

Fighting prevents UN and aid partners from returning to Syria's war-battered east Ghouta

Continuing fighting forced the postponement on Thursday of a United Nations inter-agency relief convoy to Douma, a neighborhood in Syria's war-ravaged Eastern Ghouta, a UN spokesman reported.

This news comes after the UN and other humanitarian agencies were forced on Monday to leave after nine hours in Douma amid ongoing shelling in east Ghouta and the Syrian capital, Damascus. Only 10 trucks were fully unloaded while four were partially unloaded. As a result, half of the food for 27,500 people was not delivered.

"The United Nations continues to receive reports of escalating fighting in East Ghouta and shelling on Damascus," UN Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric told reporters at the daily UN Headquarters press briefing.

The ongoing hostilities, he said, are endangering civilians and preventing humanitarian assistance from reaching hundreds of thousands of people in need, including thousands of vulnerable children.

"The complete assistance to reach a total of 70,000 people in Douma, including medical and health supplies, still needs to be delivered," he explained.

More than 100 people have been killed in the enclave in the past 48 hours, said Mr. Dujarric, adding that since 24 February, when the UN Security Council adopted a resolution demanding a cessation of hostilities throughout Syria, hundreds of people have reportedly been killed and thousands injured due to air and ground strikes.

"The UN remains ready to deliver assistance to all people in need in Douma, other areas in east Ghouta and other hard-to-reach and besieged areas as soon as conditions allow," said Mr. Dujarric, adding that the UN continues to call on all parties to immediately allow safe and unimpeded access for further convoys to deliver critical supplies to hundreds of thousands of people in desperate need of humanitarian assistance.

UN News spoke to Marwa Awad, communications officer for the World Food Programme ([WFP](#)), based in the Syrian capital, who said the escalation and fighting in besieged and hard-to-reach areas has paralysed the UN's response and WFP's ability to reach those who desperately need help.

"A case in point is the UN and partners inability to return to Douma in east Ghouta today because the movement of the convoy was not authorized due to security concerns on the ground," she said.

The UN estimates that some 400,000 people are trapped in the towns and villages of east Ghouta and [Secretary-General António Guterres](#), who has been calling for the ongoing siege to be lifted, has described the conditions there as “hell on earth.”

[On International Women’s Day, UN celebrates the power of activism to bring change for ‘sisterhood of humanity’](#)

Ni mas uno in Latin America, *Balance ton porc* in Europe, *Bring back our girls* in western Africa, *Times Up* in North America, *#HeForShe* and *#MeToo* in nearly all countries, were just some of the campaigns that have only grown from strength to strength, said Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive Director of UN-Women, the [Organization’s Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women](#).

“We celebrate today the power of activism to bring change for all women, their solidarity and the sisterhood of humanity,” added the senior UN official.

Alongside Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka in the UN General Assembly Hall, American actor and producer Reese Witherspoon highlighted that the movement for women’s rights will continue until it achieves its goals.

“Understand that we will not leave, that we will not shut up, we want to see us represent 50/50,” said the Oscar-winning actor.

Understand that we will not leave, that we will not shut up, we want to see us represent 50/50 – *Actor and activist Reese Witherspoon*

“We will defend women next to us.”

American-Zimbabwean actor and playwright Danai Gurica – who in addition to portraying Michonne in the TV series *The Walking Dead* and ‘Okoye’ in the blockbuster movie *Black Panther* – is also a noted education and women’s rights activist, testified about her own experience as a woman in her professional career.

“I drew strength [for my characters] from women from my own life in Zimbabwe,” she said.

The potential of girls and women must not be squandered, added Ms. Gurica, thanking those who stand up for women's rights and urged many more to join in taking the stand.

Gender inequality, discrimination and violence against women harm us all – Secretary-General António Guterres

In the same vein, UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) expressed that the demand an end to abusive behaviour and discriminatory attitudes against women is something that every “sensible” man and boy should want.

“Because gender equality is a fundamental human right [and] [there is no better path to a more peaceful and prosperous world than the empowerment of women and girls](#),” he said.

“Gender inequality, discrimination and violence against women harm us all,” added the UN chief, noting overwhelming evidence that investing in women is the most effective way to lift communities, companies and countries.

Gender inequality, discrimination and violence against women harm us all – *UN chief Guterres*

In his remarks, Mr. Guterres also highlighted the importance that women's participation brings to societies and economies. He, however, also said that while much has been achieved since the first commemoration of the International Day (in 1976), challenges remain.

