

In final address, UN health chief urges world body to ‘remember the people’ behind the facts and figures

22 May 2017 – The outgoing chief of the United Nations health agency today highlighted the relevance of the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), and offered its decision-making body parting advice that included protecting scientific evidence, pushing for innovation and thinking of people in every decision that is taken.

[“Remember the people,”](#) WHO Director-General Margaret Chan told the 70th World Health Assembly in Geneva. “Behind every number is a person who defines our common humanity and deserves our compassion, especially when suffering or premature death can be prevented.”

Among other advice, Dr. Chan, who steps down after two five-year terms, urged the body to work towards realizing the “tremendous potential of vaccines. She noted that the current measles outbreak in Europe and North America would have never occurred, had immunization coverage not dropped below the necessary 95 per cent threshold.

She also stressed the importance of listening to civil society, calling it “society’s conscience” and who can “give people who suffer the most a face and a voice.”

Refuting what she called “frequent criticism” that WHO has lost its relevance, Dr. Chan pointed to a recently issued report tracking how public health has evolved during her 10 year administration.

“It is a tribute to the power of partnerships and the capacity of public health to take solutions found for one problem and apply them to others,” the senior UN official said of the report.



Opening of the 70th World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland. Photo: WHO

As an example, she noted that while it took nearly a decade to lower the prices of antiretroviral treatments for HIV, thanks to teamwork and collaboration, the prices for new drugs to cure hepatitis C fell within two years.

‘We falter sometimes, but we never give up’

“This is the culture of evidence-based learning that improves efficiency, gives health efforts their remarkable resilience, and keeps us irrepressibly optimistic,” Dr. Chan said. “We falter sometimes, but we never give up.”

WHO's relevance was "most dramatically demonstrated" during last month's global partnership meeting on neglected tropical diseases, she said. Participants celebrated a decade of "record-breaking progress" to eliminate the diseases.

"The fact that, in 2015, nearly one billion people received free treatments that protect them from diseases that blind, maim, deform, and debilitate has little impact on the world's geopolitical situation. The people being protected are among the poorest in the world," Dr. Chan said.

She added that this was "a success story that the world was hungry to hear."

Dr. Chan did admit fault, however, in WHO's handling of the 2014 [Ebola outbreak in West Africa](#); the virus has recently re-emerged near the border of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic.

The outgoing chief said that "WHO was too slow to recognize that the virus, during its first appearance in West Africa, would behave very differently than during past outbreaks in central Africa, where the virus was rare but familiar and containment measures were well-rehearsed."

While the organization made "quick course corrections" to bring three outbreaks under control and helped create the first Ebola vaccine, the outbreak happened on Dr. Chan's watch "and I am personally accountable."

Current health challenges, elections top Assembly's agenda

The year's World Health Assembly, which includes 194 countries, will discuss what has been learned from that outbreak, as well as from WHO's handling of Zika and other diseases.

Experts will also provide an update on how Angola responded to last year's Yellow Fever outbreak, which exhausted the global vaccine stockpile several times.

The current cholera epidemic in war-torn Yemen is also on the agenda; only days ago, WHO described it as "unprecedented."

Polio is still causing misery and paralysis in three countries where it is endemic: Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria, so delegates will continue to push for the complete eradication of the wild poliovirus, for which there is no cure, only prevention.

In addition to tackling these health threats and many more, the World Health Assembly has one more important task – choosing Dr. Chan's successor. The three candidates hoping to step into her shoes after the vote tomorrow afternoon are Tedros Ghebreyesus from Ethiopia, David Nabarro from the UK, and Sania Nishtar from Pakistan.

UN refugee agency ramps up response as Libya's humanitarian crisis deepens

22 May 2017 – Conflict, insecurity, political instability and a collapsing economy have contributed to the deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Libya, prompting the United Nations refugee agency to announce plans to step-up its presence and programmes there.

Amid the increasing complexity of refugee and migrant movements through and from Libya, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi visited Tripoli yesterday where he met [refugees and migrants](#) in some of Libya's many detention centres.

"I was [shocked at the harsh conditions](#) in which refugees and migrants are held, generally due to lack of resources," Mr. Grandi said. "Children, women and men who have suffered so much already should not have to endure such hardship."

Some 300,000 Libyans have been displaced by ongoing conflict. In all, more than 1.3 million people – including internally displaced people (IDPs), as well as vulnerable Libyans, host communities, migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers – are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.

