

UN chief sends condolences, offers help after earthquake in Mexico

11 September 2017 – [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres today offered his condolences to the Government and people of Mexico and said the United Nations stands ready to provide support, should it be requested.

In a statement attributable to his spokesperson, the Secretary-General said he was “saddened by the loss of life and destruction in the earthquake that struck the provinces of Oaxaca, Chiapas and Tabasco in Mexico.”

Dozens of people were killed in the quake that struck before midnight on 7 September.

Mr. Guterres wished a speedy recovery to those injured, according to the statement.

He also commended the authorities and emergency responders, who he said “are sparing no efforts to assist people in need and restore essential services.”

Return of refugees in DR Congo fraught with challenges, reports UN agency

8 September 2017 – Despite improvements in the security situation in conflict-affected parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the return to peace continues to be fragile and the return of the displaced populations remains fraught with challenges, the United Nations refugee agency said.

“Despite the critical situation, some Congolese who had sought refuge in Angola are trying to return to their homes in Kasai,” Cécile Pouilly, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), told journalists at a news briefing in Geneva today.

However, many of those spontaneously returning to their origins saw their homes destroyed and are now forced to live in internal displacement-like conditions.

[“UNHCR staff saw entire villages burnt down and civilians in a dire situation](#), as basic services had largely stopped and lawlessness prevailed,” she added, relaying information gathered by the UN agency’s field mission to the area.

In the area near the border town of Kamako, nine out of ten villages had been burnt down in attacks by armed groups or fighting between them and Government forces. In addition, health posts, schools and public buildings were systematically destroyed or pillaged by local armed groups.

Children were the ones worst affected and hundreds have been separated from their families or witnessed their murders. Equally precarious is the situation of the elderly, those needing medical attention and persons with disabilities.

UNHCR's response in the country is hampered by lack of resources. Of the \$102.5 million needed, only about 17 per cent has been received. Lack of access is also causing significant difficulties.

The Kasai crisis had begun over a year ago, spreading from local tensions to a conflict affecting nine out of the 26 provinces of the African nation. Since April 2017, some 33,000 refugees fleeing the conflict had been registered in the country's Lunda Norte province, according to UNHCR.

INTERVIEW: UN must lead 'surge in diplomacy' for peace, Guterres says ahead of 72nd General Assembly

8 September 2017 – As the excitement starts to build ahead of the United Nations General Assembly's annual high-level session – which sees Heads of State and Government and top ministers from nearly all Member States gather in New York to weigh in on the vital issues of the day – [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) sat down with *UN News* to talk about the role of the 72-year-old Organization in a world that is facing more challenges than ever.

Mr. Guterres, the Prime Minister of Portugal from 1995 to 2002, and the former UN High Commissioner for Refugees, took up his post on 1 January this year. He has consistently pushed for, among others, increased diplomacy on nettlesome global issues, broad adherence to the aims of the landmark Paris climate accord, wider engagement with the world's youth and dedicated efforts to ensure gender parity across the UN system.

Saying that the UN “must be an instrument for a surge in diplomacy for peace,” the Secretary-General discusses how he is working with the international community to make parties to conflict see that “nobody is winning” in today's devastating wars; to spotlight the links between climate change and sustainable development to ensure a globalized world that “leaves no one behind;” and to follow through on his deep belief that an equitable presence of both male and female colleagues makes organizations work better.

UN News: Mr. Secretary-General, with the new session of the General Assembly and its high-level debate coming up, what is the role of multilateralism in today's world and what are you going to do to try to strengthen this role?

Secretary-General: We live in a world with global problems – climate change, terrorism, inequality – and there is no way we can solve [them] on a country-by-country basis. We see, more and more, that only global solutions can address global problems. And for global solutions to be possible, we need to have mechanisms of governance allowing countries to come together and manage together the problems of our times.

