

With 'cautious optimism,' UN political official reports positive developments on Middle East peace

18 October 2017 – A senior United Nations political affairs official on Wednesday highlighted at the Security Council some positive developments on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, particularly on intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts.

"Today's briefing is taking place as important developments unfold to end the more than 10-year-long Palestinian divide and return Gaza to the full control of the legitimate Palestinian Authority," Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Miroslav Jenca said, referring to the 12 October agreement between the Fatah and Hamas factions that enables the Palestinian government to resume its responsibilities in Gaza.

Under the agreement, the Palestinian Authority should take control of the crossings of the Gaza Strip by 1 November. A statement released by Egypt, which facilitated the accord, further highlighted that the Palestinian Government should assume its full responsibilities in the management of the enclave by 1 December.

Mr. Jenca said that the agreement does not contain any provisions related to elections, the formation of a national unity government, or the disarming of Hamas.

On the humanitarian situation, he said that power supply restrictions have continued for the sixth consecutive month, leaving two million people in Gaza without electricity, except four to six hours per day.

Gaza is also "an unfolding environmental disaster that has no regard for borders," he said, as the equivalent of over 40 Olympic-size swimming pools of virtually raw sewage continues to flow daily into the Mediterranean Sea, leaving the whole shoreline contaminated.

The quality of health care inside Gaza is deteriorating at an alarming rate. Access to medical care outside Gaza has also become increasingly difficult.

As the Government returns to Gaza, it is critical that urgent measures are taken to reverse these trends, he stressed.

He emphasized that "despite the overall negative trajectory that has characterized the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for far too long, there are reasons for cautious optimism."

This past month, thousands of Israeli and Palestinian women united in a two-week march for peace that brought forward participants of all ages and backgrounds.

“The yearning for peace amongst both peoples remains strong. These grass-roots initiatives by civil society are critical to building the foundation for peace and must be supported,” he said. Mr. Jenca also recalled that the July 2016 report of the Middle East Quartet – comprising the UN, Russia, the United States and the European Union – identified the lack of Palestinian unity as one of the main obstacles to achieving a two-state solution, which is to establish a viable, sovereign Palestinian state that lives in peace and security with Israel.

“The parties (Hamas and Fatah) have taken a crucial first step in this process,” he said. “Success carries with it an enormous opportunity, just as failure carries with it great risks. Palestinians need to decide which path they will take.”

[UN and partners launch campaign to tackle new fungus strain threatening world's bananas](#)

The world's most traded fruit is being threatened by a new, “insidious” fungus strain that poses risks to banana production and could cause vast commercial losses or even greater damage to the 400 million people who rely on bananas as a staple food or source of income, the United Nations agriculture agency warned Wednesday.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has launched with its partners – Bioversity International, International Institute of Tropical Agriculture and World Banana Forum – a global programme requiring \$98 million to contain and manage the new Tropical Race 4 strain (TR4strain) of Fusarium wilt, an insidious disease that can last for years in soils and can hitchhike to new fields and destinations through various means, such as infected planting materials, water, shoes, farm tools and vehicles.

“This is a [major threat to banana production](#) in several regions of the world,” said Hans Dreyer, Director of FAO's Plant Production and Protection Division, in a news statement.

Fusarium wilt TR4 was first detected in Southeast Asia in the 1990s and has now been identified at 19 sites in 10 countries – including the Near East, South Asia and Mozambique in sub-Saharan Africa.

“We need to move quickly to prevent its further spread from where it is right now and to support already affected countries in their efforts to cope with the disease,” he emphasized.

Without a coordinated intervention, scientists estimate that by 2040, the

disease could affect up to 1.6 million hectares of banana lands, representing one-sixth of the current global production, valued at about \$10 billion annually. The programme is initially targeting 67 countries, aiming to reduce the potentially affected area by up to 60 per cent.

“The long-term resilience of banana production systems can only be improved through continuous monitoring, robust containment strategies, strengthening national capacities and enhancing international collaboration to deploy integrated disease management approaches,” Mr. Dreyer explained.

The five-year programme is designed to build on existing initiatives tackling the disease and strengthen local technical capacities. It will also support developing science-based technologies and tools through researching the fungus’ biology and epidemiology, its detection and the development of resistant cultivars, among other things.

For areas where the disease is not present or first appears, inspection, surveillance and rapid response measures will be developed. Where it already occurs, improved and integrated disease management techniques will be developed along with the search for and deployment of resistant varieties.

If effectively rolled out, it is estimated that every dollar invested in the programme today will produce benefits of between \$98 and \$196 in 20 years’ time, according to FAO.

More on Fusarium wilt TR4

The [fungus](#) is caused by a new variant of the disease that had decimated Gros Michel banana type plantations in the early 20th century, causing more than \$2 billion in damages and leading to its replacement with the Cavendish variety, which though resistant to the earlier strain has now succumbed to the new TR4 race.

The TR4 – which so far has impacted nearly 100,000 hectares according to estimations of scientists, which accounts for around half the bananas grown today, but also other cultivars that constitute key nutritional staples.

[UN rights experts urge Iran to halt imminent execution of juvenile Amirhossein Pourjafar](#)

18 October 2017 – United Nations human rights experts on Wednesday urgently appealed to Iran to halt tomorrow’s execution of Amirhossein Pourjafar, who was sentenced to death when he was 16 years old.

