

# Top UN official in Nigeria condemns killing of abducted aid worker; calls for immediate release of two others

The UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Nigeria, [Edward Kallon](#), [condemned](#) on Monday the killing of an aid worker who had been held captive by a non-state armed group in north-east Nigeria since March.

Saifura Hussaini Ahmed Khorsa, a 25-year-old midwife and nurse who worked with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the town of Rann, near the border with Cameroon, had been abducted on 1 March following an attack on the area, by armed extremists, in which dozens were killed.

Among the casualties that day, were [three UN aid workers](#): Emmanuel Yawe Sonter and Ibrahim Lawan who worked with the [International Organization for Migration](#) (IOM) and Dr. Izuogu Onyedikachi who worked with the [UN Children's Fund](#) (UNICEF). Two other female aid workers, who worked with UNICEF and ICRC, were also kidnapped during that incident and remain in captivity.

View of Rann, north-east Nigeria, where over 60,000 internally displaced persons are settled. OCHA/Yasmina Guerda.

"The killing of Ms. Hussaini, a young, dedicated and passionate midwife and humanitarian, is a cowardly, heinous and despicable act," said Mr. Kallon. "Our deepest condolences go to her family, including her two young children, and friends. The United Nations calls on authorities to ensure the perpetrators are brought to justice and account. The United Nations also calls for the immediate release of the two aid workers who are still being held."

The Humanitarian Coordinator stated that "this incident demonstrates the severe challenges that Nigeria continues to face, but it will not deter the international community from providing aid to millions of Nigerians caught up in the conflict in the north-east", adding that the UN "stands in solidarity with the humanitarian community".

According to the UN humanitarian affairs office ([OCHA](#)) the international response in Rann is providing life-saving assistance – including food, safe water, shelter and medical care – to over 60,000 internally displaced persons, and millions in the rest of the north-east of the country. Close to 3,000 aid workers are present in the north-east, the majority of whom are Nigerian nationals.

The humanitarian crisis in Nigeria's north-east is one of the most severe in the world today, with 7.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, 6.1 million of whom targeted for humanitarian assistance in 2018.

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# Keeping order in the General Assembly: The strange saga of how a Viking gavel was broken, then lost, then carved again

If you're a keen observer of the United Nations [General Assembly](#), you may have noticed the body's President wields a very unusual looking gavel. It is a gift from Iceland, and there's a very interesting story behind it.

Iceland's democracy is believed to be the oldest in the world: the country's parliament, *Althing*, sat for the first time in 930, making it the "grandfather" of modern parliaments.

Given their democratic heritage, Icelanders decided that the person who presides today over the "world parliament" – the UN – should be "armed" with an Icelandic gavel.

The many conference rooms at UN Headquarters in New York have a standard small wooden gavel. But the gavel used in the General Assembly Hall – where the UN's [193 Member States](#) gather to hash out the business of the world – used in the is unmissable: large, ornate and brownish-red.

The President's gavel is an integral element of official GA sessions. It is used to declare the beginning and end of meetings; the approval of the agenda; the election of officials; and the adoption of resolutions. It is also employed forcefully at times, to bring the gilded chamber to order.

Former Permanent Representative of Iceland to the UN, Hjálmar W. Hannesson, sums up the history of the striking object, this way:

"In 1952, when the new UN Headquarters building was opened on the bank of the East River, here in New York, Mr. Thor Thors, Iceland's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations, presented the gavel to the President of General Assembly. Because of this, our gift was nicknamed "Thors' gavel."

The gavel "served" in the General Assembly for eight years. But then: "In October 1960, our gavel made global headlines. Because it ... broke. To be more precise, it was broken by the then President of the General Assembly, the Irishman, Frederick Boland.

Ambassador Boland wanted to calm down the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, and in particular, to stop him banging his shoe on the table."

There was an incredible noise in the hall and Boland tried to put things in

order, so he hit the desk with his gavel and broke it. “

According to press-reports, after this incident, many delegations, in solidarity with Boland, sent him dozens of replacement gavels for his consideration.

However, at the UN it was decided to ask Iceland to make an exact copy of the broken gavel. Unlike the original, the copy managed to hold out at the UN for almost half a century, said Ambassador *Hannesson*:

“But this is not the end of the story. In 2005, it turned out that the (replacement) gavel... disappeared. A senior UN official informed us about this, and we immediately responded that Iceland would make a second copy of the gavel. This time, the author was one of the most famous carvers in the country, *Sigrídur Kristjánsdóttir*.”

