

# Ending child marriage in West and Central Africa on pace to take 100 years – UNICEF

24 October 2017 – Unless progress is accelerated, ending child marriage in West and Central Africa will take more than 100 years, with far-reaching, life-altering consequences for millions of child brides and crippling impact on the region's prosperity, the United Nations children's agency has said.

A new report released Monday from the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)), *Achieving a future without child marriage: Focus on West and Central Africa*, reveals that, due to rapid population growth and high prevalence of child marriage, even if the current decline rate was doubled, it would not suffice to reduce the annual number of girls married.

"We cannot continue to let so many of our girls miss out on their health, education, and childhood," said Fatoumata Ndiaye, UNICEF's Deputy Executive Director, in a press release, adding that "at current rates, our report shows, it will [take over 100 years](#) to eliminate child marriage in the region – how is this acceptable?"

The new projections, released during a UN-backed high-level meeting on ending child marriage in Dakar this week, aim to bring the spotlight on the region of the world where girls face the highest risk of marrying in childhood.

While the prevalence of child marriage in West and Central Africa has declined over the past two decades, progress has been uneven, and still four in 10 women are married before the age of 18 and, of these, one in three before the age of 15.

West and Central Africa includes six of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world: Niger; the Central African Republic; Chad; Mali; Burkina Faso and Guinea.

The report also highlights that progress is possible when the right mix of strategies is in place, such as empowering girls, mobilizing families and communities to change attitudes and behaviours, providing adequate services to girls at risk and to married girls and putting in place consistent laws and policies to protect and promote the rights of girls.

In five countries in the region – Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Togo, Ghana and Rwanda, declines ranged from 40 to 60 per cent over the past 25 years.

The longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to be married before the age of 18 and have children during her teenage years.

"Getting girls to schools should be our top priority," said Ms. Ndiaye. "Not only because it equips girls for life, but it also helps to lift their families, their communities, their countries out of poverty."

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## Don't just blame teachers when system is at fault, says UNESCO

24 October 2017 – Blaming just the teacher or the school for systemic educational problems can have serious negative side effects, warns a new report from the United Nations educational agency.

“Education is a shared responsibility between us all – governments, schools, teachers, parents and private actors,” said Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)), in a press release.

“Accountability for these responsibilities defines the way teachers teach, students learn, and governments act. It must be designed with care and with the principles of equity, inclusion and quality in mind,” she added.

The report, titled *Accountability in education: meeting our commitments*, looks at the different ways people and institutions can be held accountable for reaching the internationally agreed Sustainable Development Goal for Education (SDG4).

The report, the second in the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) series, shows that blaming teachers for poor test scores and absenteeism is often both unjust and unconstructive.

“Using student test scores to sanction teachers and schools makes it more likely they will adjust their behaviour to protect themselves, which may mean leaving the weakest learners behind,” explained Manos Antoninis, Director of the GEM Report.

“Accountability must start with governments. If a government is too quick to apportion blame to others, it is deflecting attention away from its own responsibility for creating a strong, supportive education system,”

For example, that nearly half of teacher absenteeism in Indonesia in 2013/14 was due to excused time for study for which replacements should have been provided.

In Senegal, only 12 of the 80 missed school days in 2014 were due to teachers avoiding their responsibilities.

In the European Union in 2009-2014, 38 per cent of education and training tenders only had one bidder, compared to 16 per cent of tenders in the construction sector, indicating that the risk of corruption is higher in education than in the building industry.

The report says that whereas transparency would help identify problems, only one in six governments publish annual education monitoring reports.

The report calls on governments to:

- design accountability mechanisms for schools and teachers that is supportive and avoid punitive mechanisms, especially those based on narrow performance measures;
- allow for democratic participation, respect media freedom to scrutinize education and set up independent institutions to handle complaints;
- develop credible and efficient regulations with associated sanctions for all education providers, public and private, that ensure non-discrimination and the quality of education;
- make the right to education justiciable, which is not the case in 45 per cent of countries.

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## [We need the will to overcome global challenges, Secretary-General says on UN Day](#)

24 October 2017 – In his first United Nations Day message, [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) called on people around the world to overcome their differences to address global challenges that go beyond national borders.

“Our world faces many grave challenges. Widening conflicts and inequality, extreme weather and deadly intolerance, [and] security threats including nuclear weapons,” said Mr. Guterres in a video message.

“We have the tools and wealth to overcome these challenges. [All we need is the will.](#)”

In his message, the UN chief stated that the challenges faced by the world transcend borders and, therefore, everyone needs to transcend their differences to transform our future.

“When we achieve human rights and human dignity for all people they will build a peaceful, sustainable and just world,” he added, urging humanity noted in the [Charter of the United Nations](#) as ‘We the Peoples’ to make this vision a reality.

The 24th of October, the day in 1945 when the UN Charter entered into force, is celebrated annually as United Nations Day. In 1971, the General Assembly recommended that the day be observed by UN Member States as a public holiday.

Around the world, governments and UN offices mark the day through various programmes and events on the core pillars of the Organization.

This year, at the UN Headquarters, in New York, the Organization's Department of Public Information will [organize](#) a concert featuring the Slovak National Folklore Ballet, Lúčnica.

The theme of the concert is "Potential in Diversity" and is sponsored by the Permanent Mission of the Slovak Republic to the UN.

