

Relentless fighting in Syria continues to exact terrible toll on civilians, says UN deputy aid chief

30 January 2018 – Hostilities in Syria continues to drive hundreds of thousands from their homes and the number of displaced in the seemingly unending conflict continues to rise along with the suffering of affected communities, the United Nations deputy humanitarian chief said Tuesday, calling on all parties to ensure the safety and protection of civilians caught up in the violence.

Ursula Mueller, the Deputy UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, said the situation is most concerning in north-west Syria where recent fighting has claimed many lives and forced over 270,000 civilians to flee for safety.

“Camps for the displaced are overstretched, forcing most of those displaced to seek shelter in some 160 makeshift settlements. During these cold and wet winter months, many families have nothing else than improvised tents which they share with others,” said Ms. Mueller, briefing a Security Council meeting on the humanitarian situation in the war-torn country.

Elsewhere in Syria, fighting in Afrin (in Aleppo governorate) where on one hand, some 16,000 people have been displaced, but at the same time, civilian movement has reportedly been restricted by local authorities, particularly for those wishing to leave the area.

The situation is equally concerning in eastern Ghouta and in areas of Damascus where at least 81 civilians – including 25 women and 30 children – were killed in the first ten days of January.

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According to estimates, altogether 13.1 million people are in need of protection and humanitarian assistance, including 6.1 million people who are displaced within the country and a further 5.5 million people have become refugees in neighbouring countries.

Wait for medical evacuations continue to claim lives

Ms. Mueller also informed the Security Council that although in late December, 29 patients in need of urgent medical care were allowed out of eastern Ghouta, hundreds more – most of them women and children – require immediate medical attention.

The law is clear [...] medical evacuations take place without conditions and without delay UN deputy aid chief Ursula Mueller

“So far, there have been 21 civilian deaths among those needing medical evacuation. Their needs are critical, and the law is clear,” she said, calling on all parties and all those with influence over the parties, “to see to it that all such medical evacuations take place without conditions and without delay.”

In the midst of the catastrophe, relief workers delivering life-saving assistance continue to face considerable challenges, including access to those in need of assistance.

Last month, none of the UN cross-line convoys could reach besieged locations and only two convoys reached hard-to-reach areas. This month, UN and partners have had no access to any such locations at all, stressed Ms. Mueller.

“Not one convoy has been able to deploy. Discussions about convoys have stalled over requirements to lower the number of beneficiaries, and splitting convoys in a way that would not allow us to provide food or other essential items,” she said, noting also issues in other parts of the country preventing delivery of aid.

“Our deliveries must continue to be based on humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law, impartially based on civilian need,” reiterated the senior UN official.

Five key areas for concrete progress

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Noting five key areas where the UN is looking to make concrete progress, she called for urgent funding for the Organization’s Syria humanitarian response plan for 2018.

Ms. Mueller also called for an urgent agreement on medical evacuations and assistance for those trapped in eastern Ghouta and other besieged areas of Syria. She further underlined the need for improved humanitarian access; and for an agreement on UN-supported aid convoys from Damascus to Rukban in south-eastern Syria.

“Fifth, more effective arrangements to enable the UN to support the work of Syrian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and to enable international NGOs to play the stronger role they can and are ready to play in relieving the suffering,” she said.

Sochi talks on Syria proposes forming constitutional committee under the Geneva-process

Meanwhile, talks sponsored by Russia on a political solution towards ending the seven-year Syrian conflict concluded today in Sochi.



Staffan de Mistura, United Nations Special Envoy for Syria. UN Photo/Violaine Martin

Speaking to the press in New York, via telephone from Sochi, Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria said that the main outcome of the talks was the declaration to set up a committee that will draft a new constitution for the war-torn country under the auspices of the UN-led Geneva process.

The committee's mandate, terms of reference, powers, rules of procedure and selection criteria for its composition will be decided by parties to the Geneva talks based on proposals made by the Special Envoy.

