

Syria: UN urges an end to hostilities, warns of grave and deepening humanitarian crisis

6 February 2018 – Senior United Nations officials in Syria warned on Tuesday of the dire humanitarian crisis in several parts of the country, calling on warring parties to immediately stop fighting so aid and basic services can reach those in need, and the sick and critically wounded can evacuate.

“The United Nations humanitarian team in Syria warns of the dire consequences of the compounded humanitarian crisis in several parts of the country,” said a statement issued Tuesday by the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and the UN Representatives in Syria.

“In this extreme situation,” the officials called for “an immediate cessation of hostilities lasting for at least one month throughout Syria to enable the delivery of humanitarian aid and services, evacuation of the critically sick and wounded, and alleviation of people’s suffering, to the extent possible, wherever they are.”

In Afrin, the ongoing military operations and the reported blockage of exits by other forces have virtually trapped many civilians preventing them from accessing safer areas, the statement said, noting that so far, 380 families have reached surrounding villages and Aleppo city neighborhoods while thousands of people have been displaced within Afrin.

“As the fighting escalates, the number of civilians affected by violence is bound to increase,” the statement warned.

In Al-Hasakah, an agreement was reached to allow some UN partners to resume their work, after a month in which most humanitarian assistance came to a complete halt. This is a positive first step, but the agreement is only for a period of two months and covers a limited number of partners.

Turning to Ar-Raqqah, the statement noted that the city’s devastation is unparalleled and conditions remain unsafe. Many civilians trying to return home have been killed and injured by unexploded ordinances. Services are absent. Access for humanitarian workers to the city is almost impossible due to unsafe conditions.

In Idleb, the military operations resulted in increased casualties and movement of civilians to safer areas. Some of them have been forced to move several times to escape fighting. With the high concentration of displaced people, the Governorate may not be able to withstand the consequences of renewed fighting.

Foah and Kafraya in Idleb continue to be besieged by non-State armed groups, without access to much needed humanitarian supplies and medical treatment.

In the south, civilians in Al-Rukban camp remain inaccessible to the humanitarian team in Syria. The last time the camp was supplied with food and non-food items was from across the border in early January, the statement said.

Upsurge in Violence in Idlib and eastern Ghouta

Meanwhile, the UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria expressed deep concern over the further escalation of violence in Idlib governorate and in eastern Ghouta.

Over the last 48 hours, the scale and ferocity of attacks has increased dramatically resulting in multiple reports of civilian casualties and airstrikes that have reportedly hit at least three hospitals, including in Ma'aret al Nu'man, Kafr Nabl and Mardikh.

Since the beginning of the year, the increase in violence in Idlib has resulted in another upsurge of internal displacement with over a quarter of a million civilians reportedly fleeing the fighting, according to reports received by the Commission.

"These reports are extremely troubling, and make a mockery of the so-called 'de-escalation zones' intended to protect civilians from such bombardment," said Commission Chair Paulo Pinheiro.

"The parties to this conflict are failing in their obligations under international humanitarian law, including their absolute obligation to refrain from attacks against medical facilities and personnel," Mr. Pinheiro added.

Most alarmingly, the Commission has received multiple reports – which it is now investigating – that bombs allegedly containing weaponised chlorine have been used in the town of Saraqeb in Idlib and in Douma in eastern Ghouta.

Mounting attacks in Idlib come at a time when the escalation of violence in eastern Ghouta has also magnified the longstanding humanitarian crisis in that besieged pocket on the north-eastern outskirts of Damascus.

Airstrikes and shelling of areas held by anti-government armed groups has compounded a three-year siege in which nearly 400,000 civilians – including children – have had little access to basic assistance, including food, medicines and life-saving health assistance.

"What is happening in eastern Ghouta is not simply a humanitarian crisis because aid is denied, these sieges involve the international crimes of indiscriminate bombardment and deliberate starvation of the civilian population," stated Mr. Pinheiro.

'Protect children and their digital footprint,' urges UNICEF on Safer Internet Day

6 February 2018 – Every half a second, every day, a child goes online for the first time – tapping into all the great opportunities the Internet has to offer, but facing grave risks, the United Nations Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) said Tuesday, calling for urgent action to protect them from sexual exploitation, cyberbullying and the misuse of their private information.

