

Security Council discusses chemical weapons use in Syria following latest global watchdog report

The UN [Security Council](#) met behind closed doors on Wednesday, to discuss the latest findings of the global chemical weapons watchdog in Syria, which concluded that there were “reasonable grounds” that a chemical attack took place during the crucial battle for control of Eastern Ghouta, last April.

The report from the UN-backed [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#) (OPCW) made up of 193 Member States, concluded based on its Fact-Finding Mission assessment, that there were “reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon has taken place, on 7 April”, adding that reactive chlorine had been detected in samples taken, around two weeks after the incident.

The attack in the city of Douma, a suburb of the capital Damascus, came at a crucial stage of the siege by Syrian Government forces, backed by Russia, on rebel-held Eastern Ghouta, which subsequently fell. Dozens were reportedly killed during the likely chemical attack, with videos purporting filmed during the aftermath widely shared across the world, showing children choking and gagging.

At the time, Russia denied any chemical weapons had been used, saying that the attack had been “staged”. The Syrian Government denied any involvement. But the United States, together with France and the United Kingdom, launched retaliatory air strikes, aimed at alleged chemical weapons facilities and infrastructure.

Last June, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, delivered a report to the Human Rights Council, [saying that](#) the siege and recapture of Eastern Ghouta by Government and allied forces, had been marked by war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The latest FFM’s report on Douma, was due to be shared with States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention, and passed on to the Security Council. The report does not assign blame for the likely use of chlorine gas, and found no grounds or evidence, to support an assertion from the Syrian Government that rebel fighters in Douma had use a local facility, to manufacture chemical weapons.

Last June, the OPCW [was given new powers](#) to assign blame for future chemical weapons attacks, but this did not include the FFM sent to Douma, to gather evidence.

Education remains an impossible a dream for many refugees and migrants

The older refugee and migrant children get, the less likely it is that they will get a quality education: less than a quarter of the world's refugees make it to secondary school, and just one per cent progress to higher education. Even for migrants who settle in wealthy, developed host countries, accessing university is an uphill struggle.

For many young migrants in the UK, even those who have the legal right to remain in a new country, the idea of going to university is almost an impossible dream: not only are they are charged "overseas student" fees, which can be around double those of "home" students but, until recently, they were denied access to student loans, which puts up another barrier to entry.

However, a ray of hope has been provided by Chrisann Jarrett, herself a young migrant. Whilst still a teenager, Chrisann set up Let Us Learn, a campaign for equal and fair treatment for young migrants. In an interview with UN News, Chrisann explained how a 2015 court victory against the UK Government has made a big difference to many young UK-based students born abroad.



UN News/Conor Lennon

Chrisann Jarrett, founder of Let Us Learn, a UK-based initiative to help young migrants access higher education.

"We recognized that over 2,000 students were being stopped from going to university because of their immigration status. So, despite being lawfully

resident in the country, they were being told that they couldn't move forward with their education aspirations. In 2015, the Supreme Court agreed that this was discriminatory, and we managed to influence government policy, which means that hundreds, if not thousands of young migrants are able to access a student loan and go to university, which previously wasn't the case."

Ms Jarrett said that the campaign was a cause worth fighting for, allowing potential talent, that would otherwise have been overlooked, to develop for the benefit of the migrants, and the countries in which they live.

Education cannot wait

Migration has become one of the central themes of political discourse and media coverage in the UK and other European countries over recent years, making it easy to forget that 92 per cent of young refugees are hosted in developing countries. These states have scant resources to ensure that they get an adequate education, and need support in order to be able to include refugee children in their school systems. This is why [Education Cannot Wait](#), the first global fund dedicated to education in emergencies and protracted crises, was set up in 2016. Hosted by the [UN Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#), Education Cannot Wait brings together public and private partners to mobilize the funding needed to deploy immediate and sustainable programmes tailor-made to the educational needs of children affected by conflict.

One such examples is in Ethiopia's refugee-hosting regions of Gambella and Benishangal-Gumuz, which received a \$15 million grant from the fund, to pay for new schools and teachers. Most of the children there fled from violence in South Sudan, and schools can play a significant role in helping them to find stability and support.



UNICEF Ethiopia/2018/Mersha

Children in Makod Primary and Secondary School in Tierkidi Refugee Camp, Gambella Region, Ethiopia.

The investment by the Fund has paid for the construction of three new secondary schools, 84 classrooms in four primary schools, and classroom furniture such as desks, chairs and chalkboards. It also supports teacher training through diploma programmes, as well as teaching and learning materials. It is hoped that the grant will lead to some 12,000 children benefiting from an improved quality of education.

