

World ‘deserves to know the truth’ behind Kashoggi disappearance: UN human rights chief

United Nations human rights chief [Michele Bachelet](#) said on Wednesday that she was open to an independent, UN-led investigation into the fate of Saudi journalist Jamal Kashoggi, if joint efforts by Turkey and Saudi Arabia, fail to uncover the facts.

The High Commissioner who heads [OHCHR](#), reiterated her call earlier in the week, for diplomatic immunity to be waived to ensure the joint investigation is effective, impartial and transparent.

Mr. Khashoggi, an influential Saudi journalist and critic, who has been living in exile in the United States in recent months and writing a column for the Washington Post newspaper, had gone to the Saudi Consulate in the Turkish city of Istanbul, on 2 October, to obtain marriage papers. He was never seen leaving, and the Saudi authorities have denied all knowledge of his whereabouts.

If it doesn't work we might need another kind of investigation...His family and the world, deserves the know the truth – UN human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet

In an exclusive interview on Wednesday with the UN News Spanish service at UN Headquarters in New York, Ms. Bachelet said that Mr. Khashoggi's "family and the world, deserves to know the truth" of what happened to him.

The rights chief said the UN had firstly urged both countries – Turkey and Saudi Arabia – to conduct a joint investigation, which is on-going, "but we have mentioned that this investigation should be thorough, should be transparent, should be a very serious investigation" she said, to determine whether, and how he may have died or genuinely disappeared.

She said it was essential that the perpetrators be brought to justice. Urging the full lifting of diplomatic immunity for the truth to be established, she said that the joint investigation, had to succeed in uncovering the facts.

"If it doesn't work we might need another kind of investigation, but for now, we hope that it's already been done, some of this, even though it's 12 days later. His family and the world, deserves the know the truth," said the High Commissioner.

'Virginity testing': a human rights violation, with no scientific basis – UN

A group of United Nations agencies has issued a [joint statement](#) calling for a ban on tests meant to assess the virginity of a girl or a woman, which is a common practice in at least 20 countries.

The statement, which was issued during the World Congress of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) in Rio de Janeiro, stresses that such tests are both unscientific, and a violation of human rights.

So-called “virginity testing” – also often referred to as hymen, “two-finger” or per vaginal examination – is a gynecological inspection of female genitalia carried out in the false belief that it can reliably determine whether a woman or girl has had vaginal intercourse.

In a global call to eliminate violence against women and girls everywhere, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), UN Women and the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), said that “this medically unnecessary, and often times painful, humiliating and traumatic practice must end”.

The practice is a long-standing tradition documented in at least 20 countries, spanning all regions of the world. Women and girls are often forced to undergo virginity testing for various reasons, including requests from parents or potential partners to establish marriage eligibility or even from potential employers.

It is mostly performed by doctors, police officers, or community leaders on women and girls, in order to assess their virtue, honour or social value.

In their statement, the UN agencies explained that the practice has “no scientific or clinical basis” and that “there is no examination that can prove a girl or woman has had sex”, as the “appearance of girl’s or woman’s hymen cannot prove whether they have had sexual intercourse or are sexually active or not”.

In addition, the UN agencies denounce virginity testing as a violation of the rights of girls and women, which can be detrimental to their physical, psychological and social well-being. The examination can be “painful, humiliating and traumatic” and reinforces stereotyped notions of female sexuality and gender inequality.

In some regions, it is common for health professionals to perform virginity testing on victims of rape, supposedly to ascertain whether or not rape occurred. Given the lack of clinical basis, the procedure is deemed “unnecessary” and “can cause pain and mimic the original act of sexual violence, exacerbating survivors’ sense of disempowerment and cause re-

victimisation,” said the agencies.

“The result of this unscientific test can impact upon judicial proceedings, often to the detriment of victims and in favour of perpetrators, sometimes resulting in perpetrators being acquitted,” the statement added.

“Given that these procedures are unnecessary and potentially harmful, it is unethical for doctors or other health providers to undertake them. Such procedures must never be carried out,” the joint statement read, calling for a collaborative response across societies, supported by the public health community and all health professionals.