The devil is in the detail [and] the job ahead is complicated – we always knew it – but we believe we can build on it UN Special Envoy de Mistura

Mr. de Mistura further clarified that each of the guarantors – Russia, Iran and Turkey – will provide about 50 names which could be considered as, in his terms, “candidates for such a committee” but the body will “very likely” be composed of 45 to 50 members at a maximum.

“I plan to consult widely, including those who did not attend the conference [in Sochi] and consistently with Security Council [resolution 2254 \(2015\)](#), will prepare a list of 45-50 people based on criteria that will be soon announced by me in Geneva, based on very wide consultations,” he added, elaborating on the declaration announced by the participants at the conference.

“The devil is in the detail [and] the job ahead is complicated – we always knew it – but we believe we can build on it,” expressed Mr. de Mistura.

[Somali leaders, international partners and UN determined to make Somalia famine resistant](#)

30 January 2018 – One year after Somalia declared drought as a national emergency, famine has so far been averted due to collective and unprecedented humanitarian action, and on Tuesday, the country marked a turning point towards ending the cycle of recurring crises, with the launch of a Government-led, United Nations-supported humanitarian response plan.

At a [high-level event](#) in the capital Mogadishu, the 2018 Humanitarian

Response Plan, seeking \$1.5 billion to address the needs of 5.4 million people, was jointly presented with a Recovery and Resilience Framework (RRF), which outlines the way forward for recovery and longer-term resilience aimed at addressing the root causes of Somalia's recurring humanitarian crises.

To address the impact of recurrent drought and famine risk, as a consequence of fragility, the Federal Government of Somalia led a Drought Impact Needs Assessment (DINA), in partnership with Federal Member States, the Banadir Regional Administration, the European Union, the UN and the World Bank.

The outcomes of the assessment have informed the RRF, which will enable the Federal Government and Federal Member states to devise medium- and long-term solutions to promote development and address the root causes of vulnerability to drought. The DINA and the RRF have been developed in alignment with the 2018 Response Plan and in coordination with humanitarian partners, in order to ensure complementarity and, most importantly, to protect humanitarian achievements.

The joint launch was attended by Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire and other senior representatives of the Somali Federal Government, as well as the international community, including the Administrator of the UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)), Achim Steiner, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock, World Bank Senior Vice-President Mahmoud Mohieldin, and the European Union.

Opening the event, Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire emphasized his Government's resolve in moving from crisis to recovery, saying: "Somalia is turning over a new leaf in its history. Important and significant progress is being made on our peace- and state-building agenda. We are determined to overcome the challenges posed by recurring droughts that risk undermining these gains, and we count on our international partners to support us in this endeavor."

On his first visit to Somalia, Mr. Steiner recognized the Government's leadership in averting famine in 2017 and highlighted the opportunity to build on this achievement while simultaneously implementing longer-term solutions.

"Today, Somalia has more effective institutions than it has had in decades. Progress in the state-building and peace-building processes in Somalia since 2012 has now created conditions in which targeted efforts can be made to define and implement solutions so that Somalia's citizens will hopefully not have to face the risk of famine again," he said.

Noting the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis, Mr. Lowcock [urged](#) the international community to sustain its life-saving support, while recognizing that that the situation cannot be solved by humanitarian interventions alone.

"Ending need in Somalia can only be achieved if we respond to immediate humanitarian needs while simultaneously implementing longer-term solutions to build resilience. Humanitarian and development partners are working with the Government to help ensure Somalis are less vulnerable to food insecurity and

malnutrition, to natural hazards and displacement, and that they have better access to basic social services,” Mr. Lowcock said.

Referencing the [new way of working](#), and emphasizing the significance of the HRP being jointly launched with the RRF, Mr. Mohieldin stated that “Somalia is ahead of the curve in its effort to overcome the challenges facing the country”. He noted that hard investment was required to implement the RRF and applauded the Government’s efforts to normalize its relations with the international finance system.

In its statement, the European Union expressed appreciation for the Government’s leadership and pledged its continued support.

