

Storms and snow in Lebanon worsen plight for Syrian refugees

Storm-force winds and snow across Lebanon have worsened the plight for tens of thousands of Syrian refugees who've been forced from their homes by nearly eight years of conflict, a top UN humanitarian official said on Thursday.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, Philippe Lazzarini, Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon, said that refugees had been moved from shelters – including in the exposed Bekaa valley where wintery conditions are especially acute – to safer facilities, after Storm Norma hit at the weekend.

“Some of the settlements have been completely flooded, very cold, it's extremely inclement conditions, and to describe daily life, it's just miserable,” he said.

What's important is, if returns are taking place, it takes place in an environment where people feel confident enough to go back and where you have the necessary trust – *UN Coordinator Philippe Lazzarini*

Although the number of Syrian refugees officially hosted by Lebanon is more than 900,000, registration ended in 2014, and it is estimated that the real figure is between 1.2 and 1.3 million.

Around 70 per cent live under the poverty line, Mr. Lazzarini said, noting that this was in fact an improvement on 2017, when the number was even higher.

This high ratio of refugees to nationals – around one in four – would be “unthinkable and unacceptable” anywhere else, the UN official said, before playing down “tensions” between host Lebanese communities, 10 to 20 per cent of whom live below the poverty line.

Rejecting suggestions that the refugee situation alone was responsible for discontent within the country, the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator noted that its leaders have been in “deadlock” and unable to agree on a power-sharing arrangement for effective central governance, despite elections last year.

“Today I would say there is an atmosphere of anxiety in the country which is very much related to the political deadlock,” he said. “The inability to put in place a cabinet, the inability to decide and put in place the long-overdue reform, combined with the economic situation, combined with the geo-politics in the region and the refugees.”

International support and solidarity for the Lebanon situation remains

strong, Mr. Lazzarini insisted, amounting to up to \$1.5 billion per year since 2015.

Nonetheless, he cautioned that eight years into the crisis, humanitarian funding “might have reached a ceiling” and that other longer-term development funding may need to be found, notably for education projects requiring a minimum four-year investment.

For returnees, ‘trust’ paramount

Asked about how many Syrian refugees have chosen to return to their war-scarred country, the UN official explained that only 16,000 to 17,000 registered with authorities in Damascus during 2018 – a slight increase on the previous year, when no more than 13,000 went home.

Suggestions that the UN had prevented people from doing so were incorrect, he insisted, noting that the organization ensured that returnees had all the “necessary documentation” they needed, such as birth and marriage certificates, to avoid difficulties reintegrating back into Syrian life.

“Ultimately people will decide if yes or not, if they are confident enough to return,” he said. “What’s important is, if returns are taking place, it takes place in an environment where people feel confident enough to go back and where you have the necessary trust.”

Latest UN figures indicate that there are more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees outside the war-torn country; Turkey hosts most, at 3.6 million.

Next is Lebanon, at more than 900,000, followed by Jordan (670,000), Iraq (250,000) and Egypt (130,000), while North Africa shelters 35,000.

More attacks, ‘persisting security challenges’ threaten progress in West Africa, Sahel

A rising number of attacks by extremist groups, using more sophisticated tactics, risk undermining progress in West Africa and the Sahel, the region’s UN envoy told the Security Council on Thursday.

“Military solutions, while necessary, are not sufficient,” Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel ([UNOWAS](#)), pushing for holistic responses, “grounded in the respect of human rights, and the socioeconomic needs of the population in the affected areas.”

In breaking down some of the most pressing challenges, he highlighted:

- In the Chad Basin, there have been increased Boko Haram attacks in recent months, notably against military installations. Also, violent clashes between farmers and herders continue, but on a lesser scale.
- Burkina Faso: Against the backdrop of a significant rise in security incidents, a state of emergency had been declared in seven of the country's 13 regions in the north, west and east.
- Niger: Despite mass mobilization of defense and security forces, they are "continuing to face challenges in the west and south."
- Niger, Benin and Togo: "Increased attacks and kidnappings by extremist groups are heightening security risks".

