

# World's human rights watchdog spotlights Afghanistan, Yemen and 12 others: Here's the scoop

The United Nation Human Rights Council (HRC) kicked off its [Universal Periodic Review](#), or UPR, on Monday at the Palais des Nations in Geneva to examine the human rights situation in 14 countries, including Afghanistan and Yemen.

## **What exactly is the Universal Period Review?**

On a rotational basis each four and a half years, all UN Member States undergo an interactive review of their human rights situation – treating all countries equally and allowing them to exchange best practices.

## **Who conducts the reviews?**

As part of a general wave of UN system reforms in 2006, the Human Rights Council was created. It is comprised of 47 UN Member States who are elected by the full 193 membership. While each inspection is led by groups of three randomly chosen countries, called troikas, any State can take part in review discussions.

## **Just what is an 'interactive review'?**

Designated independent experts called "Special Rapporteurs" present information and evidence on specific rights violations to which UN Member States raise questions. Civil-society organizations can also submit questions and evidence through their country's representatives. The State under review is permitted to explain their actions or offer plans to resolve the issues presented. Recommendations are officially made, and, as needed, technical assistance is provided. Each State review lasts about three and a half hours.

## **Which countries are being reviewed on this rotation?**

The UPR sessions take place for two weeks, three times a year, during which 14 countries are reviewed, totaling 42 per year. This year, in its 34th session, the UN Working Group will meet until 1 February to audit Yemen, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Vanuatu, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Eritrea, New Zealand, Cambodia, Cyprus, Comoros, Slovakia, Chile, Afghanistan and Uruguay with the goal of improving human rights for every person around the world.

## **Which human rights are assessed?**

The UPR assesses the human rights obligations set out in: the [UN Charter](#), the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the human rights treaties ratified

by the reviewed State, and international humanitarian law.

### **What is the outcome of the review?**

In conjunction with the State under review and technical assistance from the UN human rights office (OHCHR), the troika prepares a report summarizing the actual discussion – complete with questions, comments and recommendations, as well as responses from the State being audited. A few days after the review, the report is discussed and adopted at a plenary session of the Human Rights Council.

### **Is there any follow-up, any accountability?**

It is the primary responsibility of the evaluated State to implement the recommendations set out in the adopted report. During its review, the country is expected to provide information on measures it has taken to remedy the situation, and at the next UPR, report on its human rights developments. In consultation with the country concerned, the international community and OHCHR are available to assist and provide technical help.

### **What happens if a State is not cooperating?**

The Human Rights Council can take a series of measures, such as specific investigations; setting up dedicated committees to pressure a non-cooperating Member State; and drawing the world's attention to its unacceptable behaviour.

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## **[Migrants and refugees face higher risk of developing ill-health, says UN report on displaced people in Europe](#)**

European authorities are “struggling” to meet the needs of irregular migrants and refugees who are wrongly accused of spreading sickness among host communities, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Monday, at the launch of its [first report](#) on the subject.

“The refugees and migrants that come to Europe, they do not bring any exotic diseases with them – any exotic communicable diseases,” said Dr. Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

“The diseases that they might have there are all well-established diseases in Europe, and also we have very good prevention and control programmes for these diseases,” she added. “This applies both for tuberculosis but also HIV/AIDS.”

Among other myths exposed as false by the [report](#) was the belief that more vulnerable people were arriving in Europe than was the case.

“International migrants make up about 10 per cent of the population in the European Region, that is about 90 million,” Dr. Jakab noted. “Out of this, less than 7.4 per cent are refugees and in some of the European countries, citizens estimate that there are three or four times more migrants than there are in reality.”

Based on a review of more than 13,000 documents on the health of refugees and migrants in the WHO European Region – one of six regions globally – the organization’s report provides a snapshot of their situation, at a time of rising global migration.

It shows that they are at higher risk of developing ill-health than host populations.

