

Some 19 million newborns at risk of brain damage every year due to iodine deficiency – UN

Nearly 19 million babies born globally every year – 14 per cent – are at risk of permanent yet preventable brain damage and reduced cognitive function due to a lack of iodine in the earliest years of life, according to a United Nations-backed report released Thursday.

The report from the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and its partner, the Global Alliance of Improved Nutrition (GAIN), notes that insufficient iodine during pregnancy and infancy results in neurological and psychological deficits, reducing a child’s IQ by 8 to 10 points.

“The nutrients a child receives in the earliest years of life influence their brain development for life, and can [make or break their chance of a prosperous future](#),” said UNICEF Senior Nutrition Adviser Roland Kupka.

“By protecting and supporting children’s development in early life, we are able to achieve immense results for children throughout their lifespan,” he added, noting that salt iodization is both cost effective and economically beneficial at only \$0.02–0.05 per child annually.

Every dollar spent on salt iodization is estimated to return \$30 through increased future cognitive ability.

Titled “[Brighter futures: Protecting early brain development through salt iodization](#),” the report also notes that more than 1 in 4 affected children – 4.3 million – lives in South Asia.

While South Asia is home to the largest proportion of babies at risk globally, the region has the second highest iodized salt coverage rate at 87 per cent of the population, preceded by East Asia and the Pacific at 91 per cent coverage.

The lowest coverage with iodized salt was seen in Eastern and Southern Africa, where around 25 per cent of the population do not have access to iodized salt, leaving 3.9 million babies every year unprotected against iodine deficiency disorders.

The earliest moments of life, from conception up to age 2, are the most critical for a child’s development. Nutrition – along with protection and stimulating activities like play and early learning – during a child’s first 1,000 days shape brain development for life.

The report outlines urgent steps to reduce the risk of mental impairment to babies’ growing brains, including the integration of salt iodization into national plans to support children’s nutrition and brain development in early

childhood and the establishment of surveillance systems to identify unreached populations.

[UN Committee against Torture issues new guidelines on asylum seekers' rights](#)

New guidelines developed by the United Nations Committee against Torture aim to help Governments avoid violating international human rights law, and to help asylum seekers avoid torture or other ill-treatment.

The [new document](#) addresses governments' implementation of an article under the Convention against Torture that deals with *non-refoulement* – a ban on expelling, returning (“refouling”) or extraditing a person to another State where he or she could face torture, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)).

The new document helps the Committee against Torture give guidance to States, and also helps Governments assess whether an asylum seeker faces a personal risk of torture or ill-treatment in his or her country of origin, if returned. It provides a checklist, which among other things, asks Government authorities to keep in mind that torture victims and other vulnerable persons frequently suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“The list could also help people at risk of being sent back, by assisting them in making their claims before the national authorities,” said Committee Chair Jens Modvig.

The checklist was updated in response to the migration crisis and the consequential increase in complaints from people alleging they risked torture or other ill-treatment if forcibly removed from their countries of asylum to their countries of origin.

The 10-member expert Committee monitors implementation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment by its State parties.

The full document is available [here](#).

Airstrikes, shelling continue in Syria despite Security Council's ceasefire call – top UN officials

Despite the Security Council's demand for a ceasefire throughout Syria, violence continues to plague the war-ravaged country, worsening the humanitarian situation and the suffering of its people, top United Nations political and relief officials said Wednesday, calling on all parties to the conflict to "fulfil their obligations to end the fighting."

"The brief respite you [Security Council members,] unanimously demanded only days ago in resolution 2401 has not materialized. [The airstrikes, shelling, and ground offensives continue](#). There are even reports of yet another chlorine gas attack," Jeffrey Feltman, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said at a Council meeting on the situation.

"What we need is implementation of 2401, and that is not happening."

Speaking alongside Mr. Feltman, Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator relayed some questions received by the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which he heads up, since the resolution was adopted this past Saturday.

One question asked what has happened in Syria in the last few days?

"More bombing. More fighting. More death. More destruction. More maiming of women and children. More hunger. More misery. [More, in other words, of the same](#)," answered Mr. Lowcock.

Both Mr. Lowcock and Mr. Feltman underscored that the resolutions adopted by the Security Council, including [resolution 2401](#), must be implemented for any positive change to be possible.

Meanwhile, on the ground, the [situation remains precarious](#): millions of Syrians are unable to access any assistance and hundreds of thousands, such as those in eastern Ghouta, remain trapped in sieges.

Speaking on other parts of the country, Mr. Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, said that in Deir ez-Zor, the first UN assessment mission in three and a half years found that while the town is about 80 per cent destroyed, it is still home to 100,000 people.

The situation in Damascus city, Idleb, Afrin, Aleppo, Raqqa, Rukban, and in other places also remains concerning, he added.

In two weeks, the conflict in the country will enter into its eighth year, during this time, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and millions have been displaced from their homes or forced as refugees in

neighbouring countries.



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, addresses the Security Council meeting.

“There are no words to express our frustration over the collective failure of the international community to end this war. But that frustration is nothing compared to the suffering and destruction visited ceaselessly upon the Syrian people,” said Mr. Feltman, warning that the conflict also continues to threaten regional and international.

Underscoring that there is no military solution to the conflict, the UN political chief stressed that that the Organization “remains convinced that a political solution is the only way forward” and called on positive and constructive engagement of all stakeholders.

“Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura is pressing forward on facilitating the establishment of a constitutional committee in Geneva, as part of the overall intra-Syrian political process towards full implementation of [resolution 2254](#),” he added, noting that the full support of the Security Council and the international community is vital if UN efforts “are to have a chance of reinvigorating a serious and meaningful political process.”

“I trust that [Mr. de Mistura] will have that support.”

Top UN aid official calls for urgent support for Chad

A senior United Nations aid official has called for urgent funding to support 4.4 million people in Chad, including refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons, as well as the communities hosting them.

Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ursula Mueller [made the appeal](#) on Tuesday at the end of her first visit to the landlocked country, located in central Africa.

Ms. Mueller underscored the need for durable solutions to the crisis in the Lac region.

The activities of the extremist group Boko Haram, as well as violence in Sudan and the Central African Republic, have affected 500,000 people there, including 137,000 people the UN has deemed particularly vulnerable.

“During my visit to displacement sites, I saw the difficult living conditions and lack of means displaced communities face,” Ms. Mueller said.

“It is unacceptable that these men, women and children who have lost everything, their home, belonging, livelihood and very often family members, continue to live in fear and uncertainty.”

Chad was the final stop on a 10-day mission which also took Ms. Mueller to the Central African Republic (CAR) and Cameroon, where she saw first-hand the devastating humanitarian consequences of ongoing violence.

The humanitarian emergency across the Lake Chad basin is among the most severe in the world, according to the UN humanitarian affairs office, [OCHA](#), where Ms. Mueller is second in command.

Lake Chad Basin: Crisis Overview

Most recent key figures

Living in affected area

17.2M

Food Insecure

4.51M

Children suffering from acute malnutrition

515k

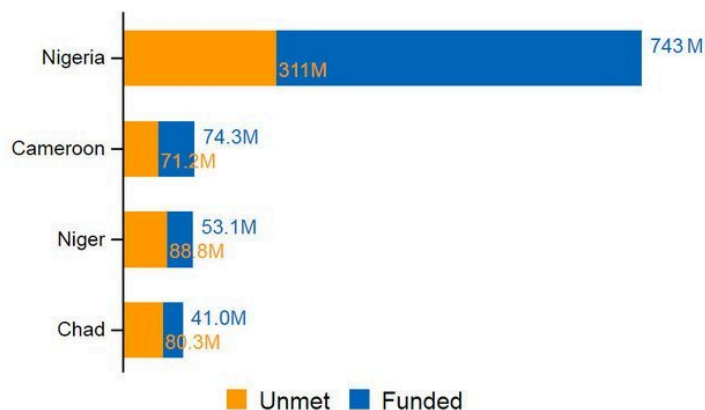
People in Need

10.9M

People Displaced

2.25M

Requirement for 2018 (in US \$)



OCHA

Lake Chad Basin: Crisis Overview

Persistent insecurity and Boko Haram operations mean that more than 10 million people in four countries – Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria – will need aid assistance this year just to survive.

OCHA said the closure of Chad's border with Nigeria from the beginning of the crisis in the Lac region in 2015, together with the continued implementation of emergency measures, have also had an impact on local populations who already face poor regional development.

Ms. Mueller said she was moved by the solidarity of host communities who are sharing the little they have with those forced to run for their lives.

"It is essential to strengthen the livelihoods of these communities who are the first lifeline for those fleeing violence and insecurity," she stated.

The crisis is taking place against a wider backdrop of recurrent food shortages and entrenched poverty across Chad, where nearly four million people require emergency food assistance and more than 200,000 children under five are at risk of dying from severe acute malnutrition.

However, funding for humanitarian operations there has not kept pace with increased needs.

Ms. Mueller urged countries to step up their support to Chad, which requires \$544 million in humanitarian funding this year.

So far, less than four per cent has been received.

UN mission welcomes Afghan Government's proposal for peace talks with Taliban

The United Nations mission in Afghanistan on Wednesday welcomed the Government's renewed call for unconditional peace talks with the Taliban and expressed strong support for its vision for peace.

The Government presented the proposal at an international conference aimed at creating a platform for peace talks.

"The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) welcomes the Afghan Government's [renewed call for unconditional peace talks](#) with the Taliban and the outlining of a framework for peace, presented at the Kabul Process II conference in the Afghan capital today," said a UNAMA press release.

The Mission "strongly supports the vision for peace through intra-Afghan dialogue and urges all parties involved to engage at the earliest time," the release said.

UNAMA commended the stated preparedness of Afghan authorities to discuss all issues as part of a peace process, including such key aspects as the constitution and the lifting of sanctions against persons and entities, as well as the release of prisoners.

The UN Security Council established UNAMA, a political mission, in March 2002. However, Afghanistan remains a country undergoing conflict, which threatens the sustainability of its achievements, according to the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA).

Peace negotiations between the Afghan Government and armed opposition groups are [the only alternative](#) for ending the conflict, the DPA says, noting that the region and the broader international community have a stake and a role in helping to create the conditions for peace.

The conference, held in Kabul, brought together all of Afghanistan's neighbouring States, along with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – as well as other parties, to establish a consensus among regional and international stakeholders on the imperative for an Afghan-led peace process.

"UNAMA is encouraged by the active participation of the countries and organisations present; we look forward to increased cooperation to assist with Afghan peace efforts and to address the shared problem of terrorism and transnational crime," the release said.