"The [potential of connectivity](#) makes it easier for children to connect with their peers anywhere in the world [...] is a tool for children's empowerment and engagement with their communities. However, this connectivity puts them at risk of their private information, access to harmful content, and cyberbullying," said Sheldon Yett, UNICEF Pacific Representative.

As outlined in [The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a digital world Worldwide](#), one-in-three internet users is a child, and yet too little is done to protect them from digital world perils.

"Every day, thousands of children are going online for the first time, which opens them up to a flood of dangers we are just coming to appreciate, let alone address," said Laurence Chandy, UNICEF Director of Data, Research and Policy.

"While governments and the private sector have made some progress in formulating policies and approaches to eliminate the most egregious online risks, more effort must be made to fully understand and protect children's online lives," he added.

UNICEF is working with governments in the Pacific to deliver cyber safety programmes particularly in Tonga and Samoa and provide tips to parents on how to protect their children online.

"Collective action – by governments, the private sector, children's organizations, academia, families and children themselves – is needed to level the digital playing field and ensure safer internet spaces for children," Mr. Chandy affirmed.

The report underscores that everyone is obliged to protect children in the digital world, including governments, families, schools and other institutions – with a special note that technology and telecommunication industries have a significant responsibility to shape the impact of digital technology on children.

UNICEF is calling for renewed urgency and cooperation among governments, civil society, UN agencies and, most significantly, the private sector, to put children at the centre of digital policy by coordinating global, regional

and national responses; safeguarding children's privacy; empowering children online through more equitable access and digital literacy; and investing in better evidence about access, opportunities and risks for children online.

"In the time it takes to click on a link, a child somewhere begins creating a digital trail which those not necessarily considering the child's best interest can follow and potentially exploit," Mr. Chandy stressed.

"As younger and younger children join the Internet, the need to have a serious discussion about how to keep them safe online and secure their digital footprint becomes increasingly urgent," he concluded.

[UN chief urges Maldives to uphold rule of law amid rapidly unfolding political crisis](#)

6 February 2018 – Following the declaration of a 'state of emergency' in the Maldives, after which soldiers forced their way into the Supreme Court, United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres on Tuesday urged the Government to uphold the rule of law and ensure the safety of the people of the island nation.

The UN chief expressed serious concern about the unfolding situation in the Maldives and, in statement issued by his Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric, urged the Government to [uphold the constitution](#) and rule of law, lift the state of emergency as soon as possible, and take all measures to ensure the safety and security of the people in the country, including members of the judiciary."

According to media reports, the security forces arrested the top judge after the declaration of the state of emergency – a development following the Supreme Court decision that ordered the release of convicted opposition leaders and the reinstatement of 12 parliamentarians.

Over the weekend, senior UN officials called on the authorities in the Maldives to fully respect the top court ruling, with Mr. Guterres expressing the continued readiness of the UN to facilitate all-party talks in finding a solution to the Indian Ocean nation's political stalemate.

With rising number of girls at risk, world in 'race against time' to end female genital mutilation – UN

6 February 2018 – Female genital mutilation is a violent act that, among other things, causes infection, disease, childbirth complications and death, said the Executive Directors of the United Nations Population Fund ([UNFPA](#)) and UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) in a joint statement for the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Describing FGM as ["a cruel practice"](#) that inflicts emotional harm and preys on girls between infancy and age 15, the most vulnerable members of society, the UN agency chiefs called it a ["violation of human rights"](#) that perpetuates the low status of girls and women; and a drag on the well-being of communities and economies.

["Yet, it is also something that can be stopped,"](#) UNFPA's Dr. Natalia Kanem, and UNICEF's Henrietta H. Fore said in Tuesday's statement.

["Around the world, momentum to eliminate female genital mutilation is building. Political will, community engagement and targeted investment are changing practices and changing lives,"](#) they added.

In countries where both agencies work jointly to end FGM, girls are one-third less likely today to undergo the harmful practice than in 1997.

Since 2008, more than 25 million people in some 18,000 communities across 15 countries publicly disavowed the practice, and globally its prevalence has declined by nearly a quarter since 2000.

["This is good for girls and young women themselves; it is also good for their families and communities,"](#) the agency heads stressed.

Girls who are not subjected to the practice tend to grow up to be healthier and have healthier children, they elaborated, pointing out that they are often ["better educated, earn higher incomes and are more empowered to make decisions about their own lives."](#)

The UN agencies also noted that the countries committed to changing the harmful practice reap commensurate benefits.