“As a major partner to Somalia, who promotes a comprehensive approach linking security, political engagement, development and humanitarian aid, the European Union is pleased by the resolve shown by the government to lead us in a collective effort to move from reaction to prevention,” said Fulgencio Garrido Ruiz, Deputy Head of the European Union Delegation to Somalia.

[Thousands flee violence in eastern DR Congo, seek shelter in nearby countries – UN refugee agency](#)

30 January 2018 – Surging violence in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is driving thousands of Congolese into neighbouring Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda, the United Nations refugee agency said Tuesday.

“Thousands of children, women and men have [abandoned their homes](#), in the midst of intensified military operations against Mai Mai armed groups in South Kivu province,” Babar Baloch, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) told press at the regular briefing in Geneva.

“Since last week almost 7,000 people have crossed to neighbouring Burundi and an additional 1,200 to Tanzania,” he added, noting that many more may be displaced inside South Kivu without shelter or food.

While some refugees have told UNHCR that they fled forced recruitment, direct violence and other abuses by armed groups, others say they left in anticipation of military operations and out of fear.

“It is imperative that people fleeing the violence are allowed safe passage, and that humanitarian access to the internally displaced is facilitated,” Mr. Baloch stressed.

Most refugees heading to Burundi are crossing Lake Tanganyika on small fishing boats, arriving to extremely limited shelter, sanitary facilities, drinking water and food in Nyanza Lac and Rumonge.

“Together with the authorities and other partners, UNHCR is transferring the refugees to transit centres and camps – already overcrowded – in Burundi’s north and east,” the spokesperson explained.

In addition to the Congolese citizens, UNHCR is also concerned about the situation for over 43,000 Burundian refugees just across the lake in South Kivu, mainly at Lusenda and Mulongwe.

“Although these locations have not been directly affected by the fighting, it is vital that all parties to the conflict respect the humanitarian character of the sites where refugees are and refrain from activities that could hinder the delivery of humanitarian assistance,” underscored Mr. Baloch.

Congolese heading to Tanzania are also crossing Lake Tanganyika from South Kivu to locations in and around the city of Kigoma – many exhausted and unwell.

“The influx is placing enormous pressure on existing shelter, water and sanitation facilities, and many people have no choice but to sleep in the open,” asserted Mr. Baloch, adding that UNHCR was mobilizing relief aid for the reception areas and preparing to transfer the new arrivals to the country’s north-west Nyarugusu refugee camp.

Conflicts in the north DRC – including inter-communal violence in Ituri province and military offensives in North Kivu – have also driven more Congolese to Uganda.

Since December, more than 15,000 people have entered Uganda either on foot or by crossing Lake Albert in fishing boats or canoes. January arrivals, at around 330 people per day, are four times what they were in December.

The DRC is one of the world’s most complex crises – deteriorating as local conflicts escalate.

As 2018 began, some five million Congolese were displaced, about 674,879 of them in other African countries, and about 4.35 million internally.

“This places DRC among the world’s biggest displacement crises,” concluded Mr. Baloch.

[Amid funding crunch, UN agency seeks](#)

\$800 million in lifesaving aid for Palestine refugees

30 January 2018 – Facing an acute funding shortage, the United Nations agency for Palestine refugees is seeking more than \$800 million for its emergency programmes for Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The appeal would enable the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East ([UNRWA](#)) to “continue delivering [desperately needed relief](#) to those affected by deepening emergency situations,” UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl said at a launch event in Geneva.

“However, the Agency’s critical financial crisis following the reduction in US funds threatens our ability to deliver these vital services,” he added.

Programmes for Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which consists of Gaza and the West Bank, require \$400 million each. The appeal covers some 50,000 Palestine refugees from Syria who have fled to Lebanon and Jordan.

Mr. Krähenbühl explained that the majority of Palestine refugees in the occupied Palestinian territory and from Syria “rely on UNRWA to provide aid which is literally life-saving, including food, water, shelter and medical assistance.”

