

Amid ongoing political tensions, situation in Burundi 'not suitable' for credible elections – UN official

Urgent efforts are needed to keep the “hard-won” gains in Burundi from eroding, a senior United Nations official told the Security Council on Monday, noting that while the security situation is calm, there is still the potential for volatility as political tensions persist.

The overall political situation, along with the Government’s decision to revise the Constitution, has hampered economic development, said Michel Kafando, the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Burundi.

At the same time, though Burundi has made some progress, human rights violations are still being reported and the humanitarian situation remains a worry.

The environment is “not suitable” for the conduct of credible elections, planned for 2020, he added.

Presenting the Secretary-General’s latest report on the situation in the country, Mr. Kafando highlighted the efforts made at the inter-Burundian dialogue and said the region had decided to continue those talks, with strong commitments from the African Union and other regional partners.

“Dialogue remains indispensable, as the process sought to bring Burundians closer together with a view to building a strong nation,” he added.

Also at the Security Council meeting, Jürg Lauber (Switzerland), the Chair of the Burundi Configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission, said that the Configuration would align its work with subregional, regional and international efforts, focusing on the East African Community’s mediation initiative, a path to peaceful elections, socioeconomic dialogue with the Government and partners, as well as humanitarian and national reconciliation initiatives.

Noting that he would visit Burundi in the coming weeks, Mr. Lauber pledged to focus on five key issues: mediation efforts of the East African Community; the path leading to the conduct of free, fair and democratic elections in 2020; socioeconomic dialogue with the Government and its international partners; the humanitarian situation; and efforts towards national reconciliation.

He also informed the 15-member Security Council that the Peacebuilding Fund had approved three new projects for Burundi worth \$6.5 million and outlined several conclusions based on the Configuration’s recent work, which underscored the importance of the regionally-led dialogue, the 2020 elections, humanitarian efforts, improving socioeconomic development, the

swift signing of Memoranda of Understanding – both between the Government and the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR), and between the Government and the African Union – and the deployment of observers to provide a more accurate picture of human rights and civil society developments in Burundi.

[UN launches 24-hour hotline for staff to report sexual harassment](#)

The United Nations is launching a 24-hour helpline to enable staff to call out sexual harassment in the workplace, Secretary-General António Guterres said on Monday.

“The [helpline](#) is a 24-hour resource for UN Secretariat personnel to speak confidentially with an impartial and trained individual who can provide information on protection, support and reporting mechanisms,” said Mr. Guterres in his email sent to staff members.

Going live tomorrow, the ‘Speak up’ helpline is part of the UN’s [five-point plan](#) to address such behavior within its ranks and will complement existing reporting mechanisms.

The goal is to attend to the needs of personnel, and to empower them to make informed decisions on action, if they choose, he said.

The Investigations Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services will, with immediate effect, take responsibility for investigating all complaints of sexual harassment, and implement a streamlined, fast-tracked procedure to receive, process and address complaints.

A specialized team focusing on the investigation of sexual harassment is being created, and additional investigators are under recruitment, with particular attention given to increasing the number of female investigators, Mr. Guterres said.

“I reiterate my commitment to zero tolerance of sexual harassment, and underline that harassment of any type is antithetical to the principles for which we stand as an Organization,” he said.

As members of a standard-setting institution, he said, the UN must be committed to fostering an inclusive environment in which every person is valued and respected. A harmonious, safe and civil workplace is a key to delivering on its mandates for the people it serves.

In Cameroon, UN deputy aid chief urges assistance as insecurity deepens in Lake Chad basin

Amid growing insecurity in Lake Chad, a senior United Nations relief official on Monday said the international community and the Government of Cameroon must step up support for humanitarian action in the country, which is most affected by regionwide violence sparked by Boko Haram.

“The Lake Chad crisis and violence in the sub-region are far from over said Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ursula Mueller as she wrapped up a four-day visit to Cameroon.

“The international community cannot spare any effort,” she added. “Violent attacks by armed groups, mostly affiliated to Boko Haram, have increased over the past year and I have seen its direct impact and growing humanitarian needs in the Far North of Cameroon.”

In Cameroon, Ms. Mueller met with the minister of External Relations and the governor of the Far North.

Visiting the Zamai internally displaced people (IDP) site and Minawao refugee camp, she saw first-hand the impact of the deteriorating security situation in the Lake Chad basin.

In the region, Cameroon is most affected by the Boko Haram conflict, which started in Nigeria’s northeast nine years ago.

More than 60 suicide attacks were conducted in the Far North in 2017 – a 50 per cent increase compared to the previous year.

