

UN agency envoy Cate Blanchett warns of 'race against time' as Rohingya refugee camps brace for monsoon rains

As heavy rains and potential cyclones threaten more than one hundred thousand Rohingya refugees living in congested settlements in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, United Nations refugee agency envoy Cate Blanchett is urging increased international support to protect them from the worst impacts of the upcoming monsoon season.

"I've seen first-hand how UNHCR [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees] – with its partners and with the refugees themselves – is working flat out to avoid an emergency within an emergency in Cox's Bazar district," said UNHCR Ambassador Blanchett Wednesday.

Having returned this week from a visit to Bangladesh's Kutupalong, Nyapara and Chakmarkul settlements, she said UNHCR staff on the ground are distributing shelter and pre-monsoon kits to the vulnerable families, reinforcing roads, bridges, steps and other infrastructure at risk of being washed away, and relocating families to safer places where land is available

"But more is urgently needed to ensure refugees stay safe," she said.

Since August 2017 when violence broke out in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state, some 671,000 Rohingya Muslims fled to Bangladesh seeking safety. Before the latest crisis began, the country was already hosting a verified population of well over 200,000 Rohingyas from Myanmar – and likely many more.

"The Rohingya refugees have already experienced targeted violence, human rights abuses and horrific journeys. They have shown unimaginable resilience and courage," Ms. Blanchett underscored.

"But now, as the monsoon season approaches, the Government of Bangladesh, supported by UNHCR and its partners, are in a race against time to ensure the refugees are as safe as they can be to deal with potential floods and landslides," she added, calling for the international community to show solidarity and share the responsibility.

"The people of Bangladesh and host communities have been the first to respond to this crisis, supported by agencies like UNHCR and its partners. But I cannot stress how much more help is needed for these vulnerable stateless refugees, the majority of whom are women and children.

Kevin J. Allen, Head of UNHCR's emergency operation in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh said, "Bangladesh saved thousands of lives when it opened its borders and arms to Rohingya refugees. It is now critical that we stand firmly with Bangladesh and the refugees we serve to protect them from

cyclonic winds and heavy rains.”

While UNHCR is working to build dignified and decent lives for the Rohingya refugees, it stresses that the solution lies in Myanmar, calling on that country to create conditions in Rakhine state to permit the safe, sustainable repatriation of those who choose to return home.

“This is the fastest growing refugee crisis in the world, the monsoons are coming and it is critical that the international community, private sector and individuals all do what they can to support these stateless refugees and the communities hosting them,” concluded Ms. Blanchett.

[Somalia: Poor rains forecast put food security, livelihoods at risk, warns UN agency](#)

Below-average rains forecast for Somalia could lead to devastating cattle losses and exasperate malnutrition in the Horn of Africa nation, the United Nations food security agency has warned.

The grim scenario follows massive livestock deaths due to drought – up to 60 per cent of herds in some areas – that have severely damaged pastoralists’ livelihoods.

“Somalia is traditionally an agro-pastoral economy [and] [livestock losses have severely affected its economy and people](#),” Daniele Donati, the head of the UN [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO) programmes in the country, said in a news release Wednesday.

“It is crucial that we continue to support pastoralist households build resilience against climate-related shocks by providing timely veterinary and feeding assistance for their animals,” he added.

According to the UN agency’s [Global Information and Early Warning Report](#), while the country’s overall food security situation improved to some extent in early 2018, primarily due to large-scale and sustained humanitarian assistance, the number of Somalis [suffering severe food insecurity](#) still remains 170 per cent above pre-crisis levels.

Furthermore, recent cattle losses have also resulted in sharp rises in prices of livestock and livestock products, including milk. Pastoral households in the worst-hit northern and central regions have also reported increased household debts, drive by credit purchase of water, food and for care of their animals.

The losses have also severely hit Somalia's exports, a country where the livestock sector accounts for approximately 40 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

FAO response

Responding to the situation, FAO stepped up its response, providing health services to some 38.3 million animals, supplementary feeding interventions to close to 1 million, and delivered over 53 million litres of water in 2017.

In 2018, the UN agency aims to support some 2.7 million rural Somalis and has [appealed for \\$236 million](#) to sustain its livestock interventions, help farmers secure a good harvest and provide cash transfers to the most vulnerable so families can afford to eat while restoring their own food production.