Inside Syria, UNRWA is reaching over 400,000 Palestine refugees with cash assistance, one of the largest such programmes in an active conflict setting anywhere in the world.

Despite the immense security challenges, UNRWA is providing education to over 47,000 Palestine refugees, supplementing regular classes with psychosocial support and safety-awareness training. For those unable to reach our classrooms, UNRWA has developed distance-learning materials.

In Gaza, with employment opportunities stifled by the decade-old blockade – the unemployment rate remains among the highest worldwide – almost one million Palestine refugees are dependent on UNRWA for emergency food assistance, a tenfold increase on the 100,000 that required such support in 2000.

Three and a half years on from the 2014 hostilities, which caused unprecedented destruction and loss of life in Gaza, thousands of Palestine refugee families remain displaced and repairs to over fifty thousand homes have yet to be completed.

The situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, remains fragile. Palestine refugees continue to experience difficult socioeconomic conditions rooted in occupation-related policies and practices imposed by the Israeli authorities. In addition to continued movement and access restrictions and shelter demolitions, Palestine refugees in the West Bank experience high

levels of food insecurity.

Millions of children in crisis zones face 'bleak future,' UNICEF warns, launching emergency appeal

30 January 2018 – Children are the most vulnerable when conflict or disaster causes the collapse of essential services such as healthcare and unless the international community takes urgent action to protect and provide life-saving assistance to them, “they face an increasingly bleak future,” the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) warned Tuesday, launching a \$3.6 billion [emergency appeal](#).

According to UNICEF, approximately 48 million children across 51 countries are caught up in war zones, natural disasters and other dire emergencies that continue to deepen in complexity, bringing new waves of violence, displacement and disruption into their lives.

“Children cannot wait for wars to be brought to an end, with crises threatening the immediate survival and long term future of children and young people on a catastrophic scale,” said UNICEF’s Director of Emergency Programmes, Manuel Fontaine, citing the devastating impact on children living amid years-long or cyclical violence in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen, among others

UNICEF said that almost one in four children live in a country affected by conflict or disaster and has therefore set aside about 84 per cent of its appeal (over \$3 billion) these zones.

Destruction of schools, hospitals and health and sanitation systems due to violence has meant that the spread of water-borne diseases is now one of the greatest threats to children’s lives in crises.

Girls and women face additional threats, as they often fulfil the role of collecting water for their families in dangerous situations.

“[Some] 117 million people living through emergencies lack access to safe water and in many countries affected by conflict, more children die from diseases caused by unclean water and poor sanitation than from direct violence,” said Mr. Fontaine.

Without access to safe water and sanitation, children fall ill, and are often unable to be treated as hospitals and health centres either do not function or are overcrowded UNICEF official Manuel Fontaine

Without access to safe water and sanitation, children fall ill, and are often unable to be treated as hospitals and health centres either do not function or are overcrowded. The threat is even greater as millions of children face life-threatening levels of malnutrition, making them more susceptible to water-borne diseases like cholera, creating a vicious cycle of undernutrition and disease," he added

The largest chunk of UNICEF's [2018 appeal](#), amounting to \$1.3 billion is earmarked for supporting nearly seven million Syrian children both inside the war-torn country where the conflict will soon enter its eighth year as well as those forced to become refugees outside its borders.

Globally, the UN agency aims to reach 35.7 million people with access to safe water, 8.9 million children with formal or non-formal basic education, 10 million children with immunization against measles, 3.9 million children with psychosocial support, and 4.2 million children with treatment for severe acute malnutrition.

As the leading humanitarian agency on water, sanitation and hygiene in emergencies, UNICEF provided over half of the emergency water, sanitation and hygiene services in humanitarian crises around the world. It also helped hospitals and medical centres treat deadly diseases and repaired water and sanitation systems.

In the first 10 months of 2017, UNICEF provided almost 30 million people with access to safe water, 13.6 million children with vaccination against measles, 5.5 million children with some form of education, 2.5 million children with treatment for severe acute malnutrition and 2.8 million children with psychosocial support.