

UN human rights chief regrets closure of Burundi office following Government pressure

In a [statement](#) released on Tuesday, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, announced her regret at the closure of the UN Human Rights Office in Burundi – which was set up more than two decades ago – at the insistence of the country's government.

The Burundian authorities suspended all cooperation with the Office in October 2016, in reaction to an independent [UN investigation](#) that held the government and its supporters responsible for crimes against humanity.

“Since the UN Human Rights Office in Burundi was established in 1995, we worked with the Government on peacebuilding, security sector reform, justice sector reform, and helped build institutional and civil society capacity on a whole host of human rights issues,” said Ms. Bachelet.

Two years after the investigation, in December last year, the Government claimed that the existence of the UN office was no longer justified, because Burundi had made sufficient progress in putting in place national mechanisms for the protection of human rights. However, Ms. Bachelet said that the Office continued to receive allegations of human rights violations and abuses, but was severely hampered in its ability to investigate them.

The Human Rights chief insisted that the reports produced by her Office were always developed in a constructive spirit, and expressed her disappointment at Burundi's lack of cooperation with the UN in recent years.

This extended to [threats to prosecute members](#) of an independent international Commission of Inquiry, and Burundi's Ambassador to the UN comparing the Commission Chair, Doudou Diène, to a participant in the slave trade.

The UN Human Rights Office in Burundi was set up in the context of massive human rights violations that took place following the assassination of then President Melchior Ndadaye, and helped to ensure that a human rights dimension formed part of the peace accords that ended civil war in the country, in 2000.

The Office also played a leading role in the establishment of the independent National Commission on Human Rights, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in legislative reforms, and in the emergence of strong civil society organizations. “Unfortunately,” said Ms. Bachelet, “many of these human rights gains have been seriously jeopardized since 2015.”

This was the year in which President Pierre Nkurunziza announced that he would seek a third term, reportedly seen by many Burundians as a breach of the constitution, and which led to an upsurge of violence in the country,

leaving hundreds dead and prompting around half a million people to flee the country.

In the statement, the UN rights chief paid tribute to the many human rights defenders and civil society in Burundi, many of whom have been detained or forced into exile, and called on the Government of Burundi to “cooperate with all relevant UN human rights mechanisms, including UN independent experts and human rights treaty bodies.”

Recreational cannabis poses ‘significant’ health challenges to youth: drugs control body

The UN-backed International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) warned on Tuesday that poorly regulated medical cannabis programmes could step-up the “recreational” use of the drug while diminishing public concern over its harmful effects.

“Legalization of cannabis for recreational purposes, as seen in a small number of countries, represents not only a challenge to the universal implementation of the treaties and the signatories to the treaties, but also a significant challenge to health and wellbeing, particularly among young people”, INCB President Viroj Sumyai said, following the publication of the body’s latest Annual Report.

The report, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the independent drugs control board, details the risks and benefits of the medical and scientific use of cannabis and cannabinoids.

With several US states and countries around the world having legalized marijuana for recreational use in recent years, it also looks in detail at the impact of that move, saying it can result in diversion to non-medical use and adversely affect public health.

Mr. Sumyai explained that there is “a great deal of misunderstanding about the safety, regulation and distribution of cannabis, particularly where recreational use has been legalized or medical cannabis programmes are expanding.”

INCB made clear its concern over legislative developments on the drugs non-medical use, which it maintains not only contravenes drug control conventions but also poses significant health risks.

“Our report’s focus on the use of cannabis and cannabinoids is coming at the

right time, with recent legislative developments in a number of countries”, Mr. Sumyai asserted. INCB remains committed to constructive dialogue with governments of countries where recreational cannabis has been legalized.

“There is limited knowledge of the way the international drug control system works”, he added. “It has been designed by States to safeguard public health by preventing drug abuse while ensuring access to important medicines.”

People ‘unnecessarily suffering’

Turning to pain management, the Board called on governments to end the unnecessary suffering of people who lack access to pain relief medicines. This, members say, will contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

“People are unnecessarily suffering pain and undergoing surgical procedures without anaesthesia because of the lack of access to controlled medicines in some parts of the world”, Mr. Sumyai affirmed.

