-seekers and refugees in Nauru and Manus as well are suffering from post-traumatic stress and depression. This is per capita one of the highest mental health problems levels that have been noted.”

Despite the clear need to address the problem, the lack of psychiatric help and healthcare “has increased the sense of hopelessness and despair,” Mr. Ratwatte said.

“The point here is also that Australia has had a long tradition of supporting refugee and humanitarian programmes globally, but on this one, the offshore processing policy has had an extremely detrimental impact on refugees and asylum-seekers.”

He urged Australia to continue to support the authorities on Nauru once it hands over responsibility to the island for medical and psychiatric services.

There are currently around 2,000 detainees on the islands.

Around 40 children born in Nauru have seen “nothing but detention-like conditions,” Mr. Ratwatte said, and another 50 youngsters have spent more than half their lives there.

Under a deal agreed between Australia and the United States, some 1,000 detainees from Nauru will be repatriated to the US. Around 180 have already left the island.

Welcoming the agreement, the UNHCR official said that this would still leave the same number of people on Nauru, and he urged the Australian Government to consider an offer from New Zealand to rehouse them.

“It is a very genuine offer and New Zealand has an excellent programme for refugee settlement,” Mr. Ratwatte said.

[Continuing hostilities greatest challenge for South Sudan, says UN relief official](#)

With the next phase of regionally-backed peace talks for South Sudan scheduled for later this month, a senior United Nations aid official in the country has urged the parties involved to find a political compromise and

allow peace to take hold in the strife-ridden country.

Speaking to *UN News*, Alain Noudehou, the Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan, underscored that continuing hostilities remain the greatest challenge.

“People don’t feel secure [...] they are not able to go back to their lands and they are not able to produce. They need to feel secure, not only in sense of physical protection but actually in the sense that they can go back to their lives,” he explained.

The world’s youngest country, South Sudan, gained independence in 2011.

However, it 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.

In December last year, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an eight-country trade bloc in Africa, facilitated an [agreement](#) between the Government and opposing groups. The first phase of talks, formally called the High-Level Revitalisation Forum, was held in February this year.

In spite of the recent progress, close to two million people remain displaced within South Sudan and a further 2.5 million took refuge in neighbouring countries.

With women and children making up close to 85 per cent of the total, ensuring their inclusion and participation in the peace process is vital, stressed Mr. Noudehou, who is also the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for South Sudan.



UNMISS/Denis Louro

A woman paints a mural on a wall in Yei, South Sudan. As a part of a collective effort, the group of painters painted a number of pictures and messages on peace and harmony at many locations in the town.

Women's participation vital to securing peace

Mr. Noudehou stressed that the participation of women is critical for durable and effective peace.

"If they are not a part of the dialogue of peace-making, we will be missing a tremendous perspective of what it's going to take to make the peace much more lasting in [the country]," he added, noting that women's participation is vital in not only defining the peace agreement but also in implementing it.

"They understand the plight of the women [because] they have been there and can contribute to a solution that is durable and is effective," added the senior UN official.

The conflict and instability in South Sudan also led to a devastating famine last year, leaving over 7 million of its people dependent on humanitarian and protection assistance.

Across the country, 5.3 million people (48 per cent of the population) are estimated to be facing Crisis and Emergency – the highest levels – of [food insecurity](#) according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification.

Compared with the same period last year, this is a 40 per cent increase in the population facing severe food insecurity in the post-harvest season.



UNMISS Photo

Alain Noudehou (left), the Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan, speaks at the launch of the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan for the country. Alongside him is Hussein Marnyot, the Minister of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management of South Sudan.

A 'catastrophic situation' can be avoided

However, with coordinated action, a "catastrophic situation" can be avoided,

said Mr. Noudehou.

“We are planning a multi-sectoral approach to provide the assistance. We are not talking about only about food assistance; but the whole gamut of a system that goes together with it.”

Alongside the [humanitarian effort](#), full and sustained support and funding is equally important. And the resources are needed now, he said, noting that this will enable supplies to be pre-positioned and unnecessary costs avoided.

“If we start to act now and receive the funding now, we will be able to serve more people and do it cheaply,” he said.

With full funding, the \$1.76 billion [Humanitarian Response Plan](#) for South Sudan will provide assistance to some 6 million people across the country. In all, 167 aid organizations, including 11 UN agencies, 61 international non-governmental organizations and 95 national non-governmental organizations are part of the response.

[UN rights experts urge France to provide essential services to migrants, asylum seekers](#)

A group of United Nations human rights experts have called on the French Government to urgently provide water and sanitation services as well as emergency shelters for migrants and asylum seekers living in “inhumane situation” in areas along the country’s northern coast.

According to estimates, over 1,250 migrants and asylum-seekers are living in Calais, Grande-Synthe, Tatinghem, Dieppe and other sites along the coast without adequate shelter and access to drinking water, toilets or washing facilities.