According to Mr. Grandi's Office ([UNHCR](#)), hundreds of thousands of people in the North African country have been affected by the collapse of law and order, absent or insufficient health care assistance, essential medicines, food, safe drinking water, shelter and education. In response, UNHCR is ramping up its existing humanitarian operations and is strengthening cooperation with the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) to leverage the respective strengths of both organizations.

"We should not underestimate the challenges of operating in an unstable and volatile environment, such as Libya today," stressed Mr. Grandi.

In addition to new offices and community development centres for refugees and asylum-seekers, UNHCR is also scaling up its presence in places of disembarkation for people rescued or intercepted at sea, in close cooperation with IOM and other partners.

At the same time, access and humanitarian assistance to vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers in detention facilities run by the Libyan authorities will be increased, focusing on lifesaving humanitarian activities and advocating for the release of detained refugees and asylum-seekers.

"Our ability to access and effectively deliver much needed protection and assistance is a constant challenge. The people we are trying to help and my staff live and work under enormous strain and risks," said the High Commissioner.

In the last year and a half, UNHCR has been able to secure the release of

more than 800 vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers. The agency is trying to find durable solutions for them.

UNHCR will also boost its programmes to assist Libyan IDPs and host communities who are in dire need of improved access to basic services, which have severely deteriorated as a result of the crisis. Among other activities, small-scale, community-based projects of immediate impact are envisaged for the benefit of host communities, displaced persons, refugees and asylum-seekers.

Libya continues to be the main departing point for refugees and migrants seeking to reach Europe. Mr. Grandi was accompanied to Tripoli by Vincent Cochetel, Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean Situation, who will be coordinating UNHCR's cross-regional response to the complexities of mixed migration movements across the Mediterranean, and by Amin Awad, UNHCR's Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

[UN forum aims to ensure 'promises made are promises kept' on financing for development](#)

22 May 2017 – Promises made for financing the implementation of sustainable development goals must be promises kept, speakers said today at the opening of a United Nations forum.

"The eyes of the world are upon us," said Frederick Musiiwa Makamure Shava, President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), as he opened the 2017 [Forum](#) on financing for development follow-up.

The forum is an intergovernmental process mandated to review the [Addis Ababa Action Agenda](#) adopted by UN Member States in 2015 as well as other financing for development outcomes and the means of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)).

Building on last year's inaugural session, which devoted particular attention to setting up the monitoring framework for the follow-up to the Addis Agenda, the 2017 Forum is expected to provide impetus for achieving results.

UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, speaking via video message, recalled that the Addis Agenda, the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development and the [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change have provided a roadmap for a better future for all.

The Forum will closely examine key elements of that roadmap, including the need for long-term, high-quality investment and urgent measures to improve

the well-being of the poor and vulnerable, she said, encouraging participants to share their experiences with others and urged all countries to seek out and forge meaningful partnerships.

Developed countries need to deliver and developing countries have to further pursue South-South and triangular cooperation, she added.

[Other speakers](#) included Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF); Mahmoud Mohieldin, Senior Vice-President for the 2030 Development Agenda, United Nations Relations and Partnerships, World Bank Group; and Yonov Frederick Agah, Deputy Director-General of the World Trade Organization ([WTO](#)).

Meanwhile, a new UN report launched today [says](#) that continued slow global economic growth would likely leave about 6.5 per cent of the world population extremely poor in 2030 without national actions supported by international cooperation.

The 2017 *Financing for Development: Progress and Prospects* report states that a continuation of the status quo would severely hamper efforts to achieve the [SDGs](#) by 2030, with least developed countries (LDCs) likely to fall short by large margins.

The report, which is led by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, tracks progress on the Addis Agenda, and draws on the expertise, analysis and data from over 50 international institutions that make up the Inter-agency taskforce on financing for development, including the World Bank Group, the IMF and the WTO, UNCTAD and the UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)).

The report finds that there is an urgent need to increase long-term investments in sustainable development and to address economic vulnerability. Such investment will stimulate global growth, leading to a virtuous cycle.

“Ramped-up investment in sustainable infrastructure will help stimulate sustainable and equitable global growth, and make available more resources for investment in achieving sustainable development,” said Wu Hongbo, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs.