However, he also warned that oversupplying controlled medicines carries its own risks: “In other places, uncontrolled access is leading to diversion and abuse”, he continued. “We need to ensure more even access to these pain relief medicines.”

A special supplement aimed at marking “progress on ensuring adequate access to international controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes”, examines what is currently in the works to ensure adequate access, and how governments can be helped to move the situation forward.

The supplement includes INCB’s first global assessment of access to psychotropic substances, some of which are being prescribed to treat anxiety and epilepsy, which illustrates a growing global consumption gap.

People are unnecessarily suffering pain and undergoing surgical procedures without anaesthesia – *INCB chief*

The report notes that 80 per cent of people with epilepsy live in low- and middle-income countries, where essential anti-epileptic medicines under international control, are either very hard to obtain or unknown.

In low-income countries with a limited number of doctors, INCB recommends that more health-care professionals, such as specially trained nurses, be allowed to prescribe controlled-substances.

While there has been virtually no diversion from international trade in “scheduled precursor chemicals” to the black market over the past 30 years, Mr. Sumyai stressed that non-scheduled chemicals “pose a significant challenge”.

The Board suggests that international policy discussions should address “designer” precursors and new psychoactive substances to prevent these

potentially harmful substances from reaching people.

“Today’s drug control challenges may seem daunting, but such challenges have been successfully overcome through cooperative efforts and political will”, he pointed out.

“That same spirit and commitment are needed today”, the INCB chief concluded.

‘Huge data gaps’ hampering ‘evidence-based’ national migration policies

Francesca Grum was addressing a key meeting at UN Headquarters in New York, convened in response to the UN’s [Global Compact](#) for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the first-ever global migration pact, which was adopted by more than 160 governments in December 2018. The agreement aims to ensure that the overall benefits of migration are optimized, whilst addressing risks and challenges, for individuals and communities in countries of origin, transit and destination.

The [First Objective](#) of the Compact calls for the collection and utilization of “accurate and disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policies”; commits signatory countries to strengthen the “global evidence base on international migration” under the guidance of the UN; and calls for a “comprehensive strategy for improving migration data at local, national, regional and global levels.”

Ms. Grum told the meeting that countries frequently ask UN Statistics for more information and requests on how to improve migration data – including information relating to the root causes and drivers of migration – and its impact on migrants’ origin, transit and destination countries. Better data is needed in order to bring about sustainable social and economic development, and national migrant data strategies are needed to inform good policies.

However, she went on to say that there are “several critical challenges” to be addressed before an effective global migration data programme can be developed. These include a lack of coordination amongst data providers, and insufficient capacity to produce, analyse and communicate data. Addressing these problems would involve guidance on the use of new technologies, sampling, and how to communicate data to the public and policymakers.

Ideally, said Ms. Grum, a global data migration programme would see improved capacity for data analysis; training assistance on data infrastructure; country, regional and international-level coordination; and the sharing of case studies and best practice examples. The senior statistician emphasised that the private sector, policy-makers and experts, must all be involved in the process, and that all UN guidance must be in line with each country’s

national strategy for the development of statistics.

[UN atomic watchdog chief updates governing body on key North Korean reactor](#)

Mr. Amano said the agency “has not observed any indications” of being in operation since early December, including any reprocessing activities at the Radiochemical Laboratory or construction in or around the light water reactor.

He added that the IAEA continued, however, to observe “indications of the ongoing use of the reported centrifuge enrichment facility.” Without access, “the Agency cannot confirm the nature and purpose of these activities,” he said.

For the past decade, the agency has been largely monitoring DPRK’s nuclear activities through satellite imagery. “I again call upon the DPRK to comply fully with its obligations under relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council and of the IAEA Board, to cooperate promptly with the Agency and to resolve all outstanding issues,” Mr. Amano stressed.

North Korea carried out six nuclear tests between 2006 and 2017, and in the wake of diplomatic efforts led by the US and South Korea to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, and the lull in rocket launches, Mr. Amano has said [the agency stands ready](#) to undertake any nuclear verification activities, as requested.