“We still need to break the structural barriers that women and girls face – unpaid care work, unequal pay, harmful stereotypes, discrimination and violence,” he stressed, reiterating his call on everyone to demand gender equality and women's empowerment together.

Also speaking today, Miroslav Lajčák, the President of the General Assembly, highlighted that many efforts have been made to ensure women's empowerment and gender equality but added that much more needed to be done.

“[For every woman who enjoys her human rights, there are too many others fighting for their own](#) [and] for every woman living in safety, too many others are living in fear,” he said.

He expressed that the world needs to reinvigorate the focus on gender and the UN must lead the way.

“We can no longer call for gender equality without following our calls with action. We can no longer speak out for women's rights without speaking out even louder when they are violated and we can no longer agree that action is needed without taking it ourselves,” added the Assembly President.

(left) Observance of International Women's Day 2018 at the General Assembly. UN Photo/Manuel Elias; (right) A Rohingya refugee speaks at an event commemorating International Women's Day at a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo: UN Women/Allison Joyce

Held under the theme 'Time is Now,' International Women's Day 2018 celebrates the work of rural and urban activists who have transformed the lives of women around the world.

In addition to events at the UN Headquarters in New York, the International Day was also marked in all corners of the globe with a number of events, including forums, marathons, concerts and video screenings.

It also comes ahead of the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, which will be held from 12-23 March.

Despite ongoing unrest, DR Congo must press ahead with preparations for credible elections, says UN envoy

Highlighting political tensions and the disintegrating security situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Leila Zerrougui, briefing the Security Council for the first time as head of the UN stabilization mission in the country, said significant progress is being made on preparations for upcoming polls.

"While national political attention remains centred on the confidence-building measures and progress in the electoral process, the security situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has continued to deteriorate," she told the Council – presenting the latest report of the Secretary-General on the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo ([MONUSCO](#)).

Noting that this brought increased risks for renewed instability in many parts of the country, and posed serious threats to the civilian population, she stated that the DRC continues to face one of the world's most serious humanitarian crises.

"There is no other way of saying it – the humanitarian situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is shocking," she lamented, pointing out that the number of internally displaced persons in need of humanitarian assistance has become the highest in Africa.

Ms. Zerrougui condemned the persistent attacks by armed groups across the country, the recruitment of children, the rape of women and young girls, the burning of houses and the desecration of places of worship.

“It is the responsibility of those that direct and those that perpetrate these attacks to ensure that this unacceptable violence comes to an end,” she said. “And it is our collective responsibility to ensure that those that direct and perpetrate these crimes be held fully responsible for their actions.”

She encouraged the Council to consider how the security situation could be stabilized and the political and electoral process best supported – in line with the 31 December 2016 agreement for a peaceful political transition.

“A failure to generate confidence in the full and faithful implementation of the 31 December agreement will only serve to heighten political tensions, and to fuel the risks of inciting violence for political ends,” she underscored.

She assured the Council that during these times of simmering tensions, the UN Mission remains “steadfast in its commitment to support the Congolese authorities to protect those most vulnerable, and most affected, by acts of violence.”

Ms. Zerrougui also expressed her concern over the disproportionate use of force by security services during recent demonstrations, saying that the Government should investigate and take appropriate measures. During those protests, which began at the end of last year, nearly two dozen people were reportedly killed, more than a hundred were wounded and some 200 were arrested.

Moreover, she pointed to the need to restore confidence in the political process, including through the release of political prisoners.

The Special Representative also highlighted the progress made in preparing for the presidential and legislative elections in the country and paid homage to the determination of the Congolese people to participate in the political process.

Security Council renews UN mission in Afghanistan; debate highlights women's power

The Security Council on Thursday renewed the mandate of the United Nations political mission in Afghanistan for another year to continue providing assistance to the Government and the people of the conflict-plagued country.

“We have important tasks ahead of us this year,” Tadamichi Yamamoto, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan ([UNAMA](#)), told the 15-member Council, which voted unanimously to extend the operation’s mandate until 17 March 2019.

Looking ahead, he noted that the Mission also focus on peace efforts, the upcoming elections and the Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan which the UN would host with the Afghan Government in Geneva on 28 November. He also noted that the Mission’s critical work covers human rights and reforms, including anti-corruption.

On the political front, Mr. Yamamoto said that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani offered peace to the Taliban without preconditions, and laid out a path for negotiations with a series of concrete proposals to create space for the opening of talks.