But more than half of all school-age refugees are not getting any education: that equates to some four million young people unlikely to realize their economic and intellectual potential. The UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)) estimates that the number of young refugees receiving no schooling rose by around 500,000 in just 12 months between 2017 and 2018. The agency expects hundreds of thousands more refugee children to join these statistics, unless urgent investment is made.

The ‘horror’ of children devoid of hope

In February, [Gordon Brown](#), former UK Prime Minister and [UN Special Envoy for Global Education](#), warned that the world needs to wake up to “the horror of so many children devoid of hope,” and gave as an example the situation for children at the Maria refugee camp in Greece, where “no formal education is on offer to any of the hundreds of children who are there,” and where two young boys attempted suicide. “At that age, their lives should be full of hope and excitement at every new dawn – but instead young people are so devoid of hope, that they attempted to take their own lives”.

“Young people are so devoid of hope, that they attempted to take their own lives” Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education

Speaking at the UN’s [International Dialogue on Migration](#) later that month, António Vitorino, Director-General of the [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#), said that “Too often, young migrants are denied access to training opportunities – vocational as well as academic – or access to all parts of the labour market in countries of destination.” Many young migrants, he said, experience discrimination that “reduces their prospects for growth, as well as their self-esteem. This is a dangerous cycle that we must avoid: unduly limiting the potential of a generation who encapsulate a diverse experience and skills.”

[Nearly four million North Koreans in urgent need, as food production slumps](#)

by almost 10 per cent

The UN is calling for some \$120 million to provide life-saving humanitarian aid, desperately needed by 3.8 million North Koreans, as it releases its [2019 Needs and Priorities Plan](#) for the country.

Women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities are prioritized in the plan: 90 per cent of nutritional aid, and 92 per cent of health assistance, go to children under five years old and women.

In a [statement](#) published on Wednesday, Tapan Mishra, UN Resident Coordinator in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as the country is officially known, expressed particular concern over the fact that food production in the country dropped by almost 10 per cent between 2017 and 2018 – the lowest production in more than a decade – resulting in a significant food gap.

Arguing for adequate funding, the Resident Coordinator said that “the time to act is now,” in order to prevent a deterioration of the humanitarian situation in DPRK. Overall, some 11 million people in the country are not getting enough nutritious food, clean drinking water or access to basic services like health and sanitation, and one in five children are stunted due to chronic undernutrition.

Mr. Mishra said that, despite these alarming facts, humanitarian activities in DPRK are “critically underfunded.” Last year, barely a quarter of the requested \$111 million was provided by donors, which meant that an estimated 1.4 million people went without the food they needed, and almost 800,000 people had not access to essential health services.

Because of the underfunding, many UN agencies have had to scale back their programmes, or even close projects that have served as a life-line for millions of people. Mr. Mishra described delays and challenges to programmes as “unintended consequences of sanctions,” which have a “real and tangible impact on the aid that we are able to provide to people who desperately need it.”

Mr. Mishra praised the generosity of those donors who have provided funding, noting the positive impact that humanitarian programmes are having on the lives of North Koreans; and the improved access and monitoring that agencies can engage in thanks to “continued, principled and robust engagement with the DPRK Government.”

The Resident Coordinator appealed to all potential donors and stakeholders to rise above political and security considerations, and prevent them from getting in the way of providing life-saving aid to the men, women, and children who need it the most, because “we simply cannot leave them behind.”

Ramped-up emergency preparedness, part of 'changing the DNA' of the UN's health agency

WHO's new structural pillars:

- Programmes pillar – to support WHO's work on universal health coverage and healthier populations.
- Emergencies pillar – to manage WHO's critical health security responsibilities, both in responding to health crises and helping countries prepare for them.
- External Relations and Governance pillar – to harmonize WHO's work on resource mobilization, communications.
- Business Operations pillar – to professionally administer budgeting, finance, human resources and supply chain functions, among others.

Coordinating its processes and structures with these targets and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) is at the centre of WHO's five-years strategic plan.

Based on four pillars, the new structure and operating model will align its work at headquarters, regional offices and country offices – eliminating duplication and fragmentation.

Another institution-strengthening reform will come through a new department dedicated to boosting digital health to help countries in assessing, regulating and maximizing all that digital technologies and artificial intelligence innovations (AI), have to offer.

To provide new learning opportunities for staff and public health professionals around the world, a state-of-the-art WHO Academy has also been proposed to create a more dynamic, diverse workforce.

Other measures include a streamlined recruitment process to cut hiring time in half; more management training; new opportunities for national professional officers, and previously-announced improvements in conditions for interns.

