

A 'charismatic leader' dedicated to peace: UN officials bid farewell to former Secretary-General Kofi Annan

The flag at United Nations Headquarters in New York is flying at half-mast this Saturday as the Organization marks the death of former Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Officials from across the UN system have been paying tribute to the man who led the global body for a decade, starting in January 1997. He was Secretary-General during what has been described as one of the darkest days in the organization's history: the [19 August 2003](#) bombing of the UN premises in Baghdad, Iraq.

For Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the outgoing UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr. Annan is simply ["irreplaceable"](#).

"Kofi was humanity's best example, the epitome, of human decency and grace. In a world now filled with leaders who are anything but that, our loss, the world's loss becomes even more painful," said in a statement.

Mr. Annan was the seventh of nine men appointed Secretary-General since the UN was established in 1945. He was the first to emerge from the ranks of UN staff and the second to come from the African continent.

Before taking the reins of the organization, he held [various senior level positions](#) at Headquarters and in the field. At one point he was Zeid's immediate boss.

The UN rights chief recalled a man who was ever courageous and though direct in speech, never discourteous.

"Later, when I was an ambassador at the UN he inspired us, by being a dynamic and charismatic leader in his capacity as Secretary-General," Zeid continued.

"And most of all, he was a friend and counsel – to me and to so many others. Whenever – as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, I felt isolated and alone politically (which, in the last four years, was often) I would go for long walks with him around Geneva – and listen."

Mr. Annan and the UN were jointly awarded the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize.

Miroslav Lajčák, President of the [UN General Assembly](#), remembered the Nobel laureate as "a strong believer in dialogue" and staunch defender of peace, development and human rights.

"He dedicated his life to making the world a better, more peaceful, and just place for all people. And in many ways, he is a symbol for the shared values

of the United Nations” he said.

The UN’s Economic and Social Council ([ECOSOC](#)) brings the global community together to promote action to achieve a more sustainable planet. Inga Rhonda King, the newly appointed Council President, offered her condolences to his family, and to all those who had worked with or known the former leader.

“His contribution to the world was immense. His leadership was compassionate and his legacy consequential,” she stated.

Kofi Annan was committed to, in his words, “bringing the United Nations closer to the people”; forging partnerships with civil society, the business sector and others.

UN agencies and their chiefs are using technology to further this goal, taking to social media to express their sadness over his death.

In a post on Twitter, William Lacy Swing, Director General of the [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#) lamented the loss of “one of the greatest leaders of our times.”

He described Mr. Annan as a dear friend and “champion of justice and peace who, even at the moment of death, was engaged in the search for solutions to conflicts in many parts of the world.”

Also on Twitter, David Beasley, head of the UN [World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#) said Mr. Annan had [strongly supported](#) the agency’s mission and was an ally in the fight against hunger. “We all must keep his legacy alive, working to break the cycle of hunger and conflict so people can live in peace,” he said.

[UN mourns death of former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, ‘a guiding force for good’](#)

The United Nations is mourning the death of former Secretary-General [Kofi Annan](#), who passed away peacefully after a short illness, according to a statement published on his official Twitter account on Saturday. The renowned Ghanaian diplomat was 80 years old.

The current UN chief, [Antonio Guterres](#) hailed him as “a guiding force for good” and a “proud son of Africa who became a global [champion for peace](#) and all humanity.”

“Like so many, I was proud to call Kofi Annan a good friend and mentor. I was deeply honoured by his trust in selecting me to serve as [UN High Commissioner](#)

[for Refugees](#) under his leadership. He remained someone I could always turn to for counsel and wisdom – and I know I was not alone,” Mr. Guterres said in a statement.

“He provided people everywhere with a space for dialogue, a place for problem-solving and a path to a better world. In these turbulent and trying times, he never stopped working to give life to the values of the United Nations Charter. His legacy will remain a true inspiration for all us.”

Kofi Annan was born in Kamasi, Ghana, on 8 April 1938.