“Migrants and asylum-seekers along the northern French coast [...] are facing an inhumane situation, with some living in tents without toilets and washing themselves in polluted rivers or lakes,” said Léo Heller, the UN [Special Rapporteur on the human rights to water and sanitation](#), in a news release on Wednesday.

“Some efforts have been made, but not enough,” he added.

Since last year, the Government has taken temporary steps to provide these services for some people, including contracting a local organization to provide water and shower facilities. It is also hosting up to 200 migrants at

a sports centre in Grande-Synthe.

[“I am concerned that for every step forward, two steps are taken back,”](#) stated Mr. Heller, noting that the situation is emblematic of the need for much more attention from national and international authorities on this issue.

The experts also underscored that in the absence of valid alternatives in the provision of adequate housing, including in the Calais area, dismantling the camps was not a long-term solution.

“We are concerned about increasingly regressive migration policies and the inhumane and substandard conditions suffered by migrants,” said Felipe González Morales, the UN [Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants](#).

“Migrants, regardless of their status, are entitled to human rights without discrimination, including access to adequate housing, education, healthcare, water and sanitation as well as access to justice and remedies. By depriving them of their rights or making access increasingly difficult, France is violating its international human rights obligations,” he added.

In addition, the experts also voiced concern over harassment and intimidation of volunteers and members of non-governmental organizations providing humanitarian aid to migrants and called on France to fulfil its obligations under international human rights law and promote the work of human rights defenders.

The UN rights expert making the call also included Michel Forst, the UN [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#).

UN Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are [appointed](#) by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

[**Mine action is ‘concrete step towards peace,’ says UN chief on International Mine Awareness Day**](#)

On the day set aside to raise awareness about the threat of mines, unexploded grenades and other munitions that impede the return to normal life after conflict, United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres has urged Governments to provide political and financial support to keep up vital [mine action](#) work wherever it is needed.

“An unprecedented volume of landmines and unexploded weapons contaminates rural and urban war zones, maiming and [killing innocent civilians](#) long after conflict has ended,” Mr. Guterres said in his message on International [Mine Awareness Day](#), marked annually on 4 April.

Noting that roads cleared of explosive devices enable peacekeepers to patrol and protect civilians, he said: “Mine action is vital.”

“And when fields are cleared and schools and hospitals are made safe, normal life can resume,” he added.

According to the UN Mine Action Service, or [UNMAS](#), after nearly two decades of steadily diminishing casualty rates, the total number of people killed or injured by landmines and other explosive hazards in recent and current intense conflicts has leapt to its highest since 1999; the human suffering caused by mines, explosive remnants of war and other explosive hazards, including roadside bombs or booby traps, is devastating.

Mine action, including clearance, risk education and assistance to victims is critical for advancing protection, peace and development.

“In our turbulent world, mine action is a concrete step towards peace,” stated the Secretary-General.

UNMAS says that Mine action entails more than removing landmines from the ground; it includes five types of actions:

- [Clearance](#): Removing and destroying landmines and marking/fencing off contaminated areas
- [Education](#): Helping people understand risks they face, learn how to stay out of harm’s way
- [Victim Assistance](#): Providing medical assistance and rehabilitation services to victims
- [Advocacy](#): Advocating for a world free from the threat of landmines
- [Stockpile destruction](#): Helping countries destroy their stockpiles

‘Equal opportunity killers’

Most places affected by armed conflicts are contaminated by a variety of explosive hazards, said Daniel Craig, the UN Global Advocate for the Elimination of Mines and Explosive Hazards.

Whether landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), artillery shells or cluster bombs, he said in his message on the Day: “They are equal opportunity killers.”

“When triggered, they kill indiscriminately. Soldier or civilian. Male or female. Old or young,” he continued, explaining that over time they can more and more easily be detonated to the point when “they can easily be triggered by a child jumping a rope.”

Mr. Craig, best known for his role as ‘007’ in the *James Bond* films, outlined how mines curtail freedom – the freedom to play, collect food and water, farm

and even vote.

“Roadside bombs against United Nations personnel and humanitarian workers prevent them from accessing and helping those in need,” he stressed, stating: “We the peoples of the United Nations must join forces to defeat these deadly devices and win the fight against fear and inhumane suffering.”

“Join me. Join us. Let’s win,” said Mr. Craig.

Mine action: protection, peace and development

A series of events marking the Day began on Tuesday with documentarians who have filmed in Iraq and Afghanistan for UNMAS participating in a Facebook Live under the headline: “UNMAS Through the Lens.”

On Wednesday at UN Headquarters in New York, an [event](#) hosted by Germany and UNMAS and based on the theme of this year’s International Day, ‘Mine Action: Advancing Protection, Peace and Development,’ will focus on how mine action protects civilians and peacekeepers, and contributes to sustaining peace and development.

A live demonstration and discussion on the technical aspects and impacts of IEDs will wrap up the commemoration on Thursday, 5 April.