The Government turned to Ms. Christiansdóttir with a request: taking into account the previous incident, she was asked to make the gavel especially sturdy. She chose pear tree wood. Was it the right choice? Although it's now 2018 – let's wait and see.

“A small tablet with a brief inscription in Icelandic and Latin is affixed to the gavel,” explained Ambassador Hannesson. “This is an excerpt from one of the Icelandic sagas, which dates back to the 10th century.”

“During this period, we adopted Christianity, which contributed to the cessation of internal strife and unification of the country. And one of the leaders said then: ‘Society must be built on the basis of laws.’ This phrase now decorates our gavel.”

Stylistically, “Thors’ gavel” does not look much like an instrument of peace, making one think more perhaps, of the Viking era of pillage and conquest. But as history shows, even in the world's parliament at UN Headquarters in New York, from time to time, a bit of old-fashioned Viking force is needed, to bring world leaders to heel.

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## [Human Rights Council hears plea for victims of ‘brutal’ sexual violence in South Sudan](#)

The plight of South Sudan's women and girls “should no longer be ignored”, UN investigators told the [UN Human Rights Council](#) on Monday, citing the disturbing testimonies of sexual abuse victims who have been treated by soldiers and militias as the “spoils” of the more than five-year conflict.

“The Commission...once again heard testimonies of wanton killings and numerous accounts of brutal sexual violence,” said Yasmin Sooka, Chairperson of the [Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan](#).

“Women in South Sudan have been treated by government soldiers and armed actors to the conflict, including local militias, as spoils of the conflict.”

In Yei county, women community leaders told the UN panel that many had been abducted by government soldiers and raped. The resulting stigma the women faced led them to abandon their babies, Ms. Sooka said, their testimonies marking yet more trauma linked to the infighting that grew out of the country’s declaration of independence, in 2011.

Women in South Sudan have been treated by government soldiers and armed actors...including local militias, as spoils of the conflict –  
*Yasmin Sooka, Commission Chairperson*

In her update to the Human Rights Council, the UN-appointed rights expert also noted that Government soldiers attacked a college in Goli, Yei county, in May, raping young women and leaving 10 people dead – including five schoolchildren.

In addition to highlighting testimonies of killings and sexual violence in South Sudan, the UN panel also found food shortages at crisis levels.

According to its findings, six million people face “desperate” food insecurity – a 20 per cent increase from last year, Ms. Sooka said.

“Given the acute levels of food insecurity in the country, one would imagine that the Government of South Sudan would do its utmost to facilitate unimpeded access to UNMISS and the humanitarian organizations,” she explained.

“Instead, there is constant bureaucratic stalling of access and more alarmingly, targeted attacks against humanitarian convoys which makes it almost impossible to deliver emergency relief.”

In a call for the Government to tackle impunity, the UN Commission chair welcomed a recent ruling by a national military tribunal in the high-profile Terrain Case, in which 10 soldiers received sentences for their part in the murder, rape, sexual harassment, theft and armed robbery of aid workers, some of them foreign nationals.

“Under pressure by the international community, the Government of South Sudan was able to muster the political will to combat impunity,” Ms. Sooka said, before noting that “only the foot soldiers were prosecuted, while those with command responsibility have gone unpunished”.

It should be remembered, she continued, that UN forces documented the gang rape of more than 217 South Sudanese women by Government forces in 2016 and none of the perpetrators has been held accountable or received any

compensation for their ordeal.

It is a matter of regret, the UN Commission chair continued, that President Salva Kiir has yet to sign fast-track the establishment of a special court to address impunity in South Sudan, as it had recommended in March 2018.

“The failure to punish the perpetrators of serious crimes in South Sudan has led to many to believing that they can continue to commit these crimes with total impunity,” she said.

Established by the Human Rights Council in March 2016 according to [resolution 31/20](#), the UN Commission has a broad mandate to investigate wrongdoing in South Sudan, and seek to clarify who is carrying out alleged gross rights violations.

Since 2013, South Sudan’s civil war has led to the displacement of more than 1.7 million people inside South Sudan and created 2.5 million refugees – including more than 65,000 unaccompanied minors.

In response to the Commission’s findings, South Sudan insisted that the security situation in the country had improved and would continue to do so, following the signing of the Revitalized Peace Agreement, just last week.

