

'Put an end to the death penalty now', urges Guterres, marking World Day

Progress made toward eliminating the death penalty has been “marred by setbacks,” said [United Nations Secretary-General](#) António Guterres in a statement on Wednesday, marking the 16th World Day Against the Death Penalty.

He noted that hundreds of offenders – often impoverished, women or hailing from minority groups – have been executed without legal representation or transparent criminal proceedings, which might have spared them from the death penalty.

“In some countries, people are sentenced to death in secret trials, without due process, increasing the potential for error or abuse” – UN chief Guterres

Some 170 States have abolished or put a stay on executions, since the UN [General Assembly's](#) first call for a moratorium on its use, in 2007. Mr. Guterres noted the lack of transparency in some countries where the death penalty is still used, underscoring its incompatibility with human rights standards.

Mr. Guterres said he was “deeply disturbed” in particular, by the number of juvenile offenders being executed. Only last week, Zeinab Sekaanvand Lokran of Iran, was executed for killing her husband, when she was 17, despite a trial marred by irregularities.

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These comments echo those of UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Andrew Gilmour. In an interview with UN News last November, he said there was “far too much secrecy, and it’s quite indicative of the fact that although many countries are giving up the practice, those that retain it, nevertheless feel that they have something to hide.”

He noted the majority of executions today are carried out in China, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Guterres concluded with a call for all nations to abolish the practice of executions. “I call on those remaining, to join the majority and put an end to the death penalty now,” he added.

Disasters: UN report shows climate change causing 'dramatic rise' in economic losses

Climate-related and geophysical disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis have killed 1.3 million people over the last 20 years and left a further 4.4 billion injured, homeless or in need of emergency assistance, UN experts said on Wednesday.

The [findings](#), published by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction ([UNISDR](#)), also show that people in low- and middle-income countries are seven times more likely to die from natural disasters than those in developed nations.

"This puts a big emphasis on the need to...make sure that we curb greenhouse gas emissions," said Ricardo Mena, UNISDR Chief, Supporting and Monitoring Sendai Framework Implementation Branch.

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Failing to do this, risks letting climate-related hazards get out of control, he told journalists in Geneva, before calling for greater investment in disaster risk-reduction measures, "so that we do not allow for countries to create new risk".

In terms of the impact of disasters on the global economy between 1998 and 2017, affected countries reported direct losses of \$2,908 billion. That's more than twice what was lost in the previous two decades.

Illustrating the growing threat from climate change, extreme weather events now account for 77 per cent of total economic losses, \$2,245 billion, the report notes.

This represents a "dramatic rise" of 151 per cent compared with losses reported between 1978 and 1997, which amounted to \$895 billion.

Poorer countries most vulnerable, worst-hit

The increased vulnerability of poorer countries to disasters is illustrated by the fact that, in the last 20 years, only one officially high-income territory – the island of Puerto Rico – has featured in a league table of the top 10 economic losses as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP).

Last September, devastation in the US-dependency caused by Hurricane Maria contributed to overall losses since 1998, of more than \$71 billion; the

equivalent of 12.2 per cent of Puerto Rico's GDP.

Apart from Cuba, which is classified as an upper-middle income country in the 20-year review, the other top 10 worst-hit nations, as a percentage of their output, are all lower-income.

Haiti – where a deadly 5.9 magnitude earthquake struck the north-west of the island just four days ago – recorded the highest losses, at 17.5 per cent of GDP.

In terms of fatalities from disasters, the report indicates that more than 747,000 people – 56 per cent of the total – died in the last two decades during major seismic events, a total of 563 earthquakes and related tsunamis.

Overall, however, more than 90 per cent of all disasters in the last 20 years were in fact floods, storms, droughts and other extreme weather events.

Heatwaves are next climate change 'explosion'

Heatwaves are an increasing global threat for which solutions need to be found in the next five to 10 years, warned report co-author Professor Debarati Guha, from the Institute of Health and Society (IRSS), part of the Université Catholique de Louvain ([UCL](#)).

"The next one that is going to hit us with an explosion is heatwaves," she said. "It's going to be both in poor countries, remember, human beings have a limit, a thermal resistance limit...it is also going to be a huge problem in the wealthier countries."

"We emphasize the need to reduce existing risk to strengthen the resilience of people and nations. Otherwise the success of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is going to be a very elusive target", UNISDR's Ricardo Mena said.

[Start nurturing your mental health 'at an early age' urges UN chief](#)

Worldwide, it is estimated that one in five adolescents experience mental health challenges, though most remain underdiagnosed and undertreated. Marking Mental Health Day on Wednesday, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) is focusing on the psychological well-being of young people aged 10 to 14, to stave off conditions that can impact their lives deep into adulthood.

"Poor mental health during adolescence has an impact on educational achievement and increases the risk of alcohol and substance use and violent

behavior,” said UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#), in a statement, stressing that many children and teenagers caught up in conflicts and disasters worldwide, are particularly at risk of psychological distress.

According to WHO, half of all mental illnesses begin by the age of 14, but most cases go undetected and untreated. Depression is one of the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents and suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15 to 29 year-olds.

The harmful use of alcohol and illicit drugs among adolescents is a major issue in many countries and can lead to self-destructive behaviour such as unsafe sex or dangerous driving. Eating disorders are also of concern.

“A great deal of mental health conditions are both preventable and treatable, especially if we start looking after our mental health at an early age,” said Mr. Guterres.