"Providing livelihood support and cash in rural areas not only fights hunger, but minimizes displacement and the sale of productive assets that ultimately feed people and sustain their livelihoods," it said.

[With Caribbean still rebuilding after devastating storms, UNICEF helping to boost resilience ahead of next hurricane season](#)

Despite a massive humanitarian effort over the past six months in the Eastern Caribbean, Cuba and Haiti, there is still much work to be done to rehabilitate water and sanitation and other infrastructure damaged by powerful hurricanes Irma and Maria, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported on Tuesday.

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"So long [as] [children are in need](#) or in danger, we will continue working tirelessly so that everyone can look to the future with hope," María Cristina Perceval, Regional Director of UNICEF for Latin America and the Caribbean said, noting that some \$11.5 million in international donations continue to help the agency's work in the region.

UNICEF said it continues to work on the ground, whilst at the same time preparing for the arrival of the new hurricane season with the aim of minimizing potential damage and impact on the most vulnerable areas.

In September 2017, at least 1.4 million people, including 357,000 children, were affected by the two category 5 hurricanes that wreaked havoc through Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Cuba, Dominica, Haiti, the British Virgin Islands and Turks and Caicos.

“Following the storms,” Ms. Perceval continued, “UNICEF responded immediately, mobilizing supplies and human resources to meet the needs of those affected and save lives.”

The agency continues to prioritize safe water and hygiene, giving more than 400,000 affected people, including children, access to drinking water and purification tablets – fundamental actions that save lives and prevent the outbreak and transmission of waterborne diseases, such as cholera and diarrhoea.

On protecting children, another of its priorities, some 16,000 participated in psychosocial activities and 1,500 people were trained to continue carrying out these programmes.

In addition, UNICEF and its partners launched a cash transfer system benefiting more than 4,600 of the most vulnerable families following the hurricanes.

“Along with these emergency response actions,” Ms. Perceval said “UNICEF and its partners maintain their work in the Caribbean to contribute to an inclusive, equitable and prosperous region that guarantees the provision of quality services and support to children in the areas of education, child protection, social protection and resilience to guarantee the realization of children’s rights.”

With the next hurricane season in the region officially beginning on 1 June, UNICEF is working to improve capacities and reduce vulnerability at national and community level.

“The objective is to mitigate the impact on boys, girls and women and ensure a rapid return to normality,” concluded the spokesperson.

**Promote tolerance, respect diversity,
UN chief urges ahead of International**

Day against racial discrimination

People worldwide are being encouraged by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres to think about how they can better promote tolerance, inclusion and respect for diversity.

The UN chief made the appeal in [a speech](#) to the General Assembly in New York on Tuesday, ahead of [the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#).

“It is time all nations and all people live up to the words of [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), which recognizes the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human race,” he stated.

Mr. Guterres said while there has been progress since the Declaration’s adoption 70 years ago – for example, in the advancement of the rights of women, children, indigenous people and persons with disabilities – there is still far to go in ending discriminatory attitudes, actions and practices.

He listed pressing issues such as gender inequality; the “alarming rise” in xenophobia, racism and intolerance, and a resurgence in far-right political parties and neo-Nazi viewpoints.

Refugees and migrants are also being denied their rights, in addition to being falsely vilified as threats to the societies they seek to join, he continued.

“So, on this International Day, let us all consider how we can better promote tolerance, inclusion and respect for diversity in all nations and among all communities,” the UN chief said.

“Let us work to eliminate messages of hatred – the concept of ‘us’ and ‘them’; the false attitude that we can accept some and reject and exclude others simply for how they look, where they worship or who they love.”

Like the Secretary-General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also looked to the landmark Declaration in his address to the gathering.

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein highlighted how discrimination against individuals affects society as a whole.

“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights warns very clearly that if rights are not protected, conflict may follow,” he said.

“Experience has repeatedly demonstrated that discrimination, intolerance, prejudice and scapegoating not only lead to disastrous splintering within societies, endangering national cohesion; they also frequently generate threats to regional peace and lead to a conflict.”

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is

observed annually on 21 March.

It commemorates the lives of 69 people killed during a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville, South Africa, on that day in 1960.

They were among thousands protesting laws that required black citizens to carry a type of internal passport known as a passbook which restricted their movements: a manifestation of the then apartheid system which upheld racial segregation.