Citing UN migration agency ([IOM](#)) data indicating that more than 50,000 migrants and refugees have died in the Mediterranean area since the year 2000, the WHO report notes how women, young men, adolescents and unaccompanied minors are often “victims of deceptive recruitment and modern slavery”.

This has a grave physical and mental impact on the victims, it warns, adding that these this has “health repercussions” on their families and communities.

By way of an example, although displaced populations are at lower risk for all forms of cancer, except cervical cancer, the disease is “more likely to be diagnosed at an advanced stage”, the report says, putting them at greater risk of “considerably worse health outcomes than those of the host population”.

Diabetes also affects refugees and migrants more than host communities, the WHO report continues, with “higher incidence, prevalence and mortality rate”, especially among women.

Other illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, tend to affect refugees and migrants more than European host communities, the WHO study continues, noting that this applies particularly to unaccompanied minors, who also suffer higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Migrants and refugees are also at a greater risk from developing infectious diseases because of lack of access to health care, interrupted care and poor living conditions while on the move, according to the WHO report.

“I don’t think that in most of the countries the illegal migrants have access to the health system services,” Dr. Jakab said. “So that is an area where we have to do substantial additional work and conviction of the countries, because, the best way to protect their own population and the refugees is to give them access.”

WHO’s European Region covers 53 countries and has a combined population of almost 920 million people; the proportion of international migrants varies

from more than 50 per cent in Andorra and Monaco, to less than two per cent in Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Poland and Romania.

Providing rights-based healthcare systems that are sensitive to the needs of migrants and refugees is included in the [2030 Agenda](#), which covers 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#), known as the ‘[SDGs](#)’ and targets including universal health coverage.

Of 40 European States that responded to a WHO survey on the progress they are making towards healthcare systems that take into account the needs of refugees and migrants, only one in two said that they had conducted at least one assessment of the needs of migrants and refugees.

“The illegal migrants are not ‘visible’ to the authorities, so to say,” Dr. Jakab said. “They are there in the country but formally and officially the countries are not aware that they are present in the country.”

Globally, there are an estimated 258 million migrants, according to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

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## [Human rights are ‘key’ for economic policymaking says UN expert](#)

Calling on governments to take human rights obligations into account when designing economic reforms, an independent United Nations rights expert said on Monday that “human rights impact assessments are key to the process”.

Highlighting the vital role of human rights on policymaking, the independent expert on foreign debt and human rights, Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky, published the [Guiding Principles on Human Rights Impact Assessments of Economic Reforms](#) to assist states, international financial institutions, creditors, civil society and others, to ensure that economic policies are embedded in human rights.

“The thrust of the Guiding Principles is that states cannot shy away from their human rights obligations in economic policymaking, even in times of economic crisis” said Mr. Bohoslavsky in a [press release](#), issued on the eve of the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The UN human rights expert stressed that “any economic policy measures – whether fiscal austerity, structural adjustment reforms, privatisation of public services, deregulation of financial and labour markets, or changes in taxation – all have human rights consequences”, adding that the impacts of economic measures have to be taken in consideration, specially on specific individuals and groups “such as women and persons with disabilities”.

Mr. Bohoslavsky added that the new Guiding Principles make clear that international financial institutions, creditors and donors must not turn a blind eye to the human rights impact of their loans and grants.

He also called on international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, to ensure that “their loan conditionalities, advice and proposals for economic reforms do not undermine the borrower state’s human rights obligations”.

The publication will be presented to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council on 28 February.

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## [Global economy to see ‘steady’ growth of three per cent in 2019 despite risks, says UN](#)

“We still have relatively strong growth, but we do see rising risks on the horizon and an increasing likelihood that some of these risks might actually materialize,” said Elliott Harris, United Nations Chief Economist, in comments coinciding with [the launch](#) of the World Economic Situation and Prospects 2019 (WESP) report.