["This is the good news,"](#) they continued. ["Yet, population trends in some of the world's poorest countries where female genital mutilation persists threaten to roll back our progress."](#)

By 2030, more than one-third of births globally will be in the 30 FGM countries ["requiring accelerated progress to protect millions at risk."](#)

["It is unconscionable that these girls should be added to the 200](#)

million women and girls in the world today who have already endured female genital mutilation. Who already bear the scars, or suffer related complications, or relive harsh memories of pain and betrayal, they stressed.

Nobody — not the girls, their families or communities — benefits economically or socially in unequal societies where such violence against girls is accepted, argued the UNICEF and UNFPA chiefs.

They maintained that FGM rates can drop rapidly when the issue is taken on by governments, communities and families; when social norms are confronted, village by village; when medical professionals jointly refuse to perform it; when laws make it a crime — and authorities enforce them; when access to health, education and legal services ensure sustainable change; and where girls and women are protected and empowered to make their voices heard.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize that female genital mutilation undermines progress towards a more equal, just and prosperous world, and target by 2030 its elimination.

Given the rising number of girls at risk, both agencies call it a race against time.

With increased investment, redoubled political commitment, greater community engagement and more empowered women and girls, the agency heads upheld, it is a race that can be won. And because it can, it must.

It is high time to eliminate female genital mutilation from the face of the earth forever. It is a task for all of us, and for our common future, the statement concluded.

For his part, [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres called FGM a gross violation of the human rights of women and girls.

Without concerted, accelerated action, a further 68 million girls could be subjected to this harmful practice by 2030, he warned in his message marking the Day.

The UN chief pointed out that while several countries with strong political engagement have seen success, the progress is not enough to keep up with population growth, and without immediate action, the number of cases will continue to rise.

Sustainable development cannot be achieved without full respect for the human rights of women and girls, he upheld, reiterating SDG 5's target for FMG elimination.

He said that together with the European Union, the UN has launched the Spotlight Initiative, a global, multi-year undertaking that aims to create strong partnerships and align efforts to end all forms of violence against women and girls, including female genital mutilation.

With the dignity, health and well-being of millions of girls at stake,

there is no time to waste,” underscored the Secretary-General.
“Together, we can and must end this harmful practice.”

Amid ‘difficult reality’ in Middle East, two-state solution more important than ever – UN chief

5 February 2018 – International consensus on a two-State solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be eroding “at a time when it is more important than ever,” [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres said on Tuesday, calling the ‘question of Palestine’ one of the longest unresolved issues on the agenda of the United Nations.

“We must face today’s difficult reality,” Secretary-General António Guterres told the opening of the 2018 session of the [Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People](#), which was created by the UN General Assembly in 1975 to seek and end to the Israeli occupation and ensure the achievement of a two-state solution in the Middle East conflict.

“Negative trends on the ground have the potential to create an [irreversible one-state reality](#) that is incompatible with realizing the legitimate national, historic and democratic aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians,” he added.

After decades, “convergence and global consensus could be eroding, making effective concerted action more difficult to achieve,” he stressed, noting “illegal” settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank as “a major obstacle to peace.” “It must be halted and reversed,” he maintained. Moreover, the humanitarian and economic situation in Gaza remains dire, with predictions by the UN Country Team in the Occupied Palestine Territory that unless concrete action is taken to improve basic services and infrastructure, it will become unliveable by 2020.

“Yet,” the UN chief continued “Gaza remains squeezed by crippling closures and a state of constant humanitarian emergency” as two million Palestinians struggle daily with an electricity crisis, chronic unemployment and a paralyzed economy – amid an unfolding environmental disaster.

The latest funding shortfall in the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East ([UNRWA](#)) will further impair critical services and threaten the human security, rights and dignity of five million Palestine refugees across the Middle East. “I appeal to the generosity of the international community not to let that happen,” implored Mr. Guterres, adding “Reconciliation is a key step in reaching the larger objective of a Palestinian State and lasting peace.” He reiterated his commitment to

supporting the parties' efforts to a two-State solution.

"A two-State solution is the only way to achieve the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and secure a sustainable solution to the conflict," concluded the Secretary-General.

Meetings Coverage Press Release can be found [here](#)