

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.

Drastic deterioration in security across Burkina Faso as 70,000 flee their homes in past two months, UN warns

The landlocked West African country of Burkina Faso is facing “unprecedented” displacement, triggered by armed groups and intercommunal clashes, and exacerbated by long-term food insecurity, UN aid officials [said](#) on Tuesday.

According to the UN humanitarian coordination office, [OCHA](#), more than 70,000 have fled their homes in the last two months. Reports indicate that armed groups have also burnt schools and killed innocent civilians.

Increased insecurity, violence, a continuing food crisis, floods and

epidemics are among the factors that have plunged Burkina Faso into a full-blown humanitarian crisis, with civilians traumatized after bearing witness to brutal attacks, and many have lost family members and most of their possessions, said an agency [press release](#).

OCHA's spokesperson Jens Laerke described a rise in intercommunal clashes since the second half of last year. "[These are] clashes between communities and armed groups which are fighting each other, fighting Government forces and attacking civilians. That really took off at the beginning of this year, there were some very violent clashes in the beginning of January", he said, briefing journalists in Geneva.

On Tuesday, humanitarian partners said that US\$100 million is needed to reach 898,000 people this year. Complementing this, the UN Central Emergency Response Fund ([CERF](#)) allocated \$4 million to boost assistance to internally displaced people and host communities, and to also provide services for 15,500 women and girls.

The UN's Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator, Ursula Mueller, who ended a four-day visit to the country on Tuesday, said that those funds will "make an immediate difference for displaced people, most of whom are women and children".

Today, around 1.2 million people are in need of assistance in Burkina Faso's Sahel, North, North-Centre and Eastern regions.

The \$100 million appeal to assist 900,000 of those hardest-hit in the landlocked country is only 16 per cent funded, a month after it was launched.

Displacement and lack of basic services

As international displacement rates continue to grow, the country is already hosting 25,000 refugees, most of whom are from neighbouring Mali, to the north, which has also been wracked by instability, extremist violence, and clashes involving armed groups. 93 per cent of Malian refugees depend on humanitarian assistance to survive.

Ongoing violence has forced the closure of more than 1,100 schools, depriving around 150,000 children of education. Some 120,000 people have no access to medical care with many health centres shuttered or providing only minimal services.

After witnessing first-hand the depth of the humanitarian needs, Mr. Mueller reiterated the importance of providing "shelter, water, food and healthcare timely and sufficiently" to thousands of families who continue to flee due to persistent insecurity.

"Burkina Faso authorities and humanitarian actors have quickly provided assistance, however, more has to be done to meet growing needs of the affected people wherever they may be", she said, adding that the "neutrality of aid workers" must be respected.

The UN agency stressed that more sustained funding is needed to ensure that

people in the hardest-hit areas are reached with aid. Last year's Humanitarian Response Plan remained severely underfunded, with only [55.2 per cent](#) of the requirements met.

Break taboo around menstruation, act to end 'disempowering' discrimination, says UN experts

"Persistent harmful socio-cultural norms, stigma, misconceptions and taboos around menstruation, continue to lead to exclusion and discrimination of women and girls", [said](#) the independent human rights experts, ahead of [International Women's Day](#) on 8 March.

Despite recent campaigns by women to challenge menstruation taboos and increasing attention to the issue of menstruation in the media, research, policy-making, and cultural discussion, they underscored the need for "more efforts to address challenges faced by women and girls".

In some countries, said the experts, menstruating women continue to be viewed as "contaminated and impure", often restricted and forbidden to engage in activities like touching water or cooking, attending religious and cultural ceremonies or other community activities.

Menstruating women and girls can even be banished to outside sheds according to custom, where they suffer in cold and isolation, often at risk of life-threatening illness and attack.

"The patriarchal control exerted to constraint women's behavior and mobility during menstruation undermines their agency and equality" the experts underscored. "When combined with the stigma and shame that women and girls are made to feel during that time, it is truly disempowering."

Many live without any privacy to wash, or access to safe, clean toilets or even separate sanitation facilities at work, or in the classroom, or when they're visiting other public institutions.

Additionally, sanitary hygiene products are often inaccessible or too costly, particularly for those living in poverty and crisis situations As States' policies rarely address these issues. Vulnerable women can be forced to use improvised, unhygienic materials that may cause leaking and infection, putting their health at serious risk.

