

In Colombia, UN chief meets with ex-combatants, expressing hope for future and peace process

14 January 2018 – On the second day of an official visit to Colombia, United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres on Sunday expressed hopes for the future and for the peace process in Colombia.

“I am extremely happy to see the enthusiasm and commitment of the authorities, of the communities, and of the ex-combatants to the process of peace building in Colombia,” Mr. Guterres said in a statement to the press from Mesetas, Meta, where he visited a territorial area for the training and reintegration of former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) combatants.

“I had the opportunity to visit a FARC camp and to see the ex-combatants build their future and develop new activities with great enthusiasm,” he said.

The communities also believe that it is possible for this region to achieve not only peace, but also prosperity and good living conditions for all its inhabitants, and that the Colombian Government will play a key role in providing the security, administration, healthcare system and infrastructures they need, and in helping the local farmers get better access to the market, he added.

“What we see here is an extraordinary transformation, and it gives me great hope for the future and for the peace process in Colombia,” he stressed, reaffirming the UN’s full support and solidarity with the Colombian people in this historic moment of their lives.

A bloody start to 2018 in Syria; Over 30 children killed in two weeks – UNICEF

14 January 2018 – Only in the first 14 days of the year, more than 30 children have been killed in escalating violence in Syria’s East Ghouta, where an estimated 200,000 children have been trapped under siege since 2013, the top United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) official in the Middle Eastern country said Sunday.

“At a time when most parents are filled with the New Year’s hope for their children’s future, mothers and fathers in Syria are left grieving for the children they have lost,” said Fran Equiza, UNICEF Representative in Syria in a statement.

“It is shameful that nearly seven years into the conflict, a war on children continues while the world watches. Millions of children across Syria and in neighbouring countries have suffered the devastating consequences of unabating levels of violence in several parts of the country,” he added.

UNICEF received information from inside East Ghouta that people are taking shelter underground in fear for their lives.

Two medical facilities came under attack in the past days in East Ghouta, and most health centres had to close because of the violence. Schools have been reportedly closed in and around East Ghouta at a time when children elsewhere in Syria are sitting for their mid-term exams.

“While we saw a small glimmer of hope at the end of last year with the evacuation of 17 children in urgent need of medical attention, increased violence in and around east Ghouta turned hope into despair for the remaining 120 children who continue to suffer in silence waiting for urgent medical evacuation,” Mr. Equiza said.

In Idlib, to the northwest of the country, heavy violence reportedly killed and injured scores of children and women and displaced an estimated 100,000 civilians in the past few weeks. The maternity and paediatric hospital in Ma’arrat An Nu’man was attacked three times taking it out of service and killing at least one patient and two medical staff.

“We must be able to reach children in need of humanitarian assistance, urgently and without restrictions, wherever they are in Syria. The various parties to the conflict can make that happen by immediately allowing humanitarian workers to reach them with life-saving assistance,” he said.

Bangladesh: UN agencies working to vaccinate half a million children against diphtheria

14 January 2018 – As part of an intensified response to the current diphtheria outbreak, United Nations agencies are working to vaccinate more than 475,000 children in Rohingya refugee camps, temporary settlements and surrounding areas in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar.

All efforts are being made to stop [further spread of diphtheria](#). The vaccination of children in the Rohingya camps and nearby areas demonstrates the health sector's commitment to protecting people, particularly children, against deadly diseases," said Bardan Jung Rana, a Representative to Bangladesh of the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)).

UN estimates show that some 655,000 people have fled Myanmar to Bangladesh since August 2017.

Diphtheria is an infectious disease caused by a bacterium which primarily infects the throat and upper airways, and produces a toxin affecting other organs. The diphtheria toxin causes a membrane of dead tissue to build up over the throat and tonsils, making breathing and swallowing difficult. The disease is spread through direct physical contact or from breathing in the aerosolized secretions from coughs or sneezes of infected individuals.

Between 8 November 2017 and 11 January 2018, as many as 31 deaths and 3,954 suspected cases of diphtheria have been reported from Cox's Bazar. Nearly 10,594 contacts of these suspected cases have been put on diphtheria preventive medication.

WHO, the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) and other health partners are working with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to establish fixed locations for immunization in the Rohingya camps to continue to provide life-saving vaccines to children, in line with Bangladesh's childhood immunization programme.

Nearly 150,000 children aged six weeks to seven years received pentavalent vaccine (that protects against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, haemophilus influenza type b and hepatitis B), and nearly 166,000 children aged 7 to 17 years were given tetanus and diphtheria (Td) vaccine, during a three-week vaccination campaign that ended on 31 December.

Two more rounds of vaccination with a diphtheria-containing vaccine, at intervals of one month, are planned to fully protect the children in camps and surrounding areas.

Children are particularly vulnerable to diphtheria. Volunteers are making door-to-door visits in the Rohingya settlements to ensure all children receive vaccination," said the UNICEF Country Representative Edouard Beigbeder.

The massive influx within a very short time has heavily affected basic services in the settlement areas. They have no choice but to live in a very congested environment, which is impacting their health and quality of life," he added.

