

Amending Guatemala 'reconciliation law' would lead to unjust amnesty for rights violators: Bachelet

A bid to give amnesty to all those found guilty of grave human rights crimes during Guatemala's decades-long civil war, by amending the National Reconciliation Law, could represent a "drastic set-back" to the whole legal system and overall accountability, [UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet](#) has said.

[In a statement](#) on Tuesday, the High Commissioner expressed her "serious concern" that the Guatemalan Congress had taken steps to approve an amendment to legislation that has been in force since the 1996 peace accords, which was crucial to ending 36 years of violent clashes between Government and mainly rural insurgents.

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– *UN rights chief, Michelle Bachelet*

If adopted, the amendment will see dozens of people in jail for enforced disappearances, summary executions, sexual violence and torture, freed within 24 hours. Before the amendment can be adopted, Congress must approve it following three separate readings.

Ongoing investigations into abuse will also be halted, Ms Bachelet said. "This in effect means complete impunity for all those involved in some truly horrendous violations, including crimes against humanity," she said, warning that such a move risked reopening "old wounds" and could "destroy victims' trust in the State and its institutions".

Some 200,000 people are estimated to have died during Guatemala's civil war, according to the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)). In November, it welcomed the [conviction](#) of a former Guatemalan soldier involved in the infamous Dos Erres massacre of indigenous Maya villagers.

OHCHR said that the ruling against Santos López Alonso was "an important step" for transitional justice in Guatemala, although he was one of only six military personnel to have been convicted, amid the frequent use of injunctions to stall the trials of high-level officials.

"I am also deeply worried that if this amendment is approved, it may lead to retaliation against all those courageous victims, witnesses, judges, public prosecutors, lawyers and organizations who have been promoting justice for past crimes in Guatemala," Bachelet said.

The UN rights chief highlighted that international standards establish limits regarding the adoption of amnesties for the most serious crimes, and pointed out that they are “incompatible with State obligations to prosecute grave violations of human rights.”

‘Countless opportunities’ for new people-centred workplace, but ‘decisive action’ critical

“Countless opportunities lie ahead to improve the quality of working lives, expand choice, close the gender gap, (and) reverse the damages wreaked by global inequality”, the [Global Commission on the Future of Work](#) report stresses.

“Yet, none of this will happen by itself. Without decisive action we will be sleepwalking into a world that widens existing inequalities and uncertainties,” the report continues.

Outlining the challenges posed by new technology, demography and climate change, the Global Commission calls for a collective, worldwide response to harness the shift for the good.

The report spells out that while artificial intelligence, automation and robotics will take jobs, these same technological advances, along with economic greening, have the potential to create employment for millions.

ILO calls for:

- Universal guarantees protecting workers’ rights, an adequate living wage, limits on working hours and safe workplaces.
- Guaranteed life-long social protections from birth to old age.
- A universal entitlement to life-long learning that enables people to skill, re-skill and up-skill.
- Technological changes to boost decent work, including an international governance system for digital labour platforms.
- Greater investments in green and rural economies.

- A measurable agenda for gender equality.
- Business incentives to encourage long-term investments.

“The issues highlighted in this report [matter to people](#) everywhere and to the planet”, declared ILO Director-General Guy Ryder. “They may be challenging but we ignore them at our peril”.

Co-chaired by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa and Swedish Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, the Global Commission showcased a human-centred agenda based on investing in people, work institutions and decent, sustainable employment.

Mr. Ramaphosa called the report “a vital contribution” to understanding the global nature of changes underway along with those still to come.

“The report should stimulate engagement and partnerships within and between national and regional jurisdictions to ensure that the global economy and global society becomes more equitable, just and inclusive”, he said.

The report is the culmination of a 15-month examination by the 27-member Commission, comprised of leading figures, including from business, think tanks, government and non-governmental organizations.

For his part, Mr. Löfven stressed that these sweeping changes create “many opportunities for more and better jobs”, adding that Governments, trade unions and employers must work together, to make economies and labour markets more inclusive.

“Such a social dialogue can help make globalization work for everyone”, asserted the co-chair.

The report also spotlighted ILO’s “unique role” in developing and delivering an international system with a “human-centred economic agenda”, and called on the UN’s labour agency to give urgent attention to implementing the report’s recommendations.

“The ILO’s mandate, bringing together governments, employers and workers from all parts of the world, means the organization is well suited to act as a compass and a guide in order to help open up new vistas for coming generations at work” concluded Mr. Ryder.

