

'Dossiers are being built up' for prosecution of crimes in Syria, says UN rights chief

War crimes, potentially crimes against humanity, are likely being committed in east Ghouta and elsewhere in Syria, and the perpetrators of these acts must know they are being identified and will be held accountable, the United Nations human rights chief warned on Friday.

"Civilians are being pounded into [submission or death](#)," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, told the Geneva-based Human Rights Council during an urgent debate on situation in east Ghouta, where some 400,000 civilians are trapped amid daily airstrikes, shelling and the reported release of toxic agents, which have killed and injured hundreds of people in the past two weeks alone.

The UN human rights chief said: "The perpetrators of these crimes must know they are being identified; that dossiers are being built up with a view to their prosecution; and that they will be held accountable for what they have done."

He said that over the past four months, some high-profile perpetrators were brought to justice: Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladic was convicted of genocide; Salvadoran Colonel Inocente Orlando Montano has been extradited to Spain to face charges related to killings in San Salvador in 1989; and two Argentinian former Navy Captains, Alfredo Astiz and Jorge Eduardo Acosta, were convicted for crimes against humanity committed between 1976 and 1983.



UN Photo/Violaine Martin

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for the Human Rights at the 37th Session of the Human Rights Council, Palais des Nations

"The wheels of justice may be slow, but they do grind," Mr. Zeid said, noting that the Human Rights Council can have a real impact in ensuring that there will be justice – determined, inescapable and effective – for the suffering that has been inflicted on the Syrian people.

He also said that Syria must be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC), urging all States to greatly increase their support for the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) set up last year with its mandate focused on ensuring that information about serious crimes is collected, analyzed and preserved, with a view to furnishing dossiers for future prosecutions.

He also strongly encouraged the Council to renew the mandate of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

Meanwhile, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) on Friday called once again on those fighting on the ground inside Syria and all those who have influence over them to put their arms down and stop the war on children.

"Is our call falling once again on deaf ears? The children of Syria have been waiting for way too long. [The world has failed the children of Syria](#) so many times..." Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, told reporters at a regular briefing in Geneva.

Nearly a week ago, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution that would have created an opportunity for hundreds of thousands of children to finally get respite from the brutal and unabated violence they have been living through.

"We all thought this was an excellent window for UNICEF and other partners to deliver urgent and lifesaving assistance to children in need wherever they are inside the country," he said.

"But as the days went by, these hopes turned into illusions, the windows shut abruptly in our faces," he added, noting that violence continued in several places across the country, escalating in some and flaring up in others, despite the resolution's call for a 30-day ceasefire.

[Despite decades-long effort, one-in-five children worldwide out of school](#)

– UN cultural agency

Updated data reveals that some 263 million – one-in-five – children, adolescents and youth worldwide are out school, a figure that has barely changed over the past five years, according to a new United Nations cultural agency report.

“These new figures show starkly the size of the gap that needs to be closed to [ensure universal access](#) to education,” Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)), said Friday.

Despite decades of efforts to get every child into the classroom, progress has come to a standstill, according to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics ([UIS](#)).

“We need much more comprehensive and targeted approaches together with more resources to reach those children and youth who are denied the right to education, with a special emphasis on girls and on improving the quality of education for all,” Ms. Azoulay added.

The new numbers are published as delegates gather in Paris for the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-Education 2030 Steering Committee meeting, which provides strategic guidance on advancing the Education 2030 Agenda.

SDG4 includes a concrete commitment to ensure that every girl and boy complete a quality primary and secondary education by 2030.

“This is the greatest urgency for unlocking progress towards [SDG4](#),” stressed Ms. Azoulay.

The [UIS paper](#) shows that the rate of progress, or the lack of it, varies by age group.

At primary level, nine per cent of children aged six to 11 years, or 63 million, are out of school.

Additionally, 61 million aged 12 to 14 years and 139 million between the ages of about 15 to 17 – one-in-three – are not enrolled in school. The older group are four times more likely to be out of school than children of primary age, and more than twice as likely to be out of school as those of lower secondary age.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, one-in-three children, adolescents and youth are out of school with girls more likely to be excluded. For every 100 primary age boys out of school, 123 girls are denied the right to education.

The data also highlight a gulf between out-of-school rates in the world’s poorest and richest countries – with 59 per cent of upper-secondary youth across the world’s low-income countries out-of-school, compared to 6 per cent

in high-income countries.

“Access to education is only part of the picture. We also have a [learning crisis](#), with one in six children and adolescents not reaching minimum proficiency levels in reading or mathematics; the majority of them are in school,” said UIS Director Silvia Montoya.

The new figures reinforce calls for greater education investment globally to ensure progress towards SDG 4, including resources for data gathering and analysis to monitor the pace and equity progress.

“Education has to deliver for every child, which requires effective monitoring to ensure that all children are in school, and that they are learning what they need to know,” Ms. Montoya continued. “That is why the UIS, which is the official data source for SDG 4, is developing new indicators on equitable education and learning outcomes.”

These issues will be tabled at the fourth SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, the global education consultation and coordination mechanism for the 2030 Agenda, which provides strategic advice on policies, financing, monitoring and reporting and advocacy.

[Investing in school meals ‘win-win’ for West African nations – UN](#)

The United Nations food relief agency has urged Governments in West Africa to spend more money on school meal programmes as these investments not only contribute to children’s better future but also create local jobs around agriculture.

“It is a [win-win opportunity](#) which governments must seize,” said Abdou Dieng, UN World Food Programme (WFP) Regional Director for West and Central Africa. “Children enjoy healthy meals that make it more likely that they will stay in school and learn for a better future, while jobs are created and businesses develop.”

The call was made on African Day of School Feeding, annually observed on 1 March.