"Stigma around menstruation has significant health impacts on women's and girls' health", the experts highlighted, pointing out that some providers are prone to dismiss serious issues related to menstruation, citing that it can

take several years to diagnose endometriosis and dysmenorrhea – painful disorders that can also affect fertility.

Due to stigma and a lack of sexual education, menstruation knowledge remains limited leaving many girls with negative and ambivalent feelings and experiencing psycho-social stress, which also impacts their ability to learn, said the experts.

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In addition, some countries link the first menstruation cycle to being ready to marry, increasing the risks of adolescent pregnancy, limiting girls’ education and work opportunities.

And the situation spirals further in educational institutions and workplaces as a lack of accommodation for menstruating women and girls’ health, such as allowing rest periods, “has an impact on school and job attendance, and thus affects women’s economic participation and advancement, undermining gender equality”, added the experts.

Further progress needed

“More needs to be done globally to address the menstrual health needs of women and girls and transform the systems, norms and attitudes to support women’s and girls’ menstrual health and well-being” the experts argued, stating that “a global shift in cultures” is needed to respect menstruation, acknowledge it as a human rights issue and “eliminate discrimination, shame and stigma too often attached to it”.

Here’s how the UN is working to reduce discrimination and stigma surrounding menstruation

- Though outlawed since 2005, girls continue to be banished to sheds in rural Nepal, called “chhaupadi”. The UN Trust Fund, in partnership with Restless Development Nepal, is [combatting](#) this harmful practice by educating young people and dispelling the myths about menstruation.
- The [UN Population Fund](#) (UNFPA) [supports sexual and reproductive health](#) services around the world, including by distributing “dignity kits” in communities affected by [humanitarian emergencies](#), that contain menstrual hygiene products and support [comprehensive sex education](#) programmes.
- [UN Children’s Fund](#) (UNICEF)-supported [programmes](#) have:
 - Taught more than 10,000 boys and girls in Bolivia about menstrual

health and hygiene.

- Used community outlets and radio stations in Niger to promote, discuss and debate menstrual health, including sketches and songs in French and Hausa.
 - Distributed almost 100,000 water, sanitation and hygiene kits in Nigeria, including reusable menstrual hygiene pads.
 - Partnered in Kenya with the Government, civil society and private sector to expand access to a wider range of absorbent materials and ensuring stronger product regulation for health and safety.
 - Worked with the Ministry of Education in Zambia to integrate water, sanitation and menstrual hygiene management into its strategic policies and plans, including girls' health at school.
 - Worked with the Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars in Indonesia, producing guidance on menstrual health and hygiene management based on religious teachings, including a comic book and video to share knowledge, and discourage teasing of girls.
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[Israeli security forces' response to Gaza protests 'a recipe for more bloodshed', says UN expert](#)

Since the beginning of the year, Israeli security forces have responded to protests along Gaza's border fence with tear gas, rubber coated bullets and live ammunition that have caused death, injury and fear, which the UN's independent human rights expert on the region described on Tuesday as "a recipe for more bloodshed".

[Michael Lynk](#), the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, [said in a statement](#) that on 8 February live ammunition killed boys aged 14 and 17 during a protest.

Just four days later, a 16-year-old boy was hit in the head by a tear gas canister: "According to human rights organisations, the three boys posed no threat to Israeli forces", the statement added.

And on 22 February, another 14-year-old boy was killed by live ammunition during a protest east of Gaza city.

"We must ensure legal accountability and end impunity for the excessive use of force against largely peaceful Palestinian demonstrators, and the resulting arbitrary deprivation of life," said the Special Rapporteur. "This is a grave violation of their right to life and it abrogates their guaranteed freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association."

Mr. Lynk welcomed the [findings](#) and recommendations on [28 February](#) of the [Commission of Inquiry](#), mandated by the [Human Rights Council](#) last May, to investigate all alleged violations and abuses of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

“It found reasonable grounds to believe that, in all but two of the 189 fatalities investigated, the use of live ammunition by Israeli security forces against demonstrators was unlawful,” Mr. Lynk asserted, adding his support to the Commission’s call for accountability for “those who drafted and approved the rules of engagement which permitted this illegal use of lethal fire.”

Among the dead were 35 children, three paramedics and two journalists. Another 6,106 demonstrators were wounded during the demonstrations.