He joined the UN system in 1962 as an administrative and budget officer with the [World Health Organization](#) in Geneva, rising through the ranks to hold senior-level posts in areas such as budget and finance, and peacekeeping.

He served as UN Secretary-General for two consecutive five-year terms, beginning in January 1997.

[Senior UN children’s advocate says they “should never be targeted by violence”](#)

The last two weeks have seen a suicide attack on an education centre in Afghanistan which killed and injured young students in class, 21 children killed in Yemen when their school bus was hit by an airstrike, and ongoing child casualties in Syria – particularly in the conflict zones of Idlib and Western Aleppo in the North of the country.

Children should never be targeted by violence. – Virginia Gamba, UN Envoy

“Children have been directly targeted by belligerents. They were also collateral victims of despicable acts of war,” said Ms. Gamba. “We cannot remain silent in the face of such atrocities”, she said, adding that she wanted those fighting to understand the “simple message: enough is enough.”

She went on to urge all sides in conflicts to protect children from the scourge of war and to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law.

SRSG Virginia Gamba.

UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

“Children should never be targeted by violence. It is our collective responsibility to use these tools to their full extent and to obtain results for those boys and girls who desperately need protection.”

Following the deadly air strike in Yemen last week, UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) urged an “independent and prompt investigation”, adding that warring parties must take “constant care to spare civilians”.

In recent days several UN Agencies have strongly condemned the attacks. The [UN Children’s Fund UNICEF](#) described them as a “[war on children](#)”, whilst the UN Human Rights Office [OHCHR](#), pointed out that the Yemen strike was just the latest example of the children being killed in the country’s violent years-long conflict.

[UN chief encourages victims of terrorism to ‘raise up their voices’](#)

“We can all learn from those who have experienced terrorism,” [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) remarked, referring to the multimedia display mounted especially to mark the day, [Surviving Terrorism: Victims’ Voices](#).

“Communities around the world are demonstrating their resilience,” he declared, and “countering terrorism and violent extremism in their everyday lives, in their schools and in their places of worship,” he continued.

He pointed to their consistent call for more information to be shared during investigations, more victim-centered criminal processes, and for justice, otherwise we would be “failing in our responsibility to humanity.”

We are here for you and we are listening to you –*Secretary-General Guterres*

“When we lift up the victims and survivors of terrorism, when we listen to their voices, when we respect their rights and provide them with support and justice, we are honouring our common bonds, and reducing the lasting damage done by terrorists to individuals, families and communities,” Mr. Guterres explained.

Calling the exhibition “a unique contribution to that goal,” the Secretary-General explained that for the first time, “we have gathered in one place the testimonials of individuals whose lives have been affected by terrorism, to hear first-hand how this has impacted their lives, and what they have achieved.”

“We are here for you and we are listening to you,” he underscored. “Your

voices matter. Your courage in the face of adversity is a lesson inspiring us all.”

He called the International Day paying tribute to the victims, which will be marked on 21 August, “an opportunity to recognize, honour and support victims and survivors, and to lift up the voices of those left behind.”

Mr. Guterres pointed out that it coincides with the anniversary of the first time the Organization was targeted by terrorists, 15 years ago, when the UN Headquarters in Iraq was bombed and 22 people lost their lives, many of them UN staffers, including Special Representative and human rights chief, Sergio Vieira de Mello.

“Earlier this year, I visited Mali, where terrorists threaten our peacekeepers and civilian staff on a daily basis,” he said, underscoring that although the survivors’ stories often go untold, they must, for their entire lives, live with the burden.

He spoke more recently of last Wednesday’s “despicable attack on an education centre in Kabul, targeting children,” as something that “shocked us all.”

“It is time to stop and to listen to the victims and survivors of terrorism,” he emphasized. “It is time to raise up their voices and recognize the impact terrorism has on their lives.”

“The United Nations stands in solidarity with you,” he concluded.

One of the voices featured in the exhibition, [Sayad Mushtaq Hussaini](#), shared his experience working as a journalist in Afghanistan last December, when an attacker detonated explosives during a panel discussion he was attending, on the protection of civilians.