Iran continuing to implement commitments under nuclear deal

Turning to Iran, the IAEA chief referred the Board to his verification and monitoring report considering Security Council [Resolution 2231](#), which covers the Agency’s activities over the last few months.

2020 IAEA international nuclear security conference will:

- Raise awareness to strengthen nuclear security.
- Review the current status of nuclear security efforts and highlight areas that may need more focus.
- Promote IAEA nuclear security guidance and other international guidelines.
- Encourage information-sharing and good practices while protecting sensitive information.

- Reaffirm IAEA's central role in strengthening the nuclear security framework and coordinating international activities while avoiding duplication and overlap.
- Highlight IAEA nuclear security programmes.

"The Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of nuclear material declared by Iran under its Safeguards Agreement," he said, adding that its evaluations on the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities also continues.

The 2015 nuclear deal formally known as the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#), or JCPOA – reached by Iran, China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, the US and the European Union – sets out [rigorous mechanisms for monitoring restrictions](#) placed on Iran's nuclear programme, while paving the way for the lifting of UN sanctions against the country.

On the overarching topic itself, Mr. Amano said that the 2019 *Nuclear Safety Review* presents priorities for this year and beyond.

"It indicates how we plan to further strengthen our work in nuclear, radiation, transport and waste safety, and emergency preparedness and response", he flagged.

The IAEA chief also announced that the third IAEA [International Conference on Nuclear Security](#) would be held at ministerial level in at its headquarters in Vienna, Austria, from 10 to 14 February 2020.

[Air pollution, the 'silent killer' that claims seven million lives a year: rights council hears](#)

Shifting to renewable energy could save up to 150 million lives by the end of the century amid concerns that six billion people regularly inhale air "so polluted that it puts their life, health and well-being at risk", a UN-appointed independent rights expert said on Monday.

At the [Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva, David Boyd, [Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment](#), insisted that air pollution is a "silent, sometimes invisible, prolific killer" which affected women and girls more than men.

This is despite the fact that the right to a healthy environment is legally recognised by 155 States, Dr. Boyd explained. "Air pollutants are everywhere, largely caused by burning fossil fuels for electricity, transportation and

heating, as well as from industrial activities, poor waste management and agricultural practices," he said.

Air pollution is present both inside homes and outside and is responsible for the premature death of seven million people each year, including 600,000 children, according to the Special Rapporteur's [report](#).

"Every hour, 800 people are dying, many after years of suffering, from cancer, respiratory illnesses or heart disease directly caused by breathing polluted air," he said, before highlighting that these deaths were preventable.

Cleaner cooking fuel switch cuts indoor pollution

Some States, such as Indonesia have begun to address the problem of indoor air pollution linked to cooking by helping millions of poor families switch to cleaner cooking technologies.

In India, a Government-funded programme provides women with funds to buy natural gas stoves, the goal being to equip 95 per cent of all target households by 2022.

According to the Special Rapporteur, the number of households using solid fuels for cooking and heating is also decreasing in Latin America, parts of Asia, Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the US and China, strong laws and policies promoting cleaner air have improved air quality too.

In California, children's lung function has improved, the Special Rapporteur said, while in Shenzhen, the level of particulate matter in the air has decreased by 33 per cent in the past five years.

Among the Special Rapporteur's key recommendations are a ban on new fossil energy power plants and the replacement of existing ones by 2030, along with support for the growth of distributed renewable energy generation systems.

Pollution and emissions fight gaining speed: UN environment report

In a related development, the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) welcomed "accelerating" steps taken around the world to fight pollution on land and at sea, and reduce emissions.

The agency also highlighted the significance of India's pledge last year to phase out single-use plastics by 2022. That move was linked to action on plastic pollution, one of the themes of World Environment Day 2018, UNEP said in its [Annual Report](#).

To date, 127 countries have adopted legislation to regulate plastic bags, 27 now tax producers and eight States have banned microbeads, which are commonly found in cosmetics.

Another “huge win for the planet” is the UN-led effort to protect a massive African peatland area in the Congo basin, UNEP said.

Known as Cuvette Centrale and straddling the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo, this biodiversity treasure trove contains around 30 gigatonnes of carbon, which is equivalent to 15 years of emissions from the United States.