The UN expert reiterated that international human rights instruments pertaining to law enforcement state that firearms may only be used against persons if there is an imminent threat to life or risk of serious injury.

Moreover, in the context of an occupation, the killings at the Gaza fence resulted from the unlawful use of force, which “might well constitute wilful killings of the protected population” – a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and potentially a war crime under the [Rome Statute](#).

“We must ensure legal accountability and end impunity for the excessive use of force against largely peaceful Palestinian demonstrators, and the resulting arbitrary deprivation of life,” stressed the UN expert.

Calling the killings “a grave violation of their right to life,” Mr. Lynk said, “it abrogates their guaranteed freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association.”

We must ensure legal accountability and end impunity for the excessive use of force against largely peaceful Palestinian demonstrators –*UN rights expert*

He also endorsed the Commission’s recommendations that Gaza’s de facto authorities, the extremist group Hamas, which has controlled the region since 2006, failed to prevent the indiscriminate use of incendiary kites and balloons, causing “economic damage and civilian fear in southern Israel”.

The Special Rapporteur welcomed the Commission’s attention to the dire living conditions in Gaza that have fuelled the large demonstrations over the past year and endorsed its call that Israel immediately lift the Gaza blockade that has repeatedly been described by recent UN Secretaries-General as a prohibited form of collective punishment of Gaza’s population.

He also pointed to the dire impact the blockade has posed on the Gazan health system, which has significantly contributed to the deteriorating quality of health in the Strip.

As the one-year anniversary nears of the beginning of the protests on 30 March, which Gazans refer to as the “Great March of Return”, and in view of the deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation, the Special Rapporteur fears an increase in violence if firm action is not taken toward accountability and justice.

“Continuing to suffocate Gaza is a blot on the world’s conscience and a recipe for more bloodshed,” Mr. Lynk said.

“Restoring Gaza and ensuring justice and accountability would give the region hope that a better Middle East is possible”, he concluded.

[UN’s AIDS agency ‘greatly encouraged’ by ‘functionally cured’ patient breakthrough](#)

The [UN agency](#) leading the global effort to end AIDS, said on Tuesday that a new case of a patient who has been “functionally cured” of HIV infection, is greatly encouraging, but there is still a long way to go before the illness can be eradicated.

The male patient, who was being treated for lymphatic cancer at a London hospital in the United Kingdom, underwent a stem cell transplant in 2016, with cells from a donor carrying a rare genetic resistance to the HIV virus.

Both his cancer and HIV went into remission, and 18 months on, he is no longer taking HIV drugs and all traces of infection have become undetectable, according to doctors treating him. Researchers reportedly say that it is too early, however, to say the patient has been fully cured.

“UNAIDS is greatly encouraged by the news that an HIV-positive man has been functionally cured of HIV”, said the agency [in a press statement](#).

“Although this breakthrough is complicated and much more work is needed, it gives us great hope for the future that we could potentially end AIDS with science, through a vaccine or a cure,” said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS.

“However, it also shows how far away we are from that point,” he added saying it emphasized “the absolute importance of continuing to focus HIV prevention and treatment efforts.”

Treatment 'not viable' for large numbers of patients

The agency stressed that as stem cell transplants are “highly complex, intensive and costly procedures with substantial side-effects”, they were not a “viable way of treating large numbers of people living with HIV.”

“However, the results do offer a greater insight for researchers working on HIV cure strategies and highlight the continuing importance of investing in scientific research and innovation,” added UNAIDS.

The so far anonymous London patient, is only the second reported case of a functional cure for HIV, the first being a patient in the German capital, Berlin, who received similar cancer treatment in 2007.

There is currently no cure, and UNAIDS is working to ensure that all people living with and affected by HIV have access to life-saving HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services.

In 2017 – the latest annual figures available – there were just under 37 million people living with HIV and 1.8 million people became newly infected with the virus. In the same year, almost 1 million people died of AIDS-related illnesses and 21.7 million people had access to treatment.

Stigma and discrimination against HIV, continue to hold back key vulnerable population groups such as sex-workers, transgender people, intravenous drug users and migrants, and only one in four, living with HIV, are aware of their status.

Marking World AIDS Day in November, [UN Secretary-General](#) António Guterres, said that the world stood at a “critical juncture”, and the direction of the response to the on-going epidemic, would determine whether or not the world could end AIDS by 2030, in line with the UNAIDS Fast-Track Strategy and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#).