“Health professionals can be great agents for change,” said Dr. Princess Nothema Simelela, WHO’s Assistant Director-General for Family, Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health.

“With support from health systems and governments, they can recognise that ‘virginity testing’ has no medical or clinical bases, refuse to carry out the harmful practice, and educate the public about this,” she noted, adding that that, in doing so, they would be “upholding the Hippocratic oath of ‘do no harm’ and safeguarding the human rights of girls and women in their care”.

West Bank: ‘imminent’ demolition of Palestinian village could be ‘war crime’ – ICC Prosecutor

The Prosecutor mandated to oversee the Occupied Palestinian Territory for the [International Criminal Court](#) (ICC) [stated](#) on Wednesday that her office is keeping “a close eye” on the planned demolition of a Palestinian village in the West Bank by Israeli authorities, warning that, according to international law, it could constitute a “war crime”.

“I have been following with concern the planned eviction of the Bedouin community of Khan al-Ahmar, in the West Bank,” said Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, noting that “evacuation by force now appears imminent” and could result in “further escalation and violence”.

Approximately 190 herders, half of whom are children, live in Khan al-Ahmar, a village located in the outskirts of East Jerusalem. According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), the village is one of dozens affected by an Israeli settlement reorganization plan that would create a continuous built-up area from East Jerusalem to Jericho.

“The problem if it happens in all of these [villages], is that then the

contiguity and the possibility of a two-State solution will be challenged because the West Bank will be cut in half," [Jamie McGoldrick](#), the UN Humanitarian Coordinator explained to UN News in an interview on Tuesday.

"It bears recalling, as a general matter," said the ICC Prosecutor, "that extensive destruction of property without military necessity and population transfers in an occupied territory constitute war crimes under the Rome Statute."

According to OCHA's latest [Protection of Civilians report](#), over 300 Palestinian-owned structures have been demolished in 2018 alone.

Ms. Bensouda reminded all parties that the situation remains under preliminary examination by her Office, mandated with conducting independent and impartial preliminary examinations, investigations and prosecutions of the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and aggression.

"I continue to keep a close eye on the developments on the ground and will not hesitate to take any appropriate action, within the confines of the independent and impartial exercise of my mandate under the Rome Statute, with full respect for the principle of complementarity," she stated.

The complementarity principle on which the ICC is based entails that the ICC can only investigate and prosecute core international crimes when national jurisdictions are unable or unwilling to do so genuinely.

[Veteran UN Syria Envoy to step down, pledges to work 'until the last hour' for peace](#)

The United Nations [Special Envoy for Syria](#), told the Security Council on Wednesday that he is stepping down at the end of next month, after four years and four months on the job

Staffan de Mistura, said that he had been "discussing with the Secretary-General my desire for purely personal reasons to move on. I have deeply appreciated his constant support and wise counsel on this matter."

But briefing the 15-member Council on an invitation from the Government of Syria to visit Damascus next week, he said he would continue in his post up to the end of November, in an effort to get UN-backed peace talks on track, and help lay the groundwork for a new constitution.

We still have a very intense and hopefully fruitful month ahead. I

am not laying down the charge until the last hour of the last day of my mandate – *Staffan de Mistura, Syria Envoy*

“I plan to engage them on the work that has been done on the Constitutional Committee”, in the Syrian capital, he told the Council, adding that “without steps on a safe, calm and neutral environment, the work of a constitutional committee will not end up being very meaningful.”

Mr. de Mistura said he hoped progress would be made not only on a fresh constitutional settlement for a post-war Syria, but also “the Working Group on the release of detainees and abductees, the handover of bodies and the identification of missing people”, which had met again last week in Tehran, he said, adding that “we keep urging for the first tangible results. Many, many people in Syria are waiting for that.”

He said objections from Damascus were holding up the committee’s launch, saying the Government objected to the 50-member delegation put together by the UN, representing Syria experts, civil society, tribal leaders and women, among others.