At its core was a permanent ceasefire agreement, according to Paulino Wanwilla Unango, Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, who also noted that sporadic skirmishes had also occurred.

Turning to the UN Commission’s call for a hybrid court, the minister said that a ministerial committee had been set up for this purpose, but that discussions had been superseded by the need to push ahead with the peace deal.

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## [Senior UN official calls on Israel to stop demolition of Palestinian village in the West Bank](#)

The United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, [Nickolay Mladenov](#), [expressed concern](#) on Monday “at the intention of the Israeli authorities to demolish the Bedouin village of Khan Al-Ahmar/Abu Al-Helu” in the West Bank, where 181 Palestinians currently live, more than half of whom are children.

“I call on the authorities not to proceed with the demolition and to cease efforts to relocate Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank”, said

Mr. Mladenov, denouncing such actions as “contrary to international law” and warning that they “could undermine the chances for the establishment of a viable, contiguous Palestinian state.”

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), Khan Al-Ahmar/Abu Al-Helu, located in the outskirts of East Jerusalem, is one of 18 communities located in – or next to – an area slated in part for an Israeli settlement reorganization plan that would reportedly create a continuous built-up area, between the Ma’ale Adummim settlement and East Jerusalem.

On 24 May, the Israeli High Court of Justice rejected the community’s petition to prevent demolition, and nearly all of Khan Al-Ahmar/Abu Al-Helu’s structures are now at immediate risk of being torn down, including the school – built with donor support – which serves several communities in the area.

On 1 June, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, [Jamie McGoldrick](#), issued [a statement](#) noting that “Israel’s obligations as an occupying power to protect the residents of Khan al Ahmar are clear”.

“Should the Israeli authorities choose to implement the outstanding demolition orders in the community and force the people to leave, they would not only generate significant humanitarian hardship but also commit one of the grave breaches of international humanitarian law,” stated Mr. McGoldrick.

In July, the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)) also [denounced](#) the planned demolitions as breaching international humanitarian law as they would likely result in the forcible relocation of dozens of families.

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## [‘Wind of hope’ blowing through Horn of Africa says UN chief, as Ethiopia and Eritrea sign historic peace accord](#)

There is a powerful wind of hope blowing across the Horn of Africa region, said UN chief António Guterres on Sunday, in Saudi Arabia to witness the signing of a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, ending decades of simmering conflict.

Saudi Arabia facilitated the agreement, and in a message on Twitter, the Foreign Ministry said that the accord, signed in Jeddah “is a historic milestone for the peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and will contribute to strengthening security and stability in the region at large”.

"The signature of the peace agreement between the President of Eritrea and the Prime Minister of Ethiopia is indeed a historic event," said the Secretary-General, speaking at a press conference following the signing in Saudi Arabia's second-largest city, on the Red Sea coast, with Foreign Minister Adel Aljubeir.

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*UN chief, António Guterres*

"We have seen a conflict that has lasted for decades, ending, and that has a very important meaning in a world where we see, unfortunately, so many conflicts multiplying, and lasting forever," added Mr. Guterres.

He expressed his "deep appreciation" for the role played by Saudi Arabia, before paying tribute "on one hand to the courage, the vision, the wisdom of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia – who has had the capacity to overcome enormous resistance from the past and open a new chapter in the history of his country – and also the way the President of Eritrea has promptly responded to his peace initiatives."

The thaw in relations between the neighbouring countries, who fought a bloody, unresolved war in the late 1990s, began in earnest in June, when Ethiopia's newly-elected leader, Abiy Ahmed, made peace overtures to his counterpart, which have now come to fruition.

Seizing on the implications for the whole region, Mr. Guterres said that the agreement meant that "there is a wind of hope blowing in the Horn of Africa. It is not only the peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea – it is the fact that tomorrow and the day after tomorrow we will have, here in Saudi Arabia, the President of Djibouti and the President of Eritrea – two countries that have also been at odds with each other."

According to news reports, Eritrea and Djibouti announced on Friday that they would also normalize diplomatic relations with each other following a falling out on the border, in 2008, which left several dead and resulted in prisoners being taken on both sides.

The UN chief also noted the peace agreement between the President and his former Vice President in South Sudan, that was signed on Thursday – in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa – as another indicator of real diplomatic movement across the Horn of Africa and its borders.

"I want to say that this window of hope is enormously important in a world where, unfortunately, hope has been very scarce," added the Secretary-General.