“The offer of negotiation is on the table. It is now incumbent upon the Taliban to come forward with an offer of their own, and start direct talks with the Government to put an end to the suffering of the Afghan people,” he said.

Expressing concern about some actions which could deepen divisions in society, Mr. Yamamoto stressed that political leaders need to put the national interest above partisan agenda.

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On the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2018 and presidential elections for 2019, he cited accelerated progress on voter registration preparations, but said timelines remain tight.

As for security, Mr. Yamamoto expressed a concern over the increase in civilian casualties caused by the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province, or ISKP. The ISKP has been expanding its geographical spread beyond its stronghold of eastern Afghanistan into the country’s north.

He also said that in 2016 and 2017, 1.5 million refugees returned to Afghanistan from neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan and Iran. But such large numbers stress the Government’s ability to provide services. “This gap must be addressed before encouraging more people to move back to their homeland voluntarily,” he said.

Afghan women’s strength holds fabric of society together

Mr. Yamamoto’s remarks also highlighted the power of Afghan women as today’s meeting organized by the Netherlands, the Council president this month, was held on [International Women’s Day](#).



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Sigrid Kaag, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Netherlands and President of the Security Council for the month of March, chairs the Security Council meeting on the situation in Afghanistan.

He said the UN is working with Afghanistan's electoral commission to ensure women's participation in all stages of the elections as candidates, campaigners and voters.

He also reported that the Afghan Cabinet has adopted the necessary amendment to the Penal Code to ensure that all provisions of the Elimination of Violence Against Women law continue to apply, giving Afghan women continuing legal protection from violence.

Women are also disproportionately affected by the conflict.

"Women are also disproportionately affected by the conflict," he said, noting that last year, more than 1,200 women were killed or injured, mostly from ground fighting and suicide attacks.

The meeting was chaired by the Netherlands's Minister for Trade and Development Cooperation, Sigrid Kaag, who led an all-women delegation.

Also addressing the meeting were Mariam Safi, Founding Director of the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS), and Habibi Sarabi, Deputy Chairperson of the High Peace Council – whom Mr. Yamamoto introduced as "two women with distinguished careers in working for the advancement of peace in Afghanistan."

New communications technologies essential to empower poor rural women

– UN

To mark [International Women's Day](#), the three United Nations Rome-based agencies are spotlighting the role new innovations in information and communications technologies (ICTs) can play in expanding opportunities for rural women, who often find themselves “on the wrong side of the digital divide.”

In Rome on Thursday, the International Fund for Agricultural Development ([IFAD](#)), UN [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO) and World Food Programme ([WFP](#)) are leading the talks, which explores how women's empowerment and greater equality are inseparable from achieving sustainable development.

“At IFAD we have seen how information communications technologies can be [powerful catalysts](#) for political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality if rightly designed, accessible and usable,” said Gilbert F. Hounbo, IFAD President in his opening remarks at the IFAD-hosted event – highlighting how women's empowerment and greater equality are inseparable from achieving sustainable development.

“At IFAD, we have seen how information communications technologies can be powerful catalysts for political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality if rightly designed, accessible and usable,” said Gilbert F. Hounbo, IFAD President, in his opening remarks at the event, which the agency hosted.

Only 41 per cent of women in low- and middle-income countries own mobile phones, compared to 46 per cent for men. Nearly two-thirds of women living in the South Asia and East Asia and Pacific sub-regions do not own a mobile phone.

Rural women often lack access to health care, education, decent work and social protection.

“The global rise of information has deeply affected rural women in poor countries, who often find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide: because they live in developing countries, in rural areas, and because they are women, leaving them more likely poor and vulnerable to economic and climatic shocks,” explained FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva.

“If the interests and needs of rural women and girls are addressed, there is significant potential for information and communication technology to foster gender equality and the improvement of rural livelihoods,” he added.

ICTs can go a long way to boosting economic opportunities for rural women. For example, mobile and smartphones, provide access to real-time prices,

offering informed choices about where and when to buy and sell.

Studies indicate that when women earn money, they are more likely than men to spend it on their families' food and children's education.

"Digital technology can transform lives if we get it into the hands of the people who need it, and that's why we're working hard every day to help increase access for rural women," underscored WFP Executive Director David Beasley.

"And every time one of those women farmers uses a WFP app to sell her crops, the prosperity of her family and her community improves and we're another step closer to gender equity," he elaborated.

International Women's Day is a time to call for change and celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of their countries and communities.