Against the backdrop of high population growth, worsening youth unemployment and economic austerity measures, including the elimination of subsidies in some countries, Mr. Chambas underscored that "rising insecurity has placed a heavy burden on governments in the region".

Rising insecurity has placed a heavy burden on governments in the region – *UN Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel*

The Special Representative outlined that UNOWAS was working to advance the region's long-term stabilization goals, cooperating closely with regional partners, within the framework of the last year's new UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel ([UNISS](#)).

He also noted that while "laudable progress" was made in implementing the Council's 2017 resolution for a regional response to the Lake Chad Basin crisis, "more support is needed to advance the stabilization efforts in the Sahel".

Elections: 'A litmus test'

Beyond the "persisting security challenges" Mr. Chambas lauded presidential elections in Mali last year, regional elections in Mauritania, and voting across Togo and Cote d'Ivoire, while underscoring that "despite appreciable progress in democratic consolidation in the region, continuous efforts are needed to address contentious issues around elections".

Indicating that this was of particular importance over the next six months as the region would conduct "several high-stake elections" in Nigeria, Senegal, Mauritania and Benin, he called the next cycle of regional elections "a litmus test for the consolidation of democratic gains".

Mr. Chambas pointed out that women continue to be discriminated against and marginalized from political processes, saying that they "comprise less than 15 per cent of parliamentarians in several countries of the region".

He also expressed concern over human rights challenges, particularly

allegations of human rights violations by security forces, as well as the increasing re-emergence of self-defence groups, “whose actions have been fueling intercommunal tensions”.

“Through inclusive approaches predicated on national ownership, we must continue to work hard on addressing the governance deficits, the extreme poverty and lack of development that feed and sustain armed violence and extremism”, concluded the UN Special Representative.

[‘Refrain from violence’ UN chief urges, as presidential election result is announced in DR Congo](#)

[United Nations Secretary-General](#) António Guterres has [appealed](#) for all parties to “refrain from violence” in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), following the announcement of the provisional results of the long-delayed presidential election.

The vote – initially scheduled to take place two years ago – if upheld, marks the vast central African nation’s first democratic transfer of power since independence nearly 60 years ago.

The Secretary-General calls on all stakeholders to refrain from violence and to channel any eventual electoral disputes through the established institutional mechanisms

According to news reports, the preliminary results announced by the independent electoral commission, known by its French acronym, CENI, which declared opposition candidate Felix Tshisekedi the winner of the 30 December election, do not tally with the unofficial figures gathered by independent poll observers.

According to CENI, Mr. Tshisekedi took more than 38 per cent of the votes cast, ahead of rival presidential hopefuls Martin Fayalu and ruling party candidate, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary. Mr. Fayalu immediately rejected the result, said agency reports.

“The Secretary-General calls on all stakeholders to refrain from violence and to channel any eventual electoral disputes through the established institutional mechanisms in line with the DRC’s Constitution and relevant electoral laws,” said Mr. Guterres in a statement released by his Spokesperson, late on Wednesday evening in New York.

In a direct call to CENI, the Constitutional Court, the Government, political parties and civil society, Mr Guterres urged them to “each live up to their responsibility in preserving stability and upholding democratic practices” in the DRC.

And as the country prepares to enter a new era without President Joseph Kabila, who has been in power since the previous incumbent, his father, was assassinated in 2001, the Secretary-General reiterated “the continued support and commitment” of the United Nations.

Together with regional actors and international partners, the UN will work “for the consolidation of peace, stability and development” in the DRC, Mr Guterres insisted, his comments coming amid an acute humanitarian crisis made worse by sporadic conflict involving dozens of armed groups in parts of the huge country.

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#), 12.8 million people are now food insecure in DRC, including 4.3 million malnourished children, of whom 1.3 million face severe malnutrition this year.

This is despite the country’s huge natural riches, seen as a source of illicit wealth by armed groups who continue to hamper access for aid teams, which are also tackling endemic cholera – which threatens two million people – combined with a new outbreak of Ebola virus disease in North Kivu and Ituri.

Guatemala: UN anti-corruption body will continue working, as Constitutional Court blocks Government expulsion

Following the Guatemalan Government’s unilateral decision to shut down a long-running [UN anti-corruption commission](#), its spokesperson told UN News on Wednesday that the team is looking at ways to continue to carry out its mandate, hours after the country’s highest court ruled against the Government expulsion order.

