

UN human rights body strongly condemns recent “shocking attacks” against civilians in south-west Syria

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a strongly-worded statement on Tuesday, denouncing last week’s brutal killings and raids by members of the terrorist group ISIL, in Sweida, south-west Syria.

“We have received reports that more than 200 people were killed and injured in multiple attacks, including suicide bombings in As-Sweida City and in various villages in eastern and northeastern rural As-Sweida Governorate,” said OHCHR Spokesperson, Ravina Shamdasani.

She also cited reports of “scores of ISIL militants” raiding homes in at least eight villages in rural areas of the governorate; shooting and killing civilians inside their homes and abducting women and children.

The Government of Syria has a duty to take action to prevent violent acts that may endanger the lives and well-being of civilians – *Ravina Shamdasani (OHCHR)*

“We have received the names of at least 27 women and children who were reportedly taken hostage from Al-Shbiki village in eastern rural As-Sweida,” she noted, adding that OHCHR believes the number to actually be much higher.

According to OHCHR, photos of some of the abducted women were later tweeted out, “with threats to burn them alive if the Government did not cease military operations against ISIL in western Dara’a Governorate, and release ISIL women and men in Government custody”.

Ms. Shamdasani explained that “these ISIL militants included many who were recently evacuated and relocated from the Palestinian Yarmouk Refugee Camp, Hajar Al-Aswad, and Al-Tadamon areas of southern Damascus, as part of a Government reconciliation agreement”.

“While agreements putting an end to fighting are to be welcomed, the well-being of civilians must be paramount in any considerations,” said the OHCHR Spokesperson, as she stressed that “the transfer of armed fighters with a history of gross human rights abuses and contempt towards international law, can mean an increase in the likelihood of violent attacks against civilians like the ones carried out last week in As-Sweida”.

The UN human rights body is calling on the Government of Syria to take all necessary measures, in line with international human rights and humanitarian law, to protect civilians from attacks and to hold those responsible for

crimes and human rights violations accountable.

“The Government of Syria has a duty to take action to prevent violent acts that may endanger the lives and well-being of civilians – including by not placing armed groups such as ISIL in their proximity”, said Ms. Shamdassani.

Bangladesh: World Heritage Site threatened by ‘heedless industrialisation’ – UN expert

[The Sundarbans](#) forest, which is the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world and home to several endangered species, is being threatened by “heedless industrialization”, according to a UN rights expert, who on Tuesday, called on the Government of Bangladesh to halt the process.

“The accelerating industrialisation of the Sundarbans threatens not only this unique ecosystem – which hosts Bengal tigers, Ganges river dolphins and other endangered species – but also poses serious risks to the human rights of the 6.5 million people whose lives, health, housing, food and cultural activities depend directly on a safe, healthy and sustainable Sundarbans forest,” said [John Knox](#), Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment.

Stretching along the Bay of Bengal, the Sundarbans is considered one of the natural wonders of the world. However, despite objections from the World Heritage Committee of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the Government of Bangladesh has approved more than 320 industrial projects in the area, including a massive coal-fired power plant. The process bypassed requirements for public participation and an environmental impact assessment.

Last year, the High Court of Bangladesh directed the Government not to approve any industrial development within the 10-kilometre buffer zone of the reserved forest, but according to UNESCO, approvals continue to be given.

“The threat posed by untrammelled industrialisation of the Sundarbans is emblematic of the threats facing the environment around the world,” the Special Rapporteur said, adding that “of course, the people of Bangladesh, like people around the world, need to improve their economic well-being”. Mr. Knox stressed that “pursuing short-term economic gain in disregard of environmental costs” was simply unsustainable.

The Human Rights Council-appointed independent human rights expert explained that mangrove forests provide “benefits for clean air and water that extend

far beyond their immediate location”.