Also, Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, on behalf of the Secretary-General, will present the [2017 Secretary-General Awards](#) in categories, including innovation and creativity; implementing efficiencies; gender equality and parity; and champion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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## [Central African Republic's message to UN: 'The only thing we want is peace'](#)

23 October 2017 – It was once known as the 'Bridge of Death,' the frontline between warring factions in the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). Legendary tales were shared of the bridge being drenched in blood, with even Government security forces scared to set foot on it.

Fast forward to 2014, when the United Nations peacekeeping mission was deployed to CAR and steps began to be taken to bring together the militias in attempts at community reconciliation. It was not till October 2016, that local leaders joined forces with the UN peacekeepers to convince the militia groups to disarm and re-open the bridge.

Today, it is simply known as the Yakite Bridge. Located in the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui, the strife-torn capital, it is booming with traffic and local merchants from both Christian and Muslim communities, thanks in part to the stabilization efforts of the UN peacekeeping mission.

This commercial suburb of Bangui is crowded with small traders trying to get back to normal business. Many traders have returned from neighbouring countries, including Cameroon, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where they escaped violence.

"We are looking for peace. Now we want reconciliation, but they are still killing Muslims," says Lawadi Ismael, a representative for the neighbourhood, adding: "When the fighting broke out in 2013, I never left. Now, business is slowly resuming, but these attacks against Muslims must stop," as he blames the Government for its alleged passivity, while asking the UN peacekeeping mission, known as MINUSCA, to do more to protect them.

**VIDEO:** Keeping the Peace in the Central African Republic.

We followed a joint patrol of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR ([MINUSCA](#)) to the PK5 neighbourhood, the site of numerous clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka rebels and the anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian, during the civil conflict that erupted in 2013.

A unique aeronautics surveillance unit supports the patrol with live information gathering capacity: a camera equipped aerostat balloon, and three hover masts mounted on vehicles, send videos in real time to the joint operation centre, indicating any crowd movement or potential threats. This is used to guide the patrol to areas which need security, while protecting their members.

Even as technology helps the peacekeepers, reconciliation is still fragile, especially after recent attacks in the south-east and the centre of the country, often targeting minority communities.

“The police assist mostly when we apprehend a suspect; the military takes the lead when the use of force is required,” explains Jean-Marie Vianney, commander of the 36-strong Rwandan military platoon, as they head together with the 12-member Cameroonian Formed Police Unit (FPU) towards PK5.

“We need to reassure the population and discourage bandits,” says Sergeant Epouba Martine Martial, a Cameroonian police officer with MINUSCA.



Monitoring and surveillance technology using balloons fitted with a camera.  
UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



Monitoring and surveillance technology using balloons fitted with a camera.  
UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



UN military and police personnel conduct a joint patrol in the PK5 neighbourhood of the capital, Bangui. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



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Despite noteworthy progress and successful elections, and a UN presence to shore up stability, support governance and provide humanitarian assistance, CAR has remained in the grip of instability and sporadic unrest.

The deteriorating situation has driven about a quarter of the people in the country from their homes and since the start of 2017, the number of IDPs has reached 600,000 and refugees in neighbouring countries number over 500,000.

More than 1 million Central Africans are displaced – inside the country or abroad – and in Bangassou, the camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) has reached 1,800 people and is still growing.



Scene from a camp for internally displaced persons known as 'Site du Petit Seminaire St.Pierre Claver' in the town of Bangassou. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



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When he arrives in the area on 24 October, which is also United Nations Day, [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres is expected to pay tribute to the 12 peacekeepers who have died since January 2017 due to hostile acts.

“Across the country, communal tensions are growing. Violence is spreading. And the humanitarian situation is deteriorating,” said Mr. Guterres, who made it a point to mark UN Day with peacekeepers who put themselves on the frontlines in some of the most dangerous areas of the world.

In his latest report to the Security Council on CAR, the Secretary-General has requested reinforcements of 900 additional troops for the mission.

Lieutenant General Balla Keita, Force Commander of MINUSCA, is quite clear

that the effect of this surge in capacity will help the mission stabilize the situation. However, he noted: “There will never be a military solution for a peacekeeping operation. The solution will be a political one – a genuine negotiation with all parties.”

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## [Famine can be a war crime and should be prosecuted, says independent UN rights expert](#)

23 October 2017 – Famine can constitute a war crime or crime against humanity, an independent United Nations human rights expert today said, noting that more civilians die from hunger and disease related to conflicts than in direct combat.

“If the famine comes from deliberate action of the State or other players using food as a weapon of war, it is an international crime,” the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Hilal Elver, told journalists in New York.

The expert spoke to the media after presenting her report to the General Assembly committee dealing with social, humanitarian and cultural issues, also known as the Third Committee, where she said an estimated 70 million people in 45 countries need emergency food aid.

Those countries include Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen, where around 20 million people are hungry or face starvation as a result of man-made conflict.

States and other parties involved in conflicts, Ms. Elver said in a [press release](#), need to recognize their own duty to act, and above all, avoid using hunger as a weapon of war.

The right to food is an unconditional human right and legal entitlement for all people, not a discretionary option, she added.

“It is crucial that the international community understands that it is an international crime to intentionally block access to food, food aid, and to destroy production of food.”

She noted that the most serious cases of man-made famine could be referred to the International Criminal Court ([ICC](#)), but said in the press conference that this has never been done.

The independent expert urged governments to focus on peace processes and long-term policies that break the cycle of recurring famines.

UN Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

UN Special Rapporteurs are in New York this week to present their reports to the General Assembly. Check back to [www.un.org/News](http://www.un.org/News) for highlights throughout the week.