VIDEO: Secretary-General António Guterres talks with UN News about issues such as climate change, terrorism and inequality, as well as the role of the 72-year-old Organization. Credit: UN News

And so multilateral organizations – like the UN, but also like many others... the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, regional organizations like the European Union, the African Union... they're all essential to allow us to face the very dramatic challenges that are today threatening humankind.

UN News: With all of the challenges facing the world right now – terrorism, extremism, the refugee crisis – what's your vision for the role the UN should be playing in today's world?

The UN must, first of all, be an instrument for a surge in diplomacy for peace

Secretary-General: The UN must, first of all, be an instrument for a surge in diplomacy for peace and we are doing everything we can, facing all the crises that we have – from Mali to South Sudan to Libya to Central African Republic to Syria to Afghanistan to Somalia – to do everything we can to convince the parties to those conflicts and those that have leverage, that support the parties to the conflict, we are doing everything we can to convince them that these are wars that nobody is winning; everybody's losing.

And it is absolutely essential that they forget their differences, their contradictions of interests and that they really come together to put an end to these tragic series of crises, violence and conflicts. Because these conflicts are also becoming more and more interlinked and more linked to global terrorism.



The Secretary-General meets South Sudanese refugees during a visit to Imvepi settlement in northern Uganda in June 2017. UN Photo/Mark Garten

So we need to fight terrorists where they are, but we need to address the root causes of terrorism. That means solving conflicts, and at the same time,

building cohesive societies where people can feel they belong, where they don't feel discriminated [against] and respect human rights, to make sure that terrorist organizations have more and more difficulties recruiting people.

Youth unemployment, for instance. Youth unemployment in certain parts of the world is one of the most dramatic problems that facilitate the work of terrorist organizations recruiting people that have no future. So we need – in sustainable development, in human rights and in a peace and security approach – to combine all the UN instruments in order to be able to defeat terrorism.

UN News: We see the effects of climate change around the world. What's your message to everyone involved – governments, civil society, citizens – about the phenomenon and the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#))?

Secretary-General: First of all, climate change today is undeniable. I just came from my country, Portugal, where we are having a huge drought in the south. We're seeing forest fires multiplying terribly. In the United States, as in Portugal and other parts of the world, we are seeing heat waves, we are seeing dramatic floods – Sierra Leone, India, Nepal – we always had floods in the past but now natural disasters are becoming more frequent, more intense and with more devastating consequences. We see deserts progressing. We see glaciers diminishing. We see the sea levels starting to rise. So it is clearly a threat to us all.



In Jordan, Mr. Guterres speaks with schoolchildren during a visit to the Zaatari refugee camp in March 2017. UN Photo/Sahem Rababah

Second, to fight it we have today an important instrument – the [Paris Agreement](#). We need to make sure that all countries commit themselves to that [accord]. And wherever countries are not able to do so at the government level, that the societies, the business communities, the cities, are able to lead the process and in this way, we can be able to meet the Paris Agreement, but with an increased ambition because Paris is not enough to be able to contain global warming at the level that is acceptable.

We need to see that there is a clear link between climate change and development

At the same time, we need to see that there is a clear link between climate change and development, and the sustainability of development. So, the [2030 Agenda](#), the Sustainable Development Goals, are the global programme accepted by all Member States to have a fair globalization. A globalization that leaves no one behind. Contrary to what has happened in the recent past where we see so many regions that are dramatically, negatively impacted by technological progress or globalization.

We need to make sure that globalization that has brought enormous advantages for humankind, that it leaves no one behind. That there is inclusivity and that there is sustainability for our children and our grandchildren also to benefit from what we are achieving today.

UN News: A question dear to me – gender parity. You promised gender parity, and to strengthen gender parity within the UN system when you assumed office. Looking back at these past months, are you satisfied with what the progress so far? And what are your plans?

Secretary-General: I've appointed members of the Senior Management Group, which is the top level of the United Nations, between appointments and the renewal of mandates we have done it with 19 women and 17 men, which means parity has been taken very seriously by me in the decisions I can make. And we will have, at the end of my mandate – this is a very strong commitment – at the level of the Assistant Secretaries-General and Under-Secretaries-General across the board, all over the Organization, full parity.