He called on the Government of Bangladesh to halt the industrialization. “Pursuing short-term economic gain in disregard of environmental costs is chasing fools’ gold. Without a healthy environment, economic gains are unsustainable,” Mr. Knox stressed.

“To have truly [sustainable development](#), it is critical to protect the environment. And to ensure that environmental concerns are taken into account, governments must listen to the voices of those who are most affected by proposed industrial projects.”

“Too often, the people who raise questions about development projects are ignored or even treated as enemies of the state. But really, they should be treated as the champions of sustainable development,” the independent expert said.

[As thousands flee violence in Nicaragua, UN refugee agency urges more support for countries taking them in](#)

As thousands flee mounting political tensions, violence and serious human rights violations in Nicaragua, the United Nations refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), has called for international solidarity and more support for the countries hosting those who are joining the exodus.

Around 300 people have been killed during three months of anti-government protests, which have been calling on long-serving President Daniel Ortega to step down. Hundreds have reportedly been detained, amid a violent crackdown by police and pro-government paramilitary groups, according to news reports.

“Currently, an average of 200 [asylum applications are being lodged](#) daily in Costa Rica,” UNHCR spokesperson William Spindler told journalists on Tuesday, noting that applications have increased exponentially in recent months, since protests against the Nicaraguan government began.

According to Costa Rican authorities, nearly 8,000 asylum claims by Nicaraguan nationals have been registered since April, and some 15,000 more have been given appointments for later registration, due to the application system being overwhelmed.

Mr. Spindler said that UNHCR is supporting the Migration authority to

increase its processing capacity from 200 to at least 500 claims daily.

“UNHCR is strengthening its presence in Costa Rica’s northern border region”, he added, together with the Costa Rican Government, other UN agencies and NGO partners, he said the refugee agency was “gearing up its response capacity to provide immediate protection and assistance to thousands of Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers, both in the northern region and in the metropolitan area of the capital San Jose.”

An estimated 100,000 to 150,000 Nicaraguan families already living in Costa Rica are providing an initial safety net for friends, relatives and fellow citizens as they arrive.

“UNHCR appreciates the efforts of the Costa Rican authorities in keeping the country’s borders open to Nicaraguans in need of international refugee protection, in line with its long tradition of solidarity,” stated Mr. Spindler.

“At the same time,” he continued, “UNHCR calls on the international community to provide support to Costa Rica and other countries hosting Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers, in the spirit of solidarity and responsibility-sharing of the Global Compact on Refugees and the application of the Regional Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework – a collective regional action plan “to strengthen protection and promote durable solutions among countries of origin, transit and destination in Central America and Mexico,” added Mr. Spindler.

While Costa Rica has received the lion’s share of asylum claims, Panama, Mexico and the United States have also recorded hundreds of applications; especially during the first half of 2018, with a significant peak in June.

Meanwhile, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala are increasingly becoming transit countries for Nicaraguan refugees. In coordination with government authorities, the spokesperson said that the UN System and its partners will elaborate “a comprehensive regional response to address the international protection and humanitarian needs of Nicaraguan refugees.”

UNHCR and its partners are also providing assistance to more than 700 refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from El Salvador and Honduras, living in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua and other parts of the country.

When it comes to breastfeeding, 'timing is everything' in saving

[newborn lives – UNICEF chief](#)

Three-in-five babies, mostly born in low- and middle-income countries, are not breastfed within the first hour of life, placing them at higher risk of death and disease, according to a new United Nations report launched on Tuesday.

“When it comes to the start of breastfeeding, timing is everything,” said Henrietta Fore, the [UN Children’s Fund](#)’s (UNICEF) Executive Director, on the eve of World Breastfeeding Week.

“In many countries, it can even be a matter of life or death,” she added.

In the report, [Capture the Moment](#), UNICEF and the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) note that while newborns who breastfeed in the first hour of life are significantly more likely to survive, they estimate that 78 million newborns are excluded.