Referring to the commitments of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, he regretted that, while Member States agreed collectively to “leave no one behind”, “those struggling with mental health problems are still being marginalized”.

WHO notes that “evidence is growing that promoting and protecting adolescent mental health benefits not just adolescents’ health, in the short- and the long-term, but also economies and society as whole, with healthy young adults able to make greater contributions to the workforce, their families and communities”.

If we change our attitude to mental health, we change the world. –
UN chief António Guterres

Among the various actions that Governments can take, WHO recommends investing in: greater integration of mental health into broader health and social care systems, under the umbrella of universal health coverage; mental health resilience-building through parents and teachers; and psycho-social provision in schools and community spaces, especially in hardship contexts such as conflict and natural disaster settings.

“The United Nations is committed to creating a world where by 2030 everyone, everywhere has someone to turn to in support of their mental health, in a world free of stigma and discrimination,” said the UN chief.

“If we change our attitude to mental health – we change the world. It is time to act on mental health.”

UN refugee agency ramps up support for Venezuelans, praises 'extraordinary solidarity' of Colombia

With the help of the UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)), Colombia is showing "extraordinary solidarity" towards Venezuelans displaced amid the country's on-going economic and political crisis, said agency chief, Filippo Grandi on Tuesday.

With over 4,000 Venezuelans entering Colombia each day, intending to either stay there or push further south, neighboring countries are struggling to meet the needs of refugees and migrants.

On a visit to Colombia and other Latin American countries, the High Commissioner for Refugees called the situation "shocking," and praised Colombia for sheltering and caring for Venezuelans during critical times.

"I am impressed by Colombia's efforts to document, feed, shelter, and care for thousands of Venezuelans arriving every day," Grandi said. "This extraordinary solidarity needs more international support."

UNHCR reports that nearly two million Venezuelans have fled their country since 2015, largely compelled to leave in search of more security, income, and access to food and medicine.

A family of Venezuelan children and their older Colombian-born relatives stand outside their wooden house in Barrio Camilo Daza in the city of Cúcuta, Colombia.

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With around one million Venezuelans now in Colombia, local governments are working to ensure they can legally access essential services, resources, and obtain legal work permits.

A common stop for Venezuelan migrants is the Divina Providencia community kitchen; a centre located in the North of Santander region, the busiest border crossing in Colombia. Some 80 to 100 Colombian and Venezuelans volunteer serving 3,000 free breakfasts and 3,000 free lunches every day.

Support from UNHCR has facilitated the availability of medical and legal consultations at the centre, but the influx of Venezuelans has strained the region's health services. To boost capacity, the agency has supported the creation of a new health centre aimed at providing first aid and family planning care.

Mr. Grandi will follow the flow of Venezuelans in the coming days, from

Argentina to Peru and Ecuador, to assess migrant and refugee needs, regional implications, and discuss best approaches to be taken by host countries.

Consequences of severe global funding shortages for refugees and migrants 'all too real', warns UNHCR

Efforts to assist the tens of millions who've been forced from their homes are being increasingly constrained by severely limited funds, a new report from the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) has warned, urging greater international attention and support.

Funds available to help refugees and migrants are steadily falling, said the agency on Tuesday, while the number of those displaced has been rising by the year.

"Based on contributions to date we expect funding for 2018 to meet just 55 per cent of the \$8.2 billion that is needed," Babar Baloch, a UNHCR spokesperson, [told](#) reporters in Geneva on Tuesday, noting that in 2017 and 2016, the figures stood at 56.6 and 58 per cent, respectively.

"The consequences for refugees and internally displaced people in particular are becoming all too real."

The consequences for refugees and internally displaced people in particular are becoming all too real – *UNHCR spokesperson*

Globally, malnutrition rates among refugees are rising and health facilities are increasingly overcrowded, with children missing out on education. In addition, there are growing protection risks because of shortages of personnel to deal with unaccompanied children or victims of sexual violence, added the UNHCR spokesperson.

In a new report on [underfunded situations](#), UNHCR notes that six countries facing refugee and displacement crises – Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Syria and Somalia – are particularly badly hit.

In the case of Burundi – the lowest funded globally – only 28 per cent of the \$206 million needed has been received, which is having an acute impact on the hundreds of thousands of refugees in need.

In conflict-affected DRC, and countries hosting Congolese refugees, limited

funding has hit humanitarianists' ability to help them support themselves, especially young people, and gain access to education and health. There, only 31 per cent of the \$369 million needed has been received.

Similarly, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Somalia are also reeling under the effects of the severe funding crunch, having received only 32 per cent, 33 per cent and 37 per cent of what's needed respectively. In Syria – where needs are almost \$2 billion to support close to 12 million internally displaced persons and refugees – only 35 per cent is available.



UN Photo/Mark Garten

An aerial view of Za'atari refugee camp near Mafraq, Jordan, host to tens of thousands of Syrians displaced by conflict. 7 December 2012.

Need for generous, timely and flexible contributions

To ensure response to the crisis does not falter, UNHCR has called for contributions that are “generous, timely and flexible.”

Flexible funding, said the UN agency, will allow it to adapt its programmes to meet the rapidly evolving needs and assist populations most at risk. Such funding will also facilitate continuation of operations from one calendar year into the next, or from one sector to another depending on the requirements.

“Ideally, all funds raised should be flexible in their implementation period; meaning, UNHCR should be able to carry funds to the following year,” the [report](#) notes.

This will help make operations more predictable, and allow cash to be spent when, and where, it is most needed.