Ms. Mueller recounted the story of a family in the Zamai IDP camp, in which the mother, Sara, and her baby had been kidnapped by and escaped from Boko Haram, saying that she had no idea of her husband’s whereabouts nor whether he was even still alive.

“We need to be able to provide food, water and other life-saving assistance, as well as protection, to women and men like Sara and her ten-month-old baby,” explained Ms. Mueller. “The response to increased forced recruitment and violent attacks should also be increased solidarity with those affected by crises.”

She underscored that this area needs greater attention, including from donors.

“Security and access are major challenges but the lack of funding remains, by

far, the main impediment to humanitarian aid reaching those most in need," flagged Ms. Mueller.

Currently, the Humanitarian Response Plan proposed by the UN and its partners have only received five per cent of the \$305 million required.

In Cameroon, 3.3 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance. In the Far North, one-out-of-three people, or 1.5 million people, are now food insecure at crisis and emergency levels.

Between an increased influx of refugees from the Central African Republic and socio-political tensions in the northwest and southwest regions, the Deputy Relief Coordinator's visit also provided an opportunity to discuss other crises facing the country.

She emphasized that UN's deep concern about the situation in Cameroon, including in the south- and north-west.

"We are again calling on all parties to avoid further escalation of violence and to protect civilian populations," said Ms. Mueller.

"Further fact-finding missions will be taking place as early as next week and we are putting into place assistance to the internally displaced persons, who are estimated in the tens of thousands," she concluded.

['Hell on earth' in Syria's eastern Ghouta must end – UN chief Guterres](#)

Syria's war-battered east Ghouta, the troubled Kasais region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Northern Rakhine state in Myanmar, where violence has sparked a major exodus of Muslim Rohingyas, were all in the spotlight as the Geneva-based Human Rights Council opened its session today, with UN officials warning that these situations spiraled into crisis "because not enough was done, early and collectively, to prevent the rising horrors."

The Geneva-based United Nations' Human Rights Council opened a regular session on Monday hearing calls to ensure that counter-terrorism efforts do not supersede international obligations to protect civilians and to end the harmful use of veto in the Security Council.

"It is an honor for me to be here again today and this year, marking the 70th anniversary of [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)," UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) told the opening of a four-week session in the Swiss city, referring to the landmark document adopted in 1948 proclaiming the

inalienable rights of every human being.

The session, which runs through 23 March, opens at a time of escalating violence in Syria, where civilian casualties have spiked, a development that prompted the UN Security Council over the weekend to adopt a resolution demanding a cessation of hostilities throughout the war-torn country for at least 30 days.

It was Mr. Guterres' [first opportunity](#) to address a UN body after this action.

"I remind all parties of their absolute obligation and international humanitarian and human rights law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure at all times," he said. "And similarly, efforts to combat terrorism do not supersede these obligations."

The [Human Rights Council](#) is an inter-governmental body of 47 States responsible for promoting and protecting human rights around the globe.

Mr. Guterres highlighted how human rights are fundamental to preventing conflict.

"In today's world, it is also by ensuring the primacy of human rights that conflict can be prevented," he said, noting that all the crisis situations currently being examined by the Security Council are invariably accompanied by human rights violations and abuses and that his office is ready to help the 15-member body strengthen its preventive role.

The UN chief also underscored that the goal of ensuring diverse, inclusive, peaceful and sustainable societies on a healthy planet under the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) can be achieved only by promoting and protecting human rights.

Mr. Guterres went on to warn that the words of the Universal Declaration are not yet matched by facts on the ground, noting that gender inequality remains a pressing issue, there is a groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance, including anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred, and refugees and migrants are often denied their rights, including the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

"In my experience, the Rohingya are one of the most discriminated against populations in the world – and that was even before the crisis of the past year," he said, stressing the importance of reconciliation.

Further, Mr. Guterres pointed out that there is still some resistance to support UN action on human rights.

"We must overcome the false dichotomy between human rights and national sovereignty. Human rights and national sovereignty go hand in hand. There is no contradiction," he said.

"An emphasis on human rights lies at the heart of conflict prevention, which must be our highest priority."

In his address, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, also welcomed the Security Council's unanimous decision on a 30-day ceasefire in Syria.



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

However, he emphasized that the resolution must be viewed against a backdrop of seven years of failure to stop the violence: seven years of unremitting and frightful mass killing.

Mr. Zeid said east Ghouta in Syria, Ituri and the Kasais in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Taiz in Yemen, Burundi, Northern Rakhine state in Myanmar have become some of "the most prolific slaughterhouses of humans in recent times" because not enough was done, early and collectively, to prevent the rising horrors.