[Syria: Amid ‘promising’ diplomatic steps, UN envoy says hostilities continue on the ground](#)

22 May 2017 – Despite the “promising” steps in Syria that followed diplomatic talks in the Kazak capital, Astana – a nationwide ceasefire announced last December, and the de-escalation zones created inside Syria to deepen that

effort – a United Nations envoy today warned of ongoing hostilities between the Government and armed opposition groups in several areas, such as Hama, Homs, and Damascus.

“Astana produced, in my modest opinion, a promising step,” said Staffan de Mistura during a briefing to the Security Council in New York via video-teleconference from Geneva. A meeting in Kazakh capital, led by Russia, Turkey and Iran, saw agreement on a ceasefire between warring parties in Syria in late December 2016.

The Astana talks began shortly after to bolster the ceasefire agreement brokered by the so-called “guarantor” countries. Five months later, a deal was struck to set up “de-escalation zones” in Syria to prevent incidents and military confrontation between the warring parties. These zones are expected to also give greater humanitarian access to the 6.3 million people still living the country today.

And while the Astana process – which led to a “significant drop in violence,” including in aerial bombing – had been “good news,” Mr. de Mistura told the Council that the “not so good news” is that: “We have received reports of ongoing hostilities between the Government and armed opposition groups in areas such as Hama, Homs and Damascus. Some of these areas seem to be outside of the current de-escalation zones.”

Meanwhile, the Special Envoy said the Government of Syria has made some significant advances against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh), but he also cautioned about the “continued activities of Security Council-listed terrorist groups.”

He also gave an update on the sixth round of the [intra-Syrian talks](#), which wrapped up late last week in Geneva and have lately been held parallel to the Astana talks, whose aim to seek a political solution to the conflict.

“There is still a great deal of work to be done. We are aware that important gaps remain between the parties on major issues,” Mr. de Mistura said, explaining that his team has now prepared the ground for a “real negotiation,” which he hopes will be possible before too long. For the first time, he said, he has received the consent of all parties to engage at an expert level. He said he was also pleased that all parties were receptive the UN convening a seventh round of talks, which is intended to take place sometime in June.

[Persistent persecution of Bahá'í in Yemen 'unacceptable,' and must stop,](#)

says UN expert

22 May 2017 – In Yemen, Bahá'ís are under pressure to recant their faith, according to a United Nations rights expert, noting that in April, the Public Prosecutor reportedly summoned by phone at least 30 members of the community to appear in court, and de facto authorities in Sana'a ordered the arrest of at least 25 more.

“The recent escalation in the [persistent pattern of persecution](#) of the Bahá'í community in Sana'a mirrors the persecution suffered by the Bahá'ís living in Iran,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed. “Many Yemeni Bahá'í families in Sana'a have left their homes and live in constant fear.”

Mr. Shaheed noted that the persistent harassment of Bahá'ís amounted to religious persecution in Yemen, saying “It is unacceptable for anyone, including persons belonging to religious minorities, to be targeted or discriminated based on religion or belief.”

In addition, two Yemeni Bahá'ís, Walid Ayyash and Mahmood Humaid, were reportedly arrested by political security officers at a check point near the city border of Hudiedah. Their whereabouts are unknown since their arrests.

“The new wave of court summons and arrest orders appears to be an act of intimidation pressuring the Yemeni Bahá'ís to recant their faith,” the Special Rapporteur said. “The Yemeni authorities, including the de facto authorities in Sana'a, have failed to respond to the call made by my predecessor and other UN independent experts last year,” he added, referring to a [call](#) made in October 2016.

“The Houthi de facto authorities in Sana'a must stop summoning or arresting the Bahá'ís and immediately release all Bahá'ís arbitrarily detained,” he stressed. “They must also start an inquiry into the disappearances of Mr. Ayyash and Mr. Humaid, and provide details of the investigation.”

The expert furthermore recalled the case of Hamid Kamali Bin Haydara, arrested in 2013, and remains incarcerated in the National Security Prison for ‘compromising the independence of the Republic of Yemen,’ including spreading the Bahá'í faith in the country. His trial has been postponed on numerous occasions, and is now scheduled for 1 August. The expert also urged for the release of two other Bahá'ís, Kaiwan Mohamed Ali Qadri and Pazhohesh Sana'i who remain detained since their arrests.

The Special Rapporteur reminded the Yemen Government and the de facto authorities in Sana'a that the right to freedom of conscience, thought, religion or belief is a non-derogable right under any circumstance, adding that persons had the right not to be arbitrarily detained for exercising religious freedom or for belonging to a religious minority.

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 theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.