Among these looming dangers, accelerating trade tensions are already “having an impact” on global trade and employment, Mr. Harris told *UN News*.

In addition, rising national debt is also crippling many countries’ ability to provide basic services, but this and other risks – such as those from climate change and waning support for international cooperation – could be avoided or minimized if countries worked together to do so, the UN’s top economist insisted.

With mounting pressures in the areas of international trade, international development finance and tackling climate change, [the report](#) underscores that strengthening global cooperation is central to advancing sustainable development.

Yet, these threats come at a time when international cooperation and governance are more important than ever – many of the challenges laid out in the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development are global by nature and require collective and cooperative action. Waning support for multilateralism also raises questions around the capacity for collaborative policy action in the event of a widespread global shock.

## **UN report spotlights 'uneven progress'**

According to the WESP report, published by the [UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#), more than half the world's economies saw growth accelerate in 2017 and 2018.

Developed economies grew at 2.2 per cent in both years, while unemployment rates dropped.

Among developing economies, East Asia and South Asia saw the strongest gains in 2018, at 5.8 per cent and 5.6 per cent respectively, while commodity-exporting countries continued their "gradual recovery".

This improvement was particularly true for fuel-rich emerging nations, despite high debt levels caused by a fall in commodity prices, in 2014-15.

Although the overall picture among developing economies is largely positive, many are nonetheless experiencing "uneven progress", the UN report cautioned, amid falling individual (per capita) wealth in several nations.

"Further declines or weak per capita growth are anticipated in 2019 in Central, Southern and West Africa, Western Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean – homes to nearly a quarter of the global population living in extreme poverty," it noted.

And even where growth is strong, it is "often driven by core industrial and urban regions", the WESP 2019 report continued, such that rural areas are being left behind.

To overcome this, and for [poverty to be eradicated by 2030](#), the UN report suggests that there will need to be "both double-digit growth in Africa" along with "steep reductions" in unequal pay levels.

## **US-China trade tensions**

On the issue of trade tensions, it noted that these had led to a fall in global trade levels in 2018, from 5.3 per cent in 2017, to 3.8 per cent.

And as a result of the United States-China uncertainty, the expectation is that trade volumes in 2019 "will be lower" still, Mr. Harris suggested.

Government subsidies have to some extent softened the impact of the tariff hikes in the US and China – whose growth is expected to decrease from 6.6 per cent in 2018 to 6.3 per cent this year – but the risk is that developing economies may suffer the fallout too, unless the dispute is settled.

"If the trade dispute becomes more widespread, we will likely to see disruptions of global value change," Mr. Harris explained. "Bear in mind that the participation of global trade has been one of the ways that developing countries have participated in the rising global prosperity and have accelerated their own developments. So, anything that disrupts that, of course, (will) have a negative impact on their abilities to increase their levels of prosperity and to develop sustainably."

This cautionary assessment is telling because the US in 2018 contributed more to global trade than Japan or the European Union, according to UN economists at [UNCTAD](#), the [UN Conference on Trade and Development](#), which contributed to the WESP 2019 report.

Rising interest rates in the US – or a strengthening of the dollar – could also make matters worse for fragile emerging economies, the WESP report noted, adding that many low-income countries have already seen a “substantial rise” in interest repayments on their debt.

These include Lebanon and Sri Lanka, where over 40 per cent of Government revenue is spent servicing its debt, as well as Pakistan and Jamaica, where around a quarter of their budget is used to pay interest on national debt, representing a major constraint on public services.

### **Slow, steady growth in EU, but ‘Brexit’ looms**

On the European Union’s prospects, the WESP report estimates growth of two per cent for the next two years, with much stronger performances, potentially, from States who became members since 2004.

The pack is led by Poland, which saw its economy grow by five per cent in 2018.

The bloc’s biggest economy, Germany, is set to see more moderate growth however, at 1.8 per cent, amid potential disruption to the domestic car industry from “new technologies, new competitors and significant legal and financial consequences from past sales practices related to the diesel technology”.

