

Colombia: Reintegrating 14,000 ex-combatants remains a challenge, Security Council told

10 January 2018 – Colombia's peace efforts remain challenged by the task of reintegrating 14,000 former rebel combatants, the top United Nations official in the country said Wednesday as he also reported to the Security Council that the UN will 'closely follow' reports of a just-broken ceasefire between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Colombian Government.

“While the building blocks of stabilization are being put in place, we cannot lose sight of the challenges of reintegration,” Jean Arnault, the Secretary-General's Special Representative, told the Security Council, presenting the first quarterly report on the activities of the [UN Verification Mission in Colombia](#), which he heads up.

The mission, which started its operations on 26 September 2017, was established to verify the commitments of the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) on reintegrating former FARC-EP members into society, and on ensuring security in territories most affected by the decades-long conflict, which was ended with a peace deal between the two sides in November 2016.

Mr. Arnault said that the political reintegration of the former guerrilla organization is on course, noting that the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections this year and local and departmental elections in less than two years will be an opportunity for the new FARC party to gain seats.

“But we continue to view with concern the socioeconomic reintegration of the 14,000 former combatants,” he said, explaining that many of them are still in prison and are extremely frustrated with the reintegration process.

President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón has taken the important step of recognizing the need for access to landownership as a major incentive for reintegration.

For their part, many FARC members have demonstrated on the ground that they are willing and able to engage in agriculture, environmental protection and crop substitution.

These are promising developments, but only that. The next few months must be the opportunity to “turn the corner” and make a fragile process more durable.

Regarding a temporary ceasefire between the Government and the National Liberation Army (ELN), Mr. Arnault stressed that the clamor for the continued suspension of military action has been unanimous, and reiterated the need to preserve the lower level of violence as seen in the past three months, while

also advocating for a clearer and more reliable ceasefire.

Unfortunately, it was just announced that attacks against pipelines by the ELN have just resumed. We will follow closely developments and keep the Council informed," Mr. Arnault said.

Meanwhile, UN Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric told reporters in New York that the Secretary-General will be travelling to Bogotá, Colombia, on 13 January to support peace efforts.

On Saturday, Mr. Guterres will meet with the President, officials of the Government and armed forces, as well as with the leadership of the FARC and the Catholic Church.

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

Asked if the UN chief will meet with the ELN, Mr. Dujarric said "we're concerned by the incident this morning – an attack on an oil pipeline. We're obviously following the developments very closely and we're keeping the Security Council informed."

[Syria: UN rights chief condemns spike in civilian casualties in 'de-escalation' areas](#)

10 January 2018 – The United Nations human rights chief on Wednesday condemned an upsurge in civilian casualties in Eastern Ghouta in Syria amid the recent escalation in airstrikes and ground-based attacks by Government forces and their allies, noting that at least 85 civilians have been killed since 31 December.

"The suffering of the people of Syria knows no end," said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, noting that residential areas in Eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of the nation's capital, Damascus, are being hit day and night by strikes from the ground and the air, forcing civilians to hide in basements.

He stressed that all parties are obliged under international law to distinguish between lawful military targets and civilians and civilian objects.

Since 31 December, at least 85 civilians, including 21 women and 30 children, have been killed and at least 183 injured in Eastern Ghouta, where at least

390,000 civilians have been living under siege for four years, according to information gathered by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)).

On 9 January, airstrikes and ground-based strikes hit a residential area in opposition-controlled Hamourya, reportedly killing at least 13 civilians. The previous day, two airstrikes and simultaneous ground-based strikes on a residential area near a market in the opposition-held town of Duma reportedly killed 12 civilians.

Armed opposition groups also continue to fire rockets into residential areas in Government-controlled Damascus. On 4 January, a rocket fired into Old Damascus hit the vicinity of a bakery, reportedly killing a woman and injuring 13 other civilians.

The High Commissioner also noted that the failure to evacuate urgent medical cases from Eastern Ghouta runs contrary to its international humanitarian law obligations to collect, care for, and take measures to evacuate the sick and wounded.

In Idlib, ground attacks and airstrikes have escalated as a rapidly-moving Government offensive gains momentum, jeopardizing the safety of hundreds of thousands of civilians, said Mr. Zeid, noting that an explosion on 7 January reportedly killed 28 civilians.

Both Eastern Ghouta and Idlib are considered de-escalation areas brokered in May by Iran, Russia and Turkey under the Astana process, with the stated aim to put a prompt end to violence and improve the humanitarian situation.

I repeat my call for the parties to ensure strict adherence to international law including by ensuring the protection of civilians from the effects of hostilities and to allow unhindered access by humanitarian agencies to provide badly needed aid," said Mr. Zeid.

[Tragic start to New Year for migrants as hundreds feared dead in Mediterranean – UN](#)

10 January 2018 – A little more than a week into the New Year, reports reveal that close to 200 migrants or refugees have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean Sea with up to 100 unaccounted for since Saturday, the United Nations migration agency said Wednesday.

It's very distressing that during the first 10 days of 2018 we have

seen close to [800 migrants rescued or intercepted](#) off the Libyan coast, with more lives lost at sea,” said Othman Belbeisi, Chief of the International Organization for Migration's ([IOM](#)) Libya Mission.

“More has to be done to reduce irregular unsafe movements of people along the Central Mediterranean route,” he added.

By contrast, at a time when Mediterranean migrants' death dropped sharply, IOM recorded only 26 on the Mediterranean Sea lanes in December.