As the UN chief pointed out, apartheid “was ultimately – and thankfully – consigned to history” after Nelson Mandela was released from prison and later ascended to the presidency.

Mr. Mandela, who died in 2013, was the first democratically-elected president of South Africa and the country’s first black head of state.

While the UN observance provides an opportunity to reaffirm rejection of racism, xenophobia and intolerance, Mr Guterres was saddened that these attitudes persist in countries and among communities around the world.

“A stark and tragic example lies in the egregious treatment of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar,” he said, referring to the ethnic minority community whose members have been fleeing to Bangladesh by the thousands to escape persecution.

[UN rural development agency invests in power and potential of women](#)

Although rural women make up one-fifth of the global population and around 43 per cent of all agricultural workers, inequality restricts their access to land, markets or even the training and technology that could improve their lives and livelihoods, according to the United Nations agency fighting to stamp out hunger and poverty.

The Rome-based International Fund for Agricultural Development ([IFAD](#)) believes promoting gender equality is critical to reducing rural poverty and ensuring that all people have enough to eat.

“I think if poverty had a face, it would be the face of a rural woman,” IFAD’s newly-appointed vice-president Cornelia Richter told *UN News*.

“Women are producers of nutrition, and there is a lot of potential. Women are not only victims: they also bear the changes and challenges of development, and I think we in IFAD are trying to invest in the potential of women and not victimizing women.”

Overall, some three billion people – roughly 40 per cent of the planet – live in rural areas of developing countries. Although they grow the food that feeds their nations, most are living in extreme poverty.

IFAD believes investing in these people benefits all people. That's because global challenges such as hunger, poverty, youth unemployment and forced migration, are rooted in rural areas. Therefore, investing in small-scale agriculture and rural development could have far-reaching impact.

For Ms. Richter, women are central to any effort to improve these communities.

"I can't imagine any kind of development without women," she stated.

Rural women and girls front and centre at UN this month

Since 1946, the UN Commission on the Status of Women ([CSW](#)) has been shaping global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Its latest session, currently underway at UN Headquarters, focuses on the challenges facing rural women and girls.

In her [opening address](#), the head of [UN Women](#), the UN agency working to advance gender equality, challenged participants to find solutions that support this group.

"Women in rural areas need innovative technology and connectivity; infrastructure that brings sanitation, clean drinking water, energy and transport, and that supports productivity and mobility," UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka told delegates.

"They need access to credit, climate justice, markets and high-value agrifood chains. They need an end to discriminatory laws and norms that sustain harmful cultural practices like female genital mutilation and early and forced marriages. They need respect for sexual and reproductive health and rights. And they need an end to violence in all its forms."

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Ms. Richter also took part in this year's session of the Commission which dovetails with her agency's priorities.

She said IFAD understands that "a holistic approach" is the only way to transform the lives of rural women.

"This means that we cannot only address one single topic: for example, education, or law enforcement. We have to come up with a well-designed approach where we address the different levels by which women and girls are hampered," she explained.

Ms. Richter believes dismantling legal barriers that affect women is a good place to start.

For example, according to IFAD, poor rural people – especially women, youth, indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups – generally have weak or unprotected land tenure rights, putting them at risk of losing access to what is often their only source of security.

“We also have to make sure that we strengthen rural institutions and invest in capacity development in order to create more advocacy for rural women and girls,” Ms. Richter continued.

“And then, I think at the beginning of development is the empowerment of women. How do we empower women? Through education. And education in the 21st century can’t happen without investing in new technologies.”

A recent IFAD-supported project ensured that more 2,000 women smallholder farmers in Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda had access to modern technology.

The women received mobile phones and radios, which they used to share information on agricultural practices but also to learn about gender issues.

This is just one example of how IFAD grants and low-interest loans have reached more than 460 million people over the past four decades.

Going forward, Ms. Richter sees the UN agency expanding its field presence.

Although she joined IFAD in February, she spent more than two decades in managerial positions with German development cooperation agencies, in a career that took her to countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

“I would like to support IFAD in its very clear mandate and also provide strategic direction in a very ambitious reform agenda on which IFAD is embarking in order to achieve more efficiency in the field, which is a very clear commitment and expectation from our member States,” she said. “So, you will find more IFAD offices in the coming months and years.”