

## [DR Congo: Restore internet services as 'a matter of urgency', urges UN expert](#)

More than a week after voters went to the polls to choose a new President in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), results have yet to be announced and all primary telecommunications remain shut down – prompting a UN expert on Monday to urge the authorities to restore internet services as “a matter of urgency”.

“A general network shutdown is in [clear violation](#) of international law and cannot be justified by any means,” said David Kaye, the UN [Special Rapporteur](#) on freedom of expression, commenting on the information blackout in place since 30 December.

According to a senior Government official, the authorities cut internet and text services to preserve public order after “fictitious results” began circulating on social media, saying that they would be restored after the preliminary results due on 6 January. Those results has now been postponed.

“Access to information is crucial for the credibility of the ongoing electoral process”, stressed Mr. Kay, adding that “shutdowns are damaging not only for people’s access to information, but also for their access to basic services”.

News reports described a climate of suspicion surrounding the poll in a country that has not gone through a peaceful transition of power since 1960, when it gained independence from Belgium. As of Sunday, the head of the election commission, CENI, said that just over half of ballots have been counted.

The UN expert cited reports indicating that the shutdown was hindering both electoral observers and witnesses in sharing information from rural polling stations with local centres that are compiling results. It is also hampering the ability of the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC, or [MONUSCO](#), to communicate with its partners in the field, including those offering protection to vulnerable civilians.

The authorities need “to restore internet services as a matter of urgency and to ensure the integrity of a fundamental democratic exercise such as this one,” the Special Rapporteur said.

In 2016, the [Human Rights Council](#) passed a resolution unequivocally condemning measures, as a violation of international human rights, which intentionally prevent or disrupt access to the internet, and the dissemination of online information.

Previously, in 2015 the Joint Declaration of UN and regional experts on freedom of expression stated that network shutdowns or internet “kill switches” were measures that can “never be justified under human rights law”.

The UN expert said he would continue to monitor developments in the DRC closely, and is standing by to assist authorities, as requested.

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 issues. The positions are honorary and the experts are not paid for their work.

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## [Killing of aid worker in Syria part of 'disturbing trend'](#)

The abduction and killing of an aid worker last week in Syria's Idlib region, brings into focus the daily risks faced by humanitarian workers in conflict zones, said the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, in a [statement](#) deploring the killing on Monday.

In September, a ceasefire agreement led to the setting up of a demilitarized zone between Government forces and rebel-held parts of Idlib, which is the last part of the country still largely in opposition hands, and home to around three million civilians, many displaced from elsewhere.

Mark Cutts said he was "appalled and outraged by the news of the abduction and killing of an aid worker", explaining that the duty to ensure humanitarian workers can do their job free from danger, falls on the parties to the conflict. Such attacks only perpetuate the crisis that aid teams are supposed to help alleviate.

"Such acts of violence put into jeopardy the continuation of a humanitarian operation that is providing a vital lifeline for millions of people in Syria", he said.

Mr. Cutts highlighted that throughout the near eight-year Syrian conflict, aid workers and assistance professionals have been subjected to violence, and that hundreds "have been killed or injured during the conflict."

"Violence, threats and intimidation" have marred the progress of humanitarian work, he said, including numerous abductions, and dozens of conflict-related slayings were reported last year alone.

Such acts of violence put into jeopardy the continuation of a humanitarian operation that is providing a vital lifeline for millions of people in Syria—UN's *Mark Cutts*

"In the northwest there has been a disturbing trend in recent months of

increased kidnappings, extortion and attacks affecting health workers and humanitarian staff," Mr. Cutts said.

The latest [figures](#) from 2018 on aid worker security show Syria to be the third most lethal country for those on the job, behind South Sudan and Afghanistan.

Though fewer attacks were reported from Syria, the use of aerial bombardment character to the country's violence resulted in more aid workers killed per incident, with most attacks taking place in areas of severely constrained access for aid organisations, according to the 2018 Aid Worker Security Database.

Overall last year, 139 aid workers were killed in different parts of the world, another 102 wounded, and 72 kidnapped in the line of duty.

As Syria's war continues to rage on, more than 13 million people there need humanitarian assistance, and their lives will be increasingly under threat if aid workers are hindered from performing their duties.

"These acts of violence affect the individuals, their families, colleagues, and communities that these humanitarian workers serve and may deprive these vulnerable people of services they rely on to survive", Mr. Cutts said.

"I call on all parties to the conflict to take the necessary measures to prevent any further attacks on humanitarian workers and to ensure their protection at all times," he added.

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## **[World Bank President steps down, Chief Executive assumes temporary role](#)**

The President of the [World Bank](#), Jim Yong Kim, announced on Monday that he is stepping down, after more than six years in the role. Kristalina Georgieva, CEO of the World Bank CEO, will assume the role of interim President, from 1 February.

In a statement, Mr. Kim said that "It has been a great honour to serve as President of this remarkable institution, full of passionate individuals dedicated to the mission of ending extreme poverty in our lifetime. The work of the World Bank Group is more important now than ever as the aspirations of the poor rise all over the world, and problems like climate change, pandemics, famine and refugees continue to grow in both their scale and complexity."