The Secretary-General speaks to journalists at a press encounter at UN Headquarters in August 2017. UN Photo/Mark Garten

We just approved a road map for parity that we will now submit to Member States in the areas where Member States need to take decisions aiming at reaching in 2023 in a majority of the areas of the UN, but for some that have more specific difficulties: in 2028, full parity for international staff across the board. So this is a strong commitment. And it's not because this idea is now very much in the public debate. It's because it's my deep belief that organizations work much better when there is an equitable presence of both male and female colleagues.

UN News: In your youth, you stood up for the principles you believed in. What would you say to young people in today's world who want to do something against racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and discrimination?

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Secretary-General: I think that young people are exactly my hope because young people are much more cosmopolitan. They are much less prone to these irrational approaches of nationalism, of xenophobia, racism; they understand diversity is a richness; it's not a threat. I hope that young people will push their societies, their communities, their governments to understand that they need to have policies of social cohesion, they need to have policies that allow for everyone to feel that his or her identity is respected but, at the same time, that they belong to the community as a whole.

UN News: People want to know you on the personal level. So I have a few questions to try to do that. You are a fan of history. Who are your favourite

historic figures?

Secretary-General: Well I had two personalities that had a very, very important influence on my political life, both ideologically and in relation to the political attitude, political behaviour. One, in my youth, Olaf Palme. Another, in the maturity of my life, Nelson Mandela. I think they correspond to a fantastic combination: on one side, the policies that are at the same time clearly oriented for equality, for a progressive view of the world, equality between people, equality between societies.

Olaf Palme has made a fantastic contribution to the development of a progressive vision of his country and of international relations. And then Nelson Mandela is the very symbol of forgiveness, tolerance and the capacity to rebuild a society that was so deeply and so tragically divided.



Mr. Guterres (centre right) on his way to UN Headquarters for his first day at work as Secretary-General on 3 January 2017. UN Photo/Mark Garten

UN News: Who is your favourite author and what is your favourite book?

Secretary-General: I am, as you said, a compulsive reader of history. There are two history authors that I really consider the best I've read. One is French, Georges Duby. He was an excellent medievalist. The other is British, A.J.P Taylor. But of course, I am Portuguese; I come from a country of poets. There is a Portuguese poet that I consider absolutely unique: Fernando Pessoa.

UN News: With all your responsibilities as the head of an Organization that people look up to for solutions in a complicated world, what do you do to de-stress? What do you do for fun?

Secretary-General: Well, I like music a lot. So I [listen to] music at home. I go to concerts, operas frequently. I am very fond of contemporary art, so here in New York is the best place in the world – the galleries in Chelsea and other parts, contemporary exhibitions in the different museums.

And at the same time, I love to travel – and to go and try to discover either aspects of cultural heritage or landscapes that are unusual, or to have contact with people that are different and can enrich us. So I would say these are probably the areas where I try to use my spare time to my own benefit.

'Robust action' required to assist

growing number of refugees on Greek islands – UN

8 September 2017 – The United Nations refugee agency today urged “robust action” to improve conditions on Greece’s eastern Aegean islands, where the number of new refugee arrivals increased last month.

“In August, there have been 3,695 sea arrivals compared to 2,249 in July,” [said](#) Cécile Pouilly, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), at a press briefing in Geneva.

“While there has been progress to date, UNHCR is calling for robust action to improve conditions in reception facilities. We are also calling for the urgent deployment of additional national services staff, especially in the areas of health, psychosocial support and protection of unaccompanied children,” she added.

According to UNHCR, the situation is most worrying on Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Leros, which have received the largest number of arrivals, including many children. More than half come from conflict-hit Syria and Iraq.

The full management of the response to the refugee situation on the islands is being transferred from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations to the Greek authorities.