To limit the spread of diphtheria to communities living near the Rohingya camps and settlements, nearly 160,000 children in 499 schools of Teknaf and Ukhiya sub-districts are also being vaccinated.

This initiative began on 1 January. Vaccination was initiated on a day when children attend school in large numbers to avail themselves of free books

provided by the government at the start of the academic year.

WHO has released \$1.5 million from its Contingency Fund for Emergencies to scale up the response to diphtheria among the Rohingya population in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, over the next six months.

The funds are being used to support immunization; provide essential medicines and supplies; improve capacities for laboratory testing, case management and contact tracing; and engage with communities.

[In Bogotá, UN Secretary-General Guterres expresses full support for peace process in Colombia](#)

13 January 2018 – In an official visit to Colombia, United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres on Saturday met with the country's President in the capital, Bogotá, where the UN chief said it is the duty of all the citizens of the world to support the peace process there.

"We see that there are more and more new conflicts and that old conflicts have no solution. That is why what happens in Colombia is of fundamental symbolic importance for the world," Mr. Guterres told a press conference at Palacio de Nariño, Colombia's presidential palace, following a meeting with President Juan Manuel Santos.

"I believe that it is the duty of all the citizens of the planet to fully support the peace building process in Colombia for the Colombian people," the UN chief added.

The purpose of Mr. Guterres' visit is to take stock of achievements that followed a peace agreement between the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) in November 2016, which ended 50 years of conflict.

The UN chief seeks to reinvigorate the implementation of the peace deal, including the process of reintegrating former rebel combatants into society, and ensure that Colombians are committed to stay the course.

This mission is clearly a mission of solidarity with Colombia and with the Colombian people

"This mission is clearly a mission of solidarity with Colombia and with the Colombian people in a historical moment and of enormous importance for Colombia, for Latin America and for the world," Mr. Guterres said.

His visit also comes ahead of legislative elections in March and presidential elections in May, and at a time when a temporary ceasefire agreement between the Government and another rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), has just expired.

The UN chief said Colombia embarked on the challenge of not only building peace but also guaranteeing the presence of the State throughout the Colombian territory, including administrative presence, security, public services, education, health, development.

“It is a huge challenge, it is something that is not done by miracle, but I want to reiterate the commitment of the United Nations to support the Colombian government in this project of enormous importance to build peace but at the same time build an inclusive democracy,” he said.

“There is no justification for armed violence. Peace is the only answer that can solve the problems of poverty, development, equality and democracy,” he said.

President Santos thanked the Secretary-General for his visit and the continuing support of the United Nations and the [UN Verification Mission in Colombia](#), which is currently monitoring compliance with the agreements established in the peace agreement.

The President highlighted the effort of Colombia to end the conflict and reiterated, to Mr. Guterres, his Government determination to continue moving in that direction.

“It is a process, we are the first to recognize the challenges that we are facing, the most important has to do with the issue of security in rural areas, which suffered so long in the armed conflict ... As I always say, peace is like a cathedral and must be built brick by brick,” he said.

On Saturday, Mr. Guterres were to meet with officials of the Government and Armed Forces, as well as with FARC-EP leadership and the Catholic Church.

On Sunday, 14 January, the Secretary-General will travel to the Department of Meta, where his agenda will include, among other activities, a visit to a territorial area for training and reintegration of former FARC-EP combatants.

[South Sudan: Rebuilt bridge in Upper Nile helping local communities, improving aid delivery](#)

12 January 2018 – For Samuel James Ayot, a villager from Akoka in rural north

South Sudan, accessing basic services and earning a livelihood does not mean having to make a perilous neck-deep wade across a river, thanks to the tireless efforts of Indian peacekeepers from the United Nations mission there, who rebuilt a bridge and connected his village to a major provincial town.

In addition to Akoka locals, the bridge – [built](#) by the ‘blue helmets’ from the UN Mission in South Sudan ([UNMISS](#)), in record time – has greatly benefited humanitarians, enabling faster aid delivery as well as security patrol and outreach activities by the Mission.

According to UNMISS’ Lt. Colonel Nishkam Puri, in-charge of the Indian engineering company that rebuilt the bridge, the project was vital to allow other critical road repairs in the region.

It was also not without problems.

“The major challenge was reconstructing the bridge through a submerged area with a depth of up to 4 metres in some places,” said Lt. Colonel Puri.

The UN peacekeepers, working in collaboration with the Government, took just 10 days to make the route passable. The bridge had been inoperable since last June when heavy rains washed away a 300-metre-long road segment.

The Akoka Bridge lies between Malakal (the provincial capital) and Melut on a major service road that also reaches Bunj and Renk.

Providing for the basic needs of the most vulnerable is essential to empowering themUNMISS spokesperson Ratomir Petrovic

“The road now provides access for life-saving food and supplies to reach the people who need them,” said Ratomir Petrovic, a spokesperson for UNMISS.

“Providing for the basic needs of the most vulnerable is essential to empowering them. Initiatives such as this one demonstrate the power of peacekeepers to make a real difference in the lives of South Sudanese families,” he added.

According to the Mission, the next phase is installing appropriate structures and masonry to bolster the bridge’s strength to withstand the next rainy season.