Turning to conditions on the ground for the millions of Syrians displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance after more than seven years of brutal fighting, he said “a catastrophe has so far been averted in Idlib, and the Russian-Turkish memorandum of understanding appears to be being implemented. Major strides have been taken in defeating terrorism and this should continue to be a priority.”

The Envoy told the Council that “we still have a very intense and hopefully fruitful month ahead. I am not laying down the charge until the last hour of the last day of my mandate.”

[World population set to grow another 2.2 billion by 2050: UN survey](#)

The world’s population is set to grow by 2.2 billion between now and 2050, the UN said on Wednesday, and more than half of that growth – 1.3 billion – is likely to be in sub-Saharan Africa, where women’s rights are hampered by limited access to healthcare and education, along with “entrenched gender discrimination”.

Monica Ferro, Director of the [UN Population Fund \(UNFPA\)](#) in Geneva, said the trend globally is towards smaller families, indicating that more people are making choices about exactly how many children they want, or can afford to raise.

Despite the gradual transition to lower fertility rates, which began in Europe in the late 19th century, no country can claim that all their citizens enjoy reproductive rights at all times, Ms Ferro told journalists at a press briefing. “No matter if it is a high fertility-rate country or low fertility-rate country, in both of them, you will find individuals and couples who say they don’t have the number of children they want. They either have too many or too few.”

In 43 countries, women have more than 4 children

According to UNFPA’s [State of World Population 2018](#), there are 43 countries where women have more than four or more children, and 38 of these are in Africa.

In all but five East African countries, fewer than half of all women surveyed, said they would prefer not to have any more children.

If UNFPA’s predictions are correct, Africa’s share of the world population will grow from 17 per cent in 2017, to 26 per cent in 2050.

Staying with the African continent, fertility rates are “significantly lower” in cities than in rural areas, the report indicates. In Ethiopia, for example, women have around 2.1 children in cities, whereas they have around five in the rest of the country.

Bigger families in conflict zones

Underlining the link between conflict and insecurity with bigger families, the UNFPA data also shows that Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Timor-Leste and Yemen have higher fertility rates than the overall average of 2.5 children per woman.

The UNFPA official urged all countries to implement a range of policies and programmes that would increase the “reproductive choices” of their populations.

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Monica Ferro, Chief, UNFPA Geneva

“In developing countries, 671 million women have chosen to use modern contraception,” Ms Ferro said. “But at the same time, we know that 250 million in the developing world want to control their fertility, and lack access to modern contraceptive methods.”

Prioritizing quality maternal healthcare for all is key, according to the UN report, which highlights the need for access to modern contraceptives, better sex education, and an emphasis on changing male stereotyping of women.

Couples who want to have more children should also be helped to do so, Ms Ferro said, explaining that economic barriers which preventing this from happening could be better addressed, through measures such as affordable child care.

France and Norway had seen their birth rates pick up after taking such steps in recent decades, the UNFPA official said.

Nonetheless, many developing countries lack the resources or political security they require to improve reproductive health and rights for all.

They “are struggling hard to meet the demand for education, the demand for jobs, the demand for even having healthcare services that are accessible to everyone,” Ms Ferro said. “What the report tries to show is that in these countries, the unmet need for family planning is typically very high.”

Reproductive rights have improved ‘substantially’

In the nearly 25 years since the landmark International Conference on Population and Development was endorsed by 179 Governments, people’s reproductive rights have “substantially improved around the world”, Ms Ferro said.

She noted that States agreed then that it was important for couples and individuals to decide the number, spacing and timing of their children, and that such decisions were made free from discrimination, coercion or violence.

A similar commitment is reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals agenda, agreed by the international community in 2015.

Nonetheless, hundreds of thousands of women continue to suffer from the failure to implement this programme of action, the UNFPA official insisted.

“Every year, 300,000 women die during pregnancy or childbirth because they have no choices in maternal healthcare; every day, thousands of girls are forced into child and early marriage and are victims of female genital mutilation. They have no choices.”