Without tackling 'gross inequalities' major issues will go unsolved, warns UN rights chief Bachelet

In a more than half-hour address to the [Human Rights Council](#), Michelle Bachelet highlighted concerns around the world, while also welcoming several firsts, such as the record number of women now serving in the United States Congress, where they make up nearly a quarter of the representation.

The new wave of women representatives taking up their seats in January, indicated several "important steps for diversity," she said. "They included the first Muslim American Congresswoman, the first Native American Congresswoman, and the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. I hail all powerful women around the world and the model they present to the next generation."

Moving on to the wider state of social justice around the world, the rights chief said that overcoming "gross inequalities" was key to achieving the 2030 Agenda, referring to the 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) which Member States signed up to in 2015.

Hailing reforms in Ethiopia – where gender parity has been achieved in government; and Tunisia – where a woman was elected Mayor of the capital Tunis last year, the High Commissioner nonetheless warned that women human rights defenders globally faced a rising number of attacks.

These include "physical and sexual violence, public shaming – including on the internet – and attacks on their families and children", she said.

'Precarious' migration proves development gains aren't universal

Turning to the issue of "involuntary and precarious" migration that affected young people in particular, Ms. Bachelet explained that it too was driven by inequality in the form of poverty, discrimination, oppression, violence, poor governance, climate change – and violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

"The continuing movement of people from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to the United States is a result of failure to ensure that development reaches everyone, with persistent violations of rights leading to profound inequalities," she said.

The High Commissioner also welcomed efforts in Mexico to move from detaining and deporting migrants to a new rights-based approach that focused on "opportunities for regularization and alternatives to detention".

'Thousands' more migrant children separated from families in US

Staying with US-bound migration, Ms. Bachelet cautioned against new restrictions that simply "push migrants back across the border", while also expressing concern that "thousands more migrant children have been separated from their families than had been previously reported".

In Europe, the issue of migration was no less dramatic, Ms. Bachelet explained, before welcoming efforts by Germany, Finland, Portugal and Spain to help those fleeing war and persecution.

Continuing reports of migrants leaving the North African coast on unsuitable vessels – and regularly drowning in the Mediterranean Sea – were evidence of the need to extend the scope of regular migration channels, as the European Union had indicated, the High Commissioner said.

"Another 226 deaths were recorded in the first two months of this year," she said. "With several NGO vessels forced to suspend operations by measures that essentially criminalise solidarity, the ancient responsibility of rescue at sea is increasingly falling on merchant vessels – which are often ill-suited to such a task."

Philippines war on drugs 'no model' for other States

Turning to the Philippines and President Rodrigo Duterte's war on narcotics, Ms. Bachelet insisted that State policy "should not be more of a threat to their lives than the drugs they are abusing".

Up to 27,000 people may have been killed in the context of the campaign against illegal drugs since mid-2016, the High Commissioner said. Despite "serious allegations of extra-judicial killings, only one case – the widely reported killing of a teenage boy – has been subject to investigation and prosecution," she added.

The country's drug policies were not a model for any country, the High Commissioner maintained, before adding that she was also extremely concerned that Philippino lawmakers were considering "measures to reintroduce the death penalty for drug related crimes and reduce the age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 12 – or even nine-years old."

Saudi Arabian female activists 'must be freed'

In a speech covering more than 30 countries, the High Commissioner also appealed to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to set free "several" female activists allegedly subject to ill-treatment or torture in jail. "The persecution of peaceful activists would clearly contradict the spirit of the country's proclaimed new reforms," she said. "So we urge that these women be released."

Yemen conflict will 'scar' generations to come

On the huge scale of suffering in Yemen, where fighting between forces loyal

to the Government of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and Houthi militia has claimed thousands of lives since 2015, Ms. Bachelet said that it would “scar the country’s future for generations”.

The conflict has not killed and injured thousands of civilians, bringing famine, “debilitating” airstrikes, shelling, landmines and acute malnutrition – especially for children.

Syrians fleeing ISIL must be given assistance

On Syria, the High Commissioner called on all warring parties to provide information about all those who have gone missing during the conflict, which began in 2011.

“I remain particularly concerned about the rising toll of civilian deaths in Idlib Governorate,” Ms. Bachelet said. “All parties must ensure that the thousands of civilians fleeing formerly ISIL-held territory receive adequate protection and assistance. And I join the Special Envoy’s call for a comprehensive political solution.”

Returning to the need to tackle “gross inequalities”, the High Commissioner insisted that it was possible for all countries – “not always the richest, in income or resources” – to adopt principled and more effective policies, grounded in the full range of human rights.

“By taking steps to advance civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights as mutually reinforcing, they can count on building a strong basis for sustainable development and social harmony,” she said.