"Time and again, my office and I have brought to the attention of the international community violations of human rights which should have served as a trigger for preventive action," he said. "Time and again, there has been minimal action."

Turning to the harmful use of veto in the Security Council, he said "second to those who are criminally responsible – those who kill and those who maim – the responsibility for the continuation of so much pain lies with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council."

"So long as [the veto is used](#) by them to block any unity of action, when it is needed the most, when it could reduce the extreme suffering of innocent people, then it is they – the permanent members – who must answer before the victims," he said.

He commended France for championing a code of conduct on the use of veto,

noting that the United Kingdom has also joined the initiative, now backed by over 115 countries. “It is time, for the love of mercy, that China, Russia and the United States, join them and end the pernicious use of the veto,” Mr. Zeid said, naming all the Council’s permanent members.

For his part, the President of the UN General Assembly, Miroslav Lajčák, spotlighted the role of the [Universal Periodic Review](#) – a peer review mechanism for the assessment and advancement of human rights in all 193 UN Member States.



UN Photo/Violaine Martin

Miroslav Lajčák, President of the General Assembly of the United Nations at the 37th Session of the Human Rights Council, Palais des Nation.

“The Universal Periodic Review has now entered its third cycle. It has been over ten years since the General Assembly adopted the resolution to begin this important process of review. And, I believe that our multilateral system is stronger with this mechanism as part of it,” he said.

There are still opportunities to make it better. “When assessing the success of the Universal Periodic Review, [what is most important is its impact on people’s lives](#),” he said.

[South Sudan: A year after averting](#)

famine, 'food insecurity outlook has never been so dire,' UN warns

One year after famine was declared in parts of South Sudan, three United Nations agencies warned on Monday that without sustained humanitarian assistance and access, more than seven million people in the crisis-torn country— almost two-thirds of the population – could become severely food insecure in the coming months.

“The situation is [extremely fragile](#), and we are close to seeing another famine. The projections are stark,” said Serge Tissot, the [Food and Agriculture Organization's](#) ([FAO](#)) Representative in South Sudan.

Should this happen, it will be the highest-ever number of food insecure people in South Sudan.

“If we ignore them, we’ll be faced with a growing tragedy. If farmers receive support to resume their livelihoods, we will see a rapid improvement in the country’s food security situation due to increased local production,” he added.

The period of greatest risk will be the lean season, between May and July.

FAO, the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) and the UN World Food Programme ([WFP](#)) warned that progress in preventing hunger-related deaths could be undone, and more people than ever could be pushed into severe hunger and famine-like conditions during May-July unless assistance and access are maintained.

Particularly at risk are 155,000 people, including 29,000 children, who could suffer from the most extreme levels of hunger.

“We are alarmed as the lean season, when the harvest runs out, is expected to start this year much earlier than usual. Unless we can pre-position assistance rather than mount a more costly response during the rains, more families will struggle to survive,” said Adnan Khan, WFP Representative and Country Director.

“The situation is deteriorating with each year of conflict as more people lose the little they had,” he elaborated.

In January, nearly half the population struggling to find enough food each day were in “crisis” or “emergency” levels of food insecurity – according to an Integrated Food Security Phase Classification report released Monday.

This represents a 40 per cent increase in the number of severely food insecure people compared to January 2017.

The report comes one year after famine was declared in parts of South Sudan last February.

Despite improved access and a massive humanitarian response in containing and averting famine later last year, the food insecurity outlook has never been as dire as it is now.

“We are preparing for rates of severe malnutrition among children never before seen in this country,” said Mahimbo Mdoe, UNICEF’s Representative in South Sudan.

“Without an urgent response and access to those most in need, many children will die. We cannot allow that to happen,” he warned.

A growing tragedy

Protracted conflict, the result of a political dispute that erupted between South Sudanese leaders and their rival factions in 2013, has led to reduced food production and disrupted livelihoods, has caused hunger levels to rise.

This was further exacerbated by an economic collapse that rendered markets and trade unable to compensate for the local food production decrease.

Prolonged dry spells, flooding and continued pest infestation also had a damaging impact.

In areas like Unity, Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Central Equatoria, riddled by reoccurring outbreaks of violent conflict and displacement, the proportion of people suffering from extreme food insecurity ranges from 52 to 62 per cent – more than half the states’ combined population.

The number is expected to increase unless people find the means to receive, produce or buy their own food.

Projections for February-April reveal 6.3 million people in “crisis,” “emergency” or “catastrophe” levels of food insecurity, including 50,000 people in the latter.

The May-July forecast put 7.1 million in those same levels, including 155,000 people in “catastrophe.” Moreover, 1.3 million children under age five risk acute malnutrition.