While January 2017 had witnessed some 254 deaths, this week's reports suggest that the start of 2018 may be even deadlier.

IOM reported on Tuesday that 81 Mediterranean Sea deaths of migrants or refugees were recorded in the [first eight days of the year](#) – five in Western Mediterranean waters off Spain and Morocco, the rest between Italy and Libya.

In the latest, and third deadliest, shipwreck in the Mediterranean since Saturday, the Libyan Coast Guard [rescued](#) three rubber boats with 279 migrants – 19 women, 243 men, 13 boys and four girls – in an operation lasting at least 12 hours.

According to survivors, and a press release by Libya's Coast Guard, about 100 people on board remained missing.

IOM was present at the disembarkation point in Tripoli and provided the survivors with food and water.

IOM's Christine Petré reported that the boats departed from the coastal towns of Azzawiyah and Al Khums – with most of the survivors hailing from African countries, including Senegal, Mali and Nigeria. The Libyan Cost Guard reported that eight are from Bangladesh while two are from Pakistan.

The UN migration agency continues to provide support and direct humanitarian assistance to the survivors of this latest tragedy, many of whom now are at Libya's Tajoura detention centre.

[Taking on environmental health risks, UN agencies aim to protect 'foundations for life' on Earth](#)

10 January 2018 – Two United Nations agencies are teaming up in a major new initiative taking on the herculean task of combatting environmental health risks, which claim an estimated 12.6 million lives a year.

The partnership, announced Wednesday, between the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) and the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), includes specific action to address air pollution, climate change and antimicrobial resistance as well as improve coordination on waste and chemicals management, water quality, and food and nutrition issues.

“Our health is directly related to the health of the environment we live in. Together, air, water and chemical hazards kill some 12.6 million people a year. This cannot and must not continue,” said Tedros Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of WHO, in a [news release](#) announcing the undertaking.

“There is an urgent need for [us] to work more closely together to address the critical threats to environmental sustainability and climate change which are the foundations for life on this planet. This new agreement recognizes that sober reality,” added Erik Solheim, the Executive Director of UNEP.

The new collaboration has a particular focus on the developing world as the worst impacts of environmental pollution and the related deaths occur in developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The initiative also includes joint management of the [BreatheLife](#) advocacy campaign to reduce air pollution for multiple climate, environment and health benefits.

The two UN agencies have been cooperating in a range of health and environment areas.

This latest partnership, is however, the most significant formal agreement on joint action across the breadth of environment and health issues in over 15 years, the agencies added.

[Rohingya children trapped in ‘appalling’ conditions in Myanmar’s Rakhine state – UNICEF](#)

9 January 2018 – While the eyes of the world are on Myanmar’s northern Rakhine and Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh, more than 60,000 Rohingya children remain nearly forgotten, trapped in appalling camps in central Rakhine where the shelters teeter on stilts above garbage and excrement, the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) reported Tuesday.

“Partners have identified about 20 children separated from their families during the violence but estimate the total number to be at least 100 – most of whom are in parts of northern Rakhine state that they still

cannot access,” Marixie Mercado, UNICEF spokesperson told journalists in Geneva today during a briefing on her visit to Myanmar from 6 December 2017 through 3 January.

She painted a harrowing picture of the situation in Rakhine, noting that prior to 25 August, when the most recent outbreak of violence occurred, UNICEF had been treating 4,800 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition; these children are no longer receiving this life-saving treatment.

“All 12 of the outpatient therapeutic treatment centres run by our partners are closed because they were either looted, destroyed or staff can't access them,” she underscored.

Ms. Mercado called the inability of UN agencies to access vulnerable Rohingya children who remain in northern Myanmar “troubling,” saying that while “the eyes of the world” are focused on the 655,000 refugees who have fled across the border into Bangladesh, 60,000 Rohingya children remain “almost forgotten,” trapped in squalid camps in central Rakhine.

“The Rohingya children who do remain in rural areas are almost totally isolated. We hear of high levels of toxic fear in children from both Rohingya and Rakhine communities,” she said.

She stressed that UNICEF stood ready to work with the Myanmar Government and Rakhine state authorities to provide humanitarian relief to all children – regardless of ethnicity, religion, or status – but needed unlimited access.

The spokesperson described two of the worst camps that she visited, in Pauktaw Township – reachable only by a four-to-five-hour boat ride.

“The first thing you notice when you reach the camps is the stomach-churning stench. Parts of the camps are literally cesspools. Shelters teeter on stilts above garbage and excrement,” she recounted. “Children walk barefoot through the muck. One camp manager reported four deaths among children ages 3-10 within the first 18 days of December.”

Ms. Mercado also pointed to “an acute level of fear between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities,” recalling a story that parents in one Rohingya village said they hadn't had their children vaccinated against Japanese Encephalitis because the government vaccinators were accompanied by security officers – while Government workers said they dared not go to Rohingya communities without security.

“Rohingya children need a political solution to the issue of legal identity and citizenship. In the interim they need to be recognized first and foremost as children, she said, stressing that the Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees rights to health, education and opportunities to learn and grow to all children, irrespective of their ethnicity or status or the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Ms. Mercado said that the Annan Commission [a [report](#) led by the former UN Secretary-General on the situation in Rakhine state] has provided a roadmap for a durable political solution so all children's rights can be protected in a sustainable, open and fair manner in the longer term.

UNICEF stands ready to support this crucial work. And we call on the global community, especially regional organizations and countries, to leverage their influence so children have better lives today and a future they can look forward to," she said.