“The Iranian authorities must immediately [halt the execution](#) of this juvenile offender and annul the death sentence against him in compliance with their international obligations,” said the experts in a statement issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)).

“International standards unequivocally forbid imposing the death sentence on anyone under 18 years of age,” they added.

The experts said that despite being strictly prohibited by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Iran is party, the country continued to execute juvenile offenders.

In 2016, the Committee on the Rights of the Child strongly urged Iran to end the execution of people who committed a crime while under the age of 18. However, the country has executed at least four juvenile offenders since January, and at least 86 more are known to be on death row – although the actual figure may be higher.

Several months ago, Iran executed Alireza Tajiki, who was arrested in 2012 at age 15. Prior to his execution, he had spent four years on death row amid reports of torture and violations of his right to a fair trial.

Mr. Pourjafar was sentenced to death in September 2016 after being convicted of raping and murdering a seven-year-old girl. The court said he had attained “mental maturity” at the time of the crime and had understood the nature and consequences of his actions. The Supreme Court upheld the sentence in January 2017.

“We deplore the continued scheduling of the executions of juvenile offenders,” the experts stressed. “Iran should immediately and unconditionally abolish the sentencing of children to death, and engage in a comprehensive process of commutation of all death sentences issued against children, in line with juvenile justice standards.”

The experts are: Asma Jahangir, Special Rapporteur on the situation of [human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#); Agnes Callamard, Special Rapporteur on [extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions](#); and Renate Winter, current Chairperson of the [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#).

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN 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.

UNICEF and partner agencies in South Sudan help reunite 5,000 children with families

18 October 2017 – Since conflict broke out in South Sudan in 2013, the United Nations Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)), Save the Children and other partners have successfully reunited more than 5,000 children with their families.

"Keeping families together is the best way to ensure that children are protected, which is why the family tracing and reunification process for unaccompanied children is so important," [said](#) UNICEF Country Representative Mahimbo Mdoe in a press statement Wednesday.

"Children rely on their family for a sense of stability, protection and support, and that's even more imperative in times of conflict," he added.

The 5,000th child to be reunited with his family was a 17-year-old boy, who had fled Tombura in Western Equatoria and sought refuge in Wau, Western Bahr El Ghazal. The boy had been separated with his mother for almost four years.

"I want to go back to school and someday help other children who are suffering like me," he said. According to UNICEF, the boy's mother said: "When I ate, I always thought about what my son could be eating. I only ate to stay alive but I never enjoyed it. I have been unhappy because I have been thinking about my son's whereabouts. It was hard to forget him because I didn't see him dead and bury him."

Reuniting separated children with their families is a challenging process in a country with virtually no infrastructure and no telephone reception in many areas. Staff often have to trek for hours to look for separated families.

Family separation is considered one of the key drivers to psychosocial stress for internally displaced persons and other affected populations. The longer a child is separated from her or his family, the more difficult it is to locate them and the more at risk a child is to violence, economic and sexual exploitation, abuse and potential trafficking.

"The family tracing and reunification programme is one of the most effective child protection in emergencies interventions in South Sudan," said Save the Children Country Director Deirdre Keogh.

A total of 16,055 unaccompanied and separated children have been registered by the organisations involved in the family tracing and reunification programmes in South Sudan.

Efforts continue to trace the families of the more than 10,000 children still separated from their family or caregivers, so that they too can be reunited.

Yemen: Education under threat as conflict shuts schools, teachers not paid for a year, warns UNICEF

18 October 2017 – The conflict in Yemen has now entered its third year and continues to take a toll on millions of children, with their education now under threat, adding to an already long list of bitter hardships including malnutrition, displacement and violence, the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) has warned.

As of July 2017, 1,600 schools have been partially or totally destroyed, and 170 have been used for military purposes or as shelter for displaced families, said Geert Cappelaere, the UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, in a [statement](#) today.

The violence has forced one in ten schools across the country to close, and textbooks and other school materials are in severely short supply, he added, noting that the beginning of the school year has been postponed several times from its usual September start.

Adding to the crisis is the fact that three-quarters of the teachers in Yemen have not been paid in nearly a year, compelling them to resort to extreme measures to survive.

One such case is that of Hassan Ghaleb, a teacher for the past 20 years and the sole breadwinner for his family of four, who was evicted from his home with his children.

He had to sell what was left of his furniture just to feed them and treat his sick sister.

How can [they] teach if [they themselves are] in need? questions UNICEF, noting that over 166,000 teachers across the war-torn country are in a similar situation.

The children of Yemen have suffered in ways that no human being should have to bear. Education is their only way to secure a better future

Lack of education and the protective environment provided by a school is not only robbing the children of some semblance of a normal childhood, it is also leaving them vulnerable to recruitment into fighting or early marriage.

Ongoing humanitarian efforts are only a drop in the ocean of suffering that Yemen has become, underscored Mr. Cappelaere, urging the parties

to the conflict to protect schools, refrain from using schools for military purposes and work together to find an urgent solution to the salary crisis so that children can learn.

He also called on donors to step up their assistance and enable the payment of incentives to education personnel, health workers and other civil servants who deliver vital services for children.

“The children of Yemen have suffered in ways that no human being should have to bear. Education is their only way to secure a better future and to help put Yemen on the path to peace,” he said.