The International Commission Against Impunity (CICIG) was set up by the UN in conjunction with the Guatemalan Government, 11 years ago, and has successfully highlighted corruption cases involving hundreds of politicians, bureaucrats and business people. Its mandate is due to run through to 3 September this year.

“As [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) has pointed out, the CICIG must complete its mandate with respect to the international agreement reached between the State of Guatemala and the United Nations,” in line with “the decision made by the Constitutional Court,” to promote the “respect for the rule of law in Guatemala,” stated Commission spokesperson, Matías Ponce.

On Monday, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Sandra Jovel met UN chief Guterres at UN Headquarters in New York and presented him with a letter notifying him of the Government’s decision to terminate the agreement that established the CICIG, within 24 hours. Under the agreement, the mandate of the Commission was scheduled to end on 3 September 2019.

The UN chief “strongly rejected” the move, led by President Jimmy Morales, who foreshadowed this week’s announcement last September, by banning CICIG Commissioner, Ivan Velasquez, from re-entering the country. The Commission has launched probes into the President’s financial affairs as well as other family members.

In a statement released on Tuesday, the Secretary-General, recalling the “important contribution of the Commission to the fight against impunity in Guatemala”, strongly rejected the contents of the letter and stated that the Government is expected to “entirely fulfil its legal obligations” under the agreement.

Mr. Ponce explained that Commissioner Valasquez – who has been continuing his job from outside Guatemala – and his team “are evaluating the different actions that will be taken to continue with the Commission’s tasks”.

“At the same time”, he added, “we are grateful for the support that the citizens and various movements of civil society in Guatemala, the international community, the national and international press, international aid workers, national justice authorities and the United Nations have given to the work of CICIG in Guatemala.”

According to news reports, Guatemala’s Constitutional Court backed the continuation of the Commission’s work through this year, during all-night deliberations, after considering appeals against the Government’s cancellation of its agreement with the UN.

Armed insurgency in north-east Nigeria ‘has created a humanitarian tragedy’

Following an upsurge in violence in north-east Nigeria, which was brought to global attention five years ago with the abduction by Boko Haram extremists of the Chibok schoolgirls, tens of thousands of innocent civilians continue to flee, prompting “grave concern” from the United Nations envoy there.

Clashes between Nigerian government forces and non-State armed groups on 26 December in Baga town, about 200 kilometers north of state capital Maiduguri, triggered massive displacement, pushing civilians to converge on already-congested camps or sites for internally displaced people (IDPs).

An attempted attack on 28 December in Monguno, further exacerbated the situation, leading to more displacement.

It is heart-wrenching to see so many...living in congested camps, or sleeping outside with no shelter – *UN Humanitarian Coordinator*

“The impact of the recent fighting on innocent civilians is devastating and has created a humanitarian tragedy,” said UN Humanitarian Coordinator Edward Kallon after visiting Monguno and Teachers Village camp for internally displaced people in Maiduguri.

“It is heart-wrenching to see so many of these people living in congested camps, or sleeping outside with no shelter,” he lamented.

“The United Nations is extremely concerned about the impact that violence in north-east Nigeria, especially in Borno State, is having on civilians”, he added.

In recent weeks, more than 30,000 internally displaced people have arrived in Maiduguri, mainly from Baga – the majority since 20 December, often after arduous journeys with young children.

Of these, an estimated 20,000 IDPs in Teachers Village camp in Maiduguri has stretched its capacity beyond the limit.

And while it is still unclear how many people are taking refuge in Monguno, tens of thousands are in need of humanitarian assistance, notably shelter, food, water and sanitation.

Some 260 aid workers have been withdrawn from the local government areas of Monguno, Kala/Balge and Kukawa, which have been affected by the conflict since November. This represents the largest withdrawal of aid workers since the international humanitarian response was scaled up in 2016, hindering the delivery of vital aid to hundreds-of-thousands of people.

While aid workers have begun returning to respond to the urgent, life-saving needs, the lack of a secure operating environment continues to prevent normal humanitarian activities.