Created in 1919, in the aftermath of the First World War, ILO is commemorating 100 years of championing decent work and fair globalization.

You can read our story from earlier this month on the history and background of how the ILO came into being, [here](#).

[Mediterranean migrant drownings should spur greater action by European countries, urge UN agencies](#)

A spate of migrant shipwrecks and rescues in the Mediterranean Sea in recent days is evidence that urgent action is required from European States to address the issue, the UN said on Tuesday

The warning from UN Refugee Agency ([UNHCR](#)) and the UN Migration Agency ([IOM](#)) comes after close to 170 people are believed to have drowned in separate tragedies off the Libyan and Moroccan coastlines late last week.

Survivors' testimonies indicate that more than 100 people died in one incident in Libyan waters on Friday 18 January, including 10 women – one of whom was pregnant – and two children.

“Three men were rescued 50 miles off Libya from a sinking boat by an Italian Navy helicopter and brought to Lampedusa, Italy,” IOM spokesperson Joel Millman said. “IOM staff spoke to the three survivors who said the boat carried 120 people on board. Based on their testimony, IOM estimates that 117 people went missing and presumably drowned at sea before rescue services could reach them.”

According to IOM, 203 people have died on the three main Mediterranean Sea routes to Europe from North Africa and Turkey in the first three weeks of 2019.

This is the fourth January in a row that more than 200 migrants and refugees have drowned trying to reach Europe on unauthorized routes, often crammed into unsuitable boats supplied by traffickers, the agency said in a statement.

Migrants shipped back and detained in Libya

In a related development, IOM reported that nearly 150 migrants had been “returned” to Libya and placed in custody after being rescued by a cargo ship.

This is despite serious and longstanding concerns over conditions in the country's detention centres, amid ongoing insecurity in Libya since the ousting of President Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

“IOM confirmed yesterday that the Sierra Leonean flag cargo vessel Lady Sham returned 144 rescued migrants to Libya. It remains unclear when and from where these individuals departed,” Mr. Millman said.

“IOM staff counted 26 women and four children among those rescued and taken to a detention centre in Misrata. IOM staff are monitoring their conditions and assessing their needs.”

In Geneva, UNHCR spokesperson Charlie Yaxley confirmed that migrants and refugees held in Libya suffered terribly. “Many report going hungry for days on end, not being able to receive urgent medical care that they require,” he said. “Others allege to have been tortured in some of these centres, the non-official centres, are run by traffickers and smugglers, where we have no access to those at all.”



UNICEF/UN052822/Romenzi

A migrant sits in a patch of light entering through one of only two windows as he tries to warm himself up at a detention centre, located in Libya, 1 February 2017. At the time of UNICEF’s visit, 160 men were being detained there.

The UNHCR spokesperson also spoke of the agency’s “alarm” at reports that the Libyan coastguard had been unable to respond to emergencies because of fuel shortages, before urging Europe’s politicians to recognize that Libya was not a safe place for vulnerable people on the move.

“The automatic use of detention for rescued refugees and migrants, the extremely volatile situation with regards to the outbreaks of violence and, together, with the widespread reports of human rights violations, they play just a part of why we consider Libya to be, to have no safe port for docking rescued passengers at the moment,” he insisted.

While most migrants and refugees heading for Europe now attempt to do so by reaching Spanish shores, Italy remains a target destination, albeit on a much smaller scale than in recent years.

Migrant crisis still needs ‘European solidarity’

Citing data from the Italian authorities, IOM’s Mr. Millman said that 155 migrants have arrived by sea to Italy so far this year, meaning that January 2019 was “on track” to be the lowest month for arrivals in more than three years.

At the same time, he noted that the volunteer rescue vessel Sea-Watch 3 – which saved 47 migrants on Saturday – has yet to receive permission to dock in Europe, before reiterating IOM’s call for a “safe and orderly disembarking mechanism in the central Mediterranean”.

UNHCR’s Mr. Yaxley, meanwhile, when asked which European countries were responsible for the difficulties encountered by rescue vessels, explained that what was needed was a coordinated, multilateral policy.

“I don’t think we can point the finger at any one State,” he said. “The Mediterranean States have been at forefront of receiving new arrivals crossing by sea for many years...it needs European solidarity, it needs European support.”. He said the tragic deaths represented the end of “desperate journeys where the refugees and migrants have faced quite horrific experiences and traumas along the way.”