During his term, which began in July 2012, President Kim emphasized that one

of the greatest needs in the developing world was more international funding for infrastructure, and he pushed the World Bank to work with private sector partners committed to building sustainable, climate-smart infrastructure in developing countries.

Under Mr. Kim's leadership, the World Bank provided financing at levels never seen outside of a financial crisis and set two goals for the bank: to end extreme poverty by 2030, and to boost shared prosperity, focusing on the bottom 40 percent of the population in developing countries. These goals now guide and inform the institution in its daily work around the globe.

Mr. Kim's tenure also saw the World Bank launch several new innovative financial instruments, including facilities to address infrastructure needs, prevent pandemics, and help the millions of people forcibly displaced from their homes by climate shocks, conflict, and violence. The Bank is also working with the United Nations and leading technology companies to implement the [Famine Action Mechanism](#), to detect warning signs earlier and prevent famines before they begin.

Mr. Kim has announced that, on leaving the World Bank, he will join a company and focus on increasing infrastructure investments in developing countries. The details of this new position will be announced shortly. He will also be re-joining the board of Partners In Health (PIH), an not-for-profit organization he co-founded more than 30 years ago.

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## [Saudi woman seeking asylum in Thailand 'now in a secure place' says UNHCR](#)

The UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), said on Monday that 18-year-old Saudi national Rahaf Mohammed Al-qunun, who had been stranded at Bangkok airport after fleeing her family in Kuwait, saying that she would be killed if forced to return, was "now in a secure place".

In a [statement](#) earlier in the day, UNHCR said it had been following developments over the past 48 hours closely and immediately sought access from the Thai authorities to meet with her.

The young Saudi told human rights groups and the media over the weekend that she had been stopped at Bangkok airport in transit from Kuwait, where her passport was taken from her. She claims she was fleeing her family and was planning to head to Australia and seek asylum there.

On Sunday, Ms. Mohammed Al-qunun had barricaded herself in a hotel room to prevent the Thai authorities from deporting her back to Kuwait. According to news reports, the Thai authorities agreed to give UNHCR access to her on

Monday, in order to assess her claim to asylum.

UNHCR consistently advocates for the principle of non-refoulement, which states that anyone confirmed or claiming to be in need of international protection cannot be returned to a territory where their life or freedom are threatened. This principle is recognized as customary international law and is also enshrined in Thailand's other treaty obligations, according to UNHCR.

Thailand is not a party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol defining the status of refugees.

For reasons of confidentiality and protection, UNHCR has not released any information on the details of the meeting that took place at the Bangkok hotel with the Saudi woman.

"She's now in a secure place, out of the hotel," said Cécile Pouilly, Senior Communications Officer for UNHCR, in an interview with *UN News*. "She's now in a state of emotional distress after all she's gone through and she needs to be given a bit of breathing space, but in the coming days, we will keep on meeting with her to try to assess her protection needs," she explained.

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## [Rising human trafficking takes on 'horrific dimensions': almost a third of victims are children](#)

A new [UN report](#) published on Monday shows that human trafficking is on the rise and taking on "horrific dimensions", with sexual exploitation of victims the main driver. Children now account for 30 per cent of those being trafficked, and far more girls are detected than boys.

The study from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)), draws on information from 142 countries, examining trafficking trends and patterns. Yury Fedotov, Executive Director of UNODC, said that "human trafficking has taken on horrific dimensions as armed groups and terrorists use it to spread fear and gain victims to offer as incentives to recruit new fighters," citing child soldiers, forced labour and sexual slavery as examples.

While the average numbers of reported victims had fluctuated during the earlier years for which UNODC had collected data, the global trend has shown a steady increase since 2010. Asia and the Americas are the regions which have seen the largest increase in the numbers of victims detected, which may be explained by improved methods of detecting, recording and reporting data on trafficking – or a real increase in the number of victims.

Most victims of trafficking detected outside their region of origin are from East Asia, followed by sub-Saharan Africa: whilst there has been an increase in the number of convictions for trafficking in these regions, the study concluding that large areas of impunity still exist in many Asian and African countries, and conviction rates for trafficking remain very low.

Trafficking for sexual exploitation is the most prevalent form in European countries, whilst in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, forced labour is the main factor driving the illicit trade. Women and girls make up most trafficking victims worldwide: almost three-quarters of them are trafficked for sexual exploitation, and 35 per cent (women and girls) are trafficked for forced labour.

### **Armed conflict the focus**

The main focus of the report is on the impact of armed conflict on trafficking. In conflict zones, where the rule of law is weak, and civilians have little protection from crime, armed groups and criminals may take the opportunity to traffic them. One example given in the study is the phenomenon of girls and young women in refugee camps in the Middle East being “married off” without their consent and subjected to sexual exploitation in neighbouring countries.

Addressing human trafficking is a key part of the [UN Sustainable Development Agenda](#), requiring Member States to monitor progress in tackling the problem, and report the number of victims by sex, age and form of exploitation.

However, significant gaps in knowledge remain, with many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and some parts of East Asia still lacking sufficient capacity to record and share data on trafficking in persons. “This report shows that we need to step up technical assistance and strengthen cooperation, to support all countries to protect victims and bring criminals to justice, and achieve the [Sustainable Development Goals](#),” said Mr. Fedotov.



#EndHumanTrafficking visual. According to the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 30% of human trafficking victims are children.