“Each year, millions of newborns miss out on the benefits of early breastfeeding and the reasons – all too often – are things we can change,” she continued. “Mothers simply don’t receive enough support to breastfeed within those crucial minutes after birth, even from medical personnel at health facilities.”

[World Breastfeeding Week](#) is celebrated annually from 1 to 7 August to encourage breastfeeding and improve the health of babies around the world by providing infants with the nutrients they need.

Even a few hours delay after birth could pose life-threatening consequences. Skin-to-skin contact along with suckling at the breast stimulate the mother’s production of breastmilk, including colostrum, which is produced ahead of regular milk, in the first few days after giving birth. It is so rich in nutrients and antibodies, that it is often referred to as the baby’s first vaccine.

According to the report, 65 per cent of countries in Eastern and Southern Africa have the highest rate of breastfeeding within the first hour, while East Asia and the Pacific have the lowest rate with only 32 percent benefitting from the early initiation.



UNICEF/Giacomo Pirozzi

A newborn sleeps in his mother's arms, in a health centre in Accra, Ghana.

While nearly nine-in-ten babies born in Burundi, Sri Lanka and Vanuatu are breastfed within that first hour, only two-in-10 born in Azerbaijan, Chad and Montenegro were nursed.

"Breastfeeding gives children the best possible start in life," said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "We must urgently scale up support to mothers – be it from family members, health care workers, employers and governments, so they can give their children the start they deserve."

Analyzing data from 76 countries, the report reveals some of the reasons why too many newborns are left waiting.

One common practice is to discard colostrum, and instead feed the infant honey, sugar water or infant formula, which also delays a newborn's first critical contact with its mother.

The rise in elective C-sections also has an impact, with a study across 51 countries noting that in this type of delivery, initiation rates among newborns are significantly lower.

Earlier studies, cited in the report, show that newborns who began breastfeeding between two and 23 hours after birth, had a 33 per cent greater risk of dying, compared to those who breastfed within one hour. And the risk more than doubled among newborns who started a day or more after birth.

The report urges governments and other decision-makers to adopt strong legal measures to restrict the [marketing of infant formula](#) and other breastmilk substitutes to help address the situation.

The WHO and UNICEF-led [Global Breastfeeding Collective](#) also released the [2018 Global Breastfeeding Scorecard](#), which tracks progress for and urges countries

to advance breastfeeding policies and programmes to help mothers breastfeed their babies in the first hour of life.

UN receives 70 new allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse in three months

The United Nations received 70 new allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse across all its entities and implementing partners, between the beginning of April to the end of June this year, [UN Deputy Spokesperson](#), Farhan Haq, announced on Monday, with 18 cases involving peacekeeping operations, and 25 from “agencies, funds and programmes.”

“Please note that not all the allegations have been fully verified and many are in the preliminary assessment phase,” he explained to journalists at UN Headquarters in New York, before announcing the breakdown of the 70 allegations.

A total of 43 allegations involve UN personnel; 24 relate to non-UN personnel working for implementing partners; and three others relate to non-UN international forces, which have been authorised by a Security Council mandate.

Of these 70 reported incidents, 27 took place this year, nine in 2017, five in 2016, ten in 2015 and two 2 allegedly occurred in 2014. The date is unknown for 17 allegations.

The vast majority, 46, are categorized as sexual exploitation, defined as “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another”.