Calling it “a challenging period,” Ms. Pouilly said that arrivals on Lesbos, Samos and Leros have outpaced the rate at which people are being authorized by the authorities to transfer to the mainland – further worsening already very challenging living conditions.

“Estimated departures for the mainland last month were 2,561 against 3,695 arrivals, based on data from the authorities,” she flagged.

In addition, conditions have affected the physical and mental health of many of the people who have been staying on the islands for months. The threat of violence, self-harm and sexual assault is extremely worrying and more security is needed, said the agency.

“The situation is most critical in Samos,” she said. “Despite the recent transfer of some 640 people to the mainland from the island, more than 1,900 people remain crammed into an area meant for 700 at the Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) in Vathy. Among them there are more than 600 children – as well as pregnant women, serious medical cases and people with disabilities.”

UNHCR voiced concern at the growing risks to their health and welfare, due to water shortages and poor hygienic conditions. The agency has been providing aid, such as blankets, mats, sleeping bags, hygiene kits, baby care and female dignity kits.

“On Chios,” Ms. Pouilly said, “there were more than 500 arrivals in August. The Vial RIC has over 1,100 people, including over 100 people without proper accommodation. Most are staying in containers and some new arrivals are in 12 tents recently installed by UNHCR.”

Some 180 people also remain at the municipality-run Souda site, which has long been earmarked for closure.

Speaking about Lesbos, she maintained that “tension remains high at the Moria RIC, which has been twice rocked by riots in recent weeks in protest at the slow pace of registration and asylum processing for certain nationalities, as well as the crowded conditions.”

In August, there were 1,052 arrivals on Lesbos, and over 700 in the first week of September. Lesbos hosts some 5,000 people.

Turning to Leros, Ms. Pouilly pointed out that “more than 290 arrivals were recorded in August, and the number of people on the island stood on Friday at 649. This puts a strain on capacity in understaffed Government-run sites, including Lepida RIC.”

UNHCR is helping the Greek Government to identify gaps in the transition period and continues providing targeted services in child protection, support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, relief items, transportation, and interpretation with a recent grant from the European Commission.

[On International Day, UN promotes online literacy in digital world](#)

8 September 2017 – New technologies open opportunities to improve lives and connect globally, but they can also marginalize those who are illiterate and lack other essential skills needed to navigate them, a senior United Nations official today said, highlighting that some 750 million adults worldwide are not literate.

“Traditionally, literacy has been considered a set of [reading, writing and counting skills](#) applied in a certain context. Digitally-mediated knowledge societies are changing what it means to be literate, calling for new and higher-level literacy skills,” said the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)), Irina Bokova, in her message for International Literacy Day.

Marked annually on 8 September, the International Day this year is devoted to better understanding the type of literacy required in a digital world to build more inclusive, equitable and sustainable societies.

In Paris, opening the International Conference on International Literacy Day, Ms. Bokova today said that technologies must be more accessible and work for people.

“First, they must be inclusive, bridging gaps, not deepening them. Second, they must be underpinned by respect for human rights and dignity. All this gives rise to new questions about the [meaning of literacy](#) today,” she said.

Also speaking at the event, Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, who is the UNESCO Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, emphasized that literacy in today’s world is at the heart of social participation and engagement.

“There is no inclusiveness if we leave behind 750 million people who lack the basic literacy skills to participate in today’s digital world,” she said. “There is no social cohesion if we allow young people to develop feelings of exclusion and lack of self-confidence.”

Most people who are illiterate around the world – more than 60 per cent – are women, according to UNESCO figures.

As part of this year’s events, UNESCO awarded its annual Confucius Prize for Literacy to The Citizens Foundation, a Pakistani literacy programme with an online platform for women and out-of-school girls. In 2016, the programme enrolled 14,020 girls and women, of whom nearly 80 per cent completed the curricula, per [information](#) on the winning organization. Local communities run nearly all of the Foundation’s 1,440 school units in the poorest slums and villages in the country.

The other winners this year are from Canada, Colombia, Jordan and South Africa.