“This was a bloody attack against freedom of speech, which claimed the lives of 42 and injured over 75 others,” he recalled. “The victims were all ordinary civilians, including boys, girls, men and women.”

He described the pain of “that dark day,” both physically and the sorrow for the friends who perished and requested the General Assembly to pay more attention to terrorist victims and their timely medical treatment, “as the Afghan Nation is suffering a lot by the ongoing terrorist attacks.”

[Terrorists potentially target millions in makeshift biological weapons](#)

'laboratories', UN forum hears

Rapid advances in gene editing and so-called "DIY biological laboratories" which could be used by extremists, threaten to derail efforts to prevent biological weapons from being used against civilians, the world's only international forum on the issue has heard.

At meetings taking place at the United Nations in Geneva which ended on Thursday, representatives from more than 100 Member States which have signed up to the Biological Weapons Convention ([BWC](#)) – together with civilian experts and academics – also discussed how they could ensure that science is used to positive ends, in line with the [disarmament blueprint](#) set out by UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#).

Although the potential impact of a biological weapons attack could be huge, the likelihood is not currently believed to be high. The last attack dates back to 2001, when letters containing toxic anthrax spores, killed five people in the US, just days after Al Qaeda terrorists perpetrated the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington.

You could be talking of epidemics on the scale of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, or even a global pandemic that could result in millions of deaths – *Daniel Feakes, UN Geneva*

Nonetheless, the rise of extremist groups and the potential risk of research programmes being misused, has focused attention on the work of the BWC.

"There's interest from terror groups and we're also seeing the erosion of norms on chemical weapons," said Daniel Feakes, head of the BWC Implementation Support Unit at the UN in Geneva.

"That could spread to biological weapons as well," he said, adding that "at the worst, you could be talking of epidemics on the scale of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, or even a global pandemic that could result in millions of deaths."

In a bid to stay on top of the latest biological developments and threats, the BWC's 181 Member States hold a series of meetings with experts every year, traditionally in the summer. The reports that are discussed during these sessions are then formally appraised in December.

At the eight-day session just ended, science and technology issues were debated for two days – a measure of their importance.

Among the developments discussed was the groundbreaking gene-editing technique CRISPR. It can be applied – in theory – to any organism. Outside the Geneva body, CRISPR's use has raised ethical questions, Mr. Feakes said, but among Member States, security ramifications dominated discussions.

“Potentially, it could be used to develop more effective biological weapons,” he said, noting that the meetings addressed the growing trend of “DIY biological labs”. However, the meetings also focused on the promotion of “responsible science” so that “scientists are part of the solution, not the problem”.

In addition to concerns that the Biological Weapons Convention lacks full international backing, the body has also faced criticism that its Members are not obliged to allow external checks on any illegal stockpiles they might have.

The issue highlights the fact that the BWC lacks a strong institution, its handful of administrators dwarfed by larger sister organizations including the [OPCW](#) – the [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#).

The OPCW’s 500-strong staff – based in the Hague – have weapons inspectors training facilities, Feakes notes, explaining that the BWC’s focus is therefore much more “about what States do at a national level”.

Concern for the future

Looking ahead, and aside from the rapid pace of scientific change, the biggest challenge is keeping the Biological Weapons Convention relevant – which appears to still be the case today.

“There are no States that say they need biological weapons,” Mr. Feakes says. “That norm needs to be maintained and properly managed. You can’t ban CRISPR or gene editing, because they can do so much good, like finding cures for diseases or combating climate change. But we still need to manage these techniques and technologies to ensure they are used responsibly.” Gene editing, in simple terms, involves the copying of exact strands of DNA, similar to cutting and pasting text on a computer.

The latest BWC session in the Swiss city also involved key intergovernmental organizations, scientific and professional associations, academic institutions, think tanks and other non-governmental entities.

Formally known as the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, the BWC was the first multilateral disarmament treaty to ban an entire category of weapons.

It opened for signature in 1972 and entered into force in 1975. It currently has 181 States Parties, and six States that have signed but not yet ratified it.