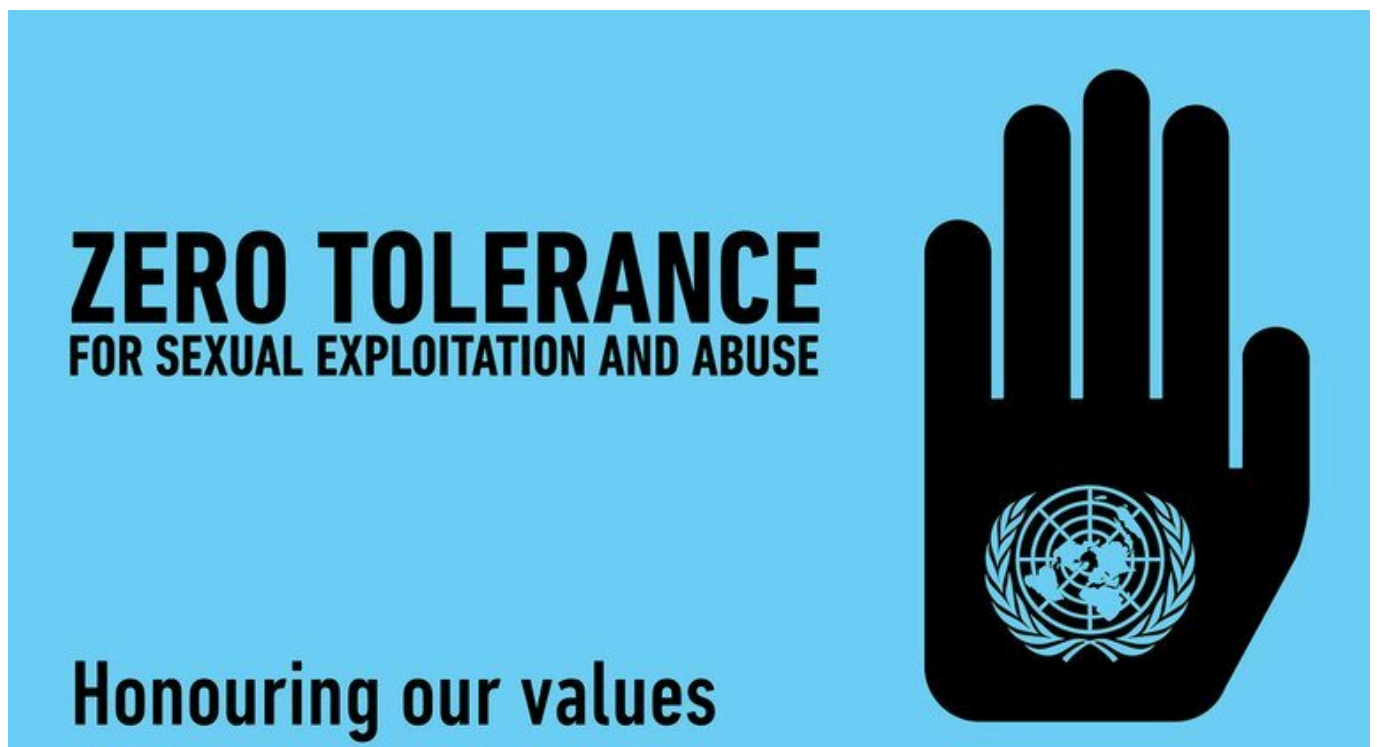
Another 18 are categorized as sexual abuse, defined as “the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions”. Another six were classified as “other” or of an unknown nature.

Women and girls suffer the most from this scourge, according to the figures presented by Mr. Haq. Out of a total of 84 reported victims, 46 are women, 17 are girls (under the age of 18), and 12 are females whose age is unknown. In addition, one boy (under the age of 18) and five males of an unknown age are also among the victims.

Out of 88 alleged perpetrators, all but eight are men, with four women and four individuals whose gender is unknown.

According to Mr. Haq, so far, three of the allegations have been substantiated through an investigation; two cases have not been substantiated, and four were closed due to other circumstances. The remaining 61 are at various stages of investigation or under preliminary review. A total of 16 allegations have been referred to the relevant Member States for action.

“We have continued our efforts to implement the Secretary-General’s strategy to combat sexual exploitation and abuse,” said Mr. Haq. Regarding the UN’s commitment to end impunity, he explained that in June, the UN launched “an electronic tool for screening UN staff dismissed as a result of substantiated allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, or who resigned or were separated during an investigation”.



United Nations