Increasingly, the food for the meals is sourced from smallholder farmers within the community. The idea is that home-grown school meals provide local farmers and businesses with a predictable outlet for their products, leading to more stable incomes, more investment, higher productivity and the creation of jobs for youth and women in the communities concerned.

In Burkina Faso, the introduction of yoghurt in school meals has had multiple benefits – a women's group that collects milk locally has recently set up a processing plant for yoghurt that is now delivered to schools by young people on motorcycles.

Some governments in the region are showing a growing interest in investing more in national school meals programmes. The Government of Benin has allotted \$47 million to feed 400,000 children over the course of five years in partnership with WFP, using a home-grown school meals model.

WFP's regional school meals programme, which aims to assist about 2.7 million children this year, faces a \$60 million funding gap. Without proper financing, the programme will fall short, leave many vulnerable students hungry and at risk of dropping out of school.

[UN 'will not give up' on push for ceasefire, says Syria envoy](#)

The United Nations mediator for the Syrian conflict on Thursday said the world body has not given up on the implementation of a recent Security Council resolution demanding a 30-day ceasefire across the war-ravaged country.

"We cannot afford the luxury of giving up, so any type of feeling that the UN is frustrated –forget it, we are not frustrated, we are determined because this otherwise becomes the copycat of Aleppo, and we saw it already happening," Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura told reporters in Geneva, referring to the situation in east Ghouta, where UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) said earlier some 400,000 people are living "in hell on earth."

Mr. de Mistura called on both parties to the conflict to stop shelling each other's areas and to allow humanitarian convoys to reach east Ghouta, stressing that the priority needs to be stopping the suffering and the tragedy of the civilians there and elsewhere.

"The UN here has not and will not give up in asking for the full implementation of (Security Council resolution) [2401](#). And we will continue asking until we are red in the face, blue in the face, for both side," he declared, emphasizing that the world does not want to see "[another] Aleppo," referring to another war-battered Syrian enclave, which saw massive shelling in 2016.

Jan Egeland, Special Adviser to the UN Special Envoy, said east Ghouta is "the place where the violence is at its worst," and called on Russia, the United States and countries with influence on the ground to help the UN

dispatch several convoys per weeks to reach all places in east Ghouta, get more than 1,000 priority medical cases evacuated from there, and also to evacuate civilians out of the conflict zone.



UN Photo/Pierre Albouy

Special Advisor to the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Jan Egeland.

“All of this should be possible, if the Security Council resolution became a reality,” he said, adding that since the adoption of the resolution, the situation has not gotten better, it got worse.

Mr. Egeland said convoys may now be able to go to eastern Ghouta in the next few days and 45 trucks are ready to go to Rukban.

For a full transcript of a joint press stakeout by Mr. de Mistura and Mr. Egeland, [here](#).

[In crisis-torn Sahel, UN anti-drugs and crime agency helps bolster justice system](#)

Africa’s vast Sahel – plagued by humanitarian crises, armed conflict and terrorism – is now witnessing improvements in its criminal justice system thanks to a special programme by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which assists Governments in the region to come together to fight corruption, and human and drug trafficking.

Africa's vast Sahel – plagued by humanitarian [crises](#), armed conflict and terrorism – is now witnessing improvements in its criminal justice system thanks to a special programme by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)), which assists Governments in the region to come together to fight corruption, and human and drug trafficking.

The impact of the Governments' commitment is evident through an increase in the number of seizures, greater cooperation and innovative judicial solutions, [says](#) Pierre Lapaque, the regional head for West and Central Africa at UNODC.

“UNODC has witnessed positive systemic change in the region in the past years. We are seeing an increase in national and regional ownership, which positively impacts the security situation in the Sahel,” he highlighted.

According to the UN agency, for 2017 alone, law enforcement officers based in the airports of Bamako (Mali), Niamey (Niger) and Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) have seized over 35 kilograms (77 pounds) of drugs and over \$1 million in foreign currencies.

Just two weeks ago, in early February, Joint Airport Interdiction Task Force agents in Ouagadougou proceeded to the seizure of 4.8 kg of heroin, off a single passenger.

On the judicial side as well as, Government efforts are yielding results. Last year, Niger secured its first two convictions for terrorist financing involving eight suspects, and a third conviction for participation in terrorist acts, involving one suspect.

Furthermore, supported by UNODC and UN volunteers (UNVs), Nigerien judicial authorities processed some 230 cases involving terrorism suspects days last spring.

Combatting corruption; building trust

Supported by UNODC, Governments are also making strides in the battle against corruption.

Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger have already ratified the [UN Convention against Corruption](#), and Chad is currently taking steps towards ratification.

In addition, anti-corruption laws are being developed in countries and increasingly more number of cases are being investigated and transferred to justice systems.

The combination of these efforts are also helping nations in implementing the commitments under the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development, especially its Sustainable Development [Goal 16](#) on providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Furthermore, strong respect for human rights and gender equality are the fundamental underpinnings of its assistance programmes, affirmed UNODC.

More than 10,000 direct beneficiaries reached

Since 2014, UNODC's [Sahel Programme](#) has reached over 10,000 direct beneficiaries through the implementation of more than 400 activities ranging from legislative assistance to the provision of equipment, or from practical training workshop to high level meetings, both at national and regional levels.

During this time, UNODC has also forced close cooperation and coordination with a wide range of partners, including UN missions, the G5 Sahel, European Union, the Civil Society and others. The Programme also complements the UN Integrated Strategy for Sahel (UNISS) by building on the progress already made in the past years, and by realigning the UNISS' objectives with 2030 Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

"We make a point of getting our partners as involved as possible, to ensure that our Programme meets their needs, their objectives and their priorities," expressed Mr. Lapaque.