France is also set to see lower-than-average growth (1.8 per cent), linked to its weaker export outlook, while the UK (1.4 per cent) is projected to pay for trade uncertainty linked to its plans to exit the EU, or Brexit, with “companies moving assets or diverting investment from the UK to the EU”, WESP 2019 notes.

The ‘Brexit’ fallout may also be felt outside the EU, the UN report warns, with a possible “10-15 per cent decline in funding available to EU accession countries”.

### **Commonwealth States, Central Europe also see ‘modest growth’**

In most Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which includes Russia, most saw accelerating growth and slowing inflation last year, amid “supportive” commodity prices.

Despite this, overall growth is forecast to slow “modestly” this year to two per cent, and 2.5 per cent in 2020, WESP 2019 suggests, amid concerns that strong expansion in smaller economies may be unsustainable, while lower public spending is expected in others.

Focusing on Russia, the UN report notes that lifting the value-added tax

(VAT) rate may encourage inflation and curb household spending, while ongoing sanctions could deter investment from abroad.

Other large commodity-exporting countries, such as Brazil and Nigeria, should see a “moderate pickup “in growth in 2019-2020, “albeit from a low base”.

Noting robust growth in Central Asia’s Tajikistan, thanks to increased aluminium and gold exports, WESP 2019 also suggests a much more positive future for the whole region, once China’s Belt and Road initiative becomes operational.

Frequently hailed as a 21st century version of the ancient Silk Road trade route, the region “should benefit from ... upgrades to countries’ railway, road and energy infrastructure, improved connections with China and Europe, and better market access,” the report explains.

Elsewhere, South-Eastern Europe saw faster growth in 2018 and its overall gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to expand by 3.7 per cent in 2019 and 2020.

Serbia, the region’s largest economy, benefited from double-digit growth in investment amid strong performances in farming and construction, while Albania also saw “solid” economic performance, WESP 2019 noted, before cautioning that longer-term improvements risk being “constrained”, unless there are improvements in industrial infrastructure and dependence on foreign financing.

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## [Ten UN peacekeepers killed in a terrorist attack in northern Mali](#)

Ten ‘blue helmets’ from the United Nations Stabilization Mission In Mali ([MINUSMA](#)) were killed on Sunday following a complex terrorist attack against the mission’s camp in Aguelhok, in the Kidal region, northern Mali.

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, strongly condemned the deadly attack which killed ten peacekeepers from Chad and injured at least 25 others.

“MINUSMA forces responded robustly and a number of assailants were killed,” a [statement](#) issued by his Spokesperson read.

The Secretary-General conveyed his “heartfelt condolences to the Government of Chad, and the families and loved ones of the deceased”, and wished a swift recovery to the injured, paying tribute to the dedication and courage of the men and women serving in MINUSMA “at great personal risk and sacrifice”.

A proliferation of armed groups fighting government forces and their allies in the centre and northern areas of Mali following a failed coup six years ago, have made MINUSMA the most dangerous mission to serve in as a UN 'blue helmet'.

Mr. Guterres called on the Malian authorities, as well as the signatory armed groups to the peace agreement, to "spare no effort" in identifying the perpetrators of this attack so that they can be brought to justice as swiftly as possible.

Recalling that attacks targeting UN peacekeepers may constitute war crimes under international law, he reaffirmed that "such acts will not diminish the resolve of the United Nations to continue supporting the people and Government of Mali in their efforts to build peace and stability in the country."

The head of the mission, Mahamat Saleh Annadif, [strongly condemned](#) the attack as well. "This complex and cowardly attack shows how determined terrorists are to sow chaos," he said. "This requires a robust, immediate and coordinated response from all the forces to destroy the threat of terrorism in the Sahel."

"Working closely with its partners, MINUSMA will remain proactive and will not let this barbaric act go unpunished," he stated.