IOM data indicates that 4,883 migrants and refugees reached Europe by sea in the first 20 days of 2019.

The number of people arriving from traditional “sender” countries such as Syria fell significantly in 2018, from 12,300 in 2017, to almost 7,700 last year, while Afghanistan nationals almost tripled in number, from around 3,500 in 2017 to more than 9,600 in 2018.

Fuel crisis rapidly draining last ‘coping capacities’ of Palestinians in Gaza

A worsening fuel crisis in the Gaza Strip enclave is putting patients’ lives at risk with power supplies for operating theaters under constant threat, the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) has said.

“Acute fuel shortages are rapidly exhausting the [last coping capacities](#) of the health system in Gaza, which is struggling with chronic shortages of pharmaceuticals, medical supplies and electricity”, said Gerald Rockenschaub, Head of the WHO Office for the West Bank and Gaza.

Gaza's 14 public hospitals are under increasing jeopardy of electricity shortages and rapidly declining fuel reserves, which are supervised by UN agencies, but controlled by Israeli authorities which has been blockading Gaza for over a decade. The fuel is essential to run emergency generators during prolonged electricity cuts from the main grid.

"Without a quick solution to address the critically low emergency fuel supplies in hospitals, many of the most vulnerable patients will be put at risk" Dr. Rockenschaub continued, in a statement released on Monday.

Without a quick solution...many of the most vulnerable patients will be put at risk – *WHO Head in West Bank and Gaza*

WHO maintained that several of the most severely impacted hospitals have already put rationalization measures in place and suspended sterilization, diagnostic imaging, cleaning, laundry and catering services during cut-off hours.

Moreover, elective surgeries have been reduced further and doctors and nurses are warning of imminent drastic service cuts that would close wards and hospitals.

This will directly affect hundreds of patients, including newborns and children, whose lives depend on dialysis services, incubators and ventilators in intensive care units, as well as other electrical life-sustaining devices and surgical interventions.

"Following our visits to several affected facilities in Gaza to assess the situation firsthand, we call on all parties to de-politicize health and to collectively ensure that lifesaving services are sustained," stressed Dr. Rockenschaub.

Depending on the number of hours of available electricity, current fuel reserves are only expected to sustain critical hospital services for a few more days.

WHO called on the local authorities and all parties to meet their responsibilities and ensure the right to health and sustained access to essential health services for all patients.

[‘Compelling case’ for urgency around global disarmament, UN-led forum told](#)

Michael Møller, head of the UN in Geneva, has warned delegates to the [Conference on Disarmament](#) that cyber-security challenges, and the existence

of new weapons systems and technologies, are not being sufficiently addressed or reflected in current arms control regimes.

Mr Møller, who acts as the Secretary-General of the Conference, was speaking at the opening of the first 2019 meeting of the Geneva-based Conference, which, although it is the only multilateral forum for disarmament negotiations, has been deadlocked for over 20 years: the last arms control agreement successfully negotiated by the body was the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, in 1996.

The UN Geneva chief said that the realities of today make a compelling case for a renewed sense of urgency, and a collective commitment and determination in pursuing disarmament. He warned that the nuclear threat remains high: nuclear programmes continue to be pursued, and nuclear arsenals enhanced, and that military and security expenditures have reached record levels. Despite these, and other risks, multilateralism is “under fire at the time we need it most,” and “meaningful dialogue on the right approach to a host of disarmament issues continues to elude us.

2019 marks the 40th anniversary of the Conference on Disarmament, described by Mr. Møller as an occasion to “recall why these mechanisms, with their regulations and rules of procedures and (spoken and unspoken) codes of conduct, were established.” They are important, he continued, because they provide a neutral place for dialogue, where different positions can be acknowledged and transcended.

Striking a positive note, Mr. Møller pointed to progress made in 2018 – when, for the first time in several years, four reports were adopted by consensus, paving the way for further work including technical discussions – and the hope that momentum generated by these developments will continue in this and future Sessions of the Conference.

The Conference on Disarmament, established as the single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum of the international community, is not formally a UN body but reports annually, or more frequently as appropriate, to the UN General Assembly.

Currently, the consensus-based body focuses primarily on the following issues: cessation of the nuclear arms race and nuclear disarmament, prevention of nuclear war, including all related matters, prevention of an arms race in outer space; effective international arrangements to assure non-nuclear-weapon States against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons; and new types of weapons of mass destruction and new systems of such weapons including radiological weapons; comprehensive programme of disarmament and transparency in armaments.