

Local aid workers in Syria are the 'backbone of response efforts', says top UN official, urging better protection as fighting rages on

Delivering life-saving assistance to millions of women, children and men in Syria, local aid workers need to be safer and better protected, said the top United Nations humanitarian official in the country on Monday.

"Syrian aid workers [risk their lives](#) on a daily basis and work tirelessly to provide life-saving assistance to fellow Syrians in need in accordance with humanitarian principles," said Panos Moumtzis, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the [Syria Crisis](#).

"All parties to the conflict in Syria are obliged under international humanitarian and human rights law to respect and protect humanitarian workers and other civilians," he added.

As lines of control shift between pro-Government troops and an array of opposition forces, aid workers, who are focused on helping civilians in need, face a greater risk of arrest and detention.

According to reports, most humanitarian staff in the country's south-west, where a Government-led offensive has been going on for weeks now, have stopped working with Syrian aid organizations, significantly impacting the response capacity at a time when they are needed most and "leaving a vacuum in their wake".

"Syrian aid workers, including members of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, have paid the ultimate price, losing their lives in their efforts to help those in need," continued Mr. Moumtzis, pointing out that their highly technical skills and operational knowledge make them "the backbone of the response effort".

It's critical all steps are taken to increase the protection of aid workers – Panos Moumtzis, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator

"It's critical all steps are taken to increase the protection of aid workers and ensure the continuation of services in support of an effective sustainable humanitarian response to the people in need," he stressed.

Syria is one of the most challenging and dangerous environments for humanitarians to operate in. Since the start of the crisis in Syria in March 2011, hundreds of humanitarian workers and service providers, including health workers, have been killed.

In line with the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and the imperative to save lives across Syria, humanitarian actors, are doing everything they can to reach some 13 million people in both government- and non-government-controlled areas – including approximately 6.5 million internally displaced.

The Syrian conflict continues to exact a terrible toll on the country's civilians, having forced more than half of the population from their homes, and having displaced numerous people multiple times.

Governments need to step up protection for the most vulnerable, from 'vile crime' of human trafficking: UN chief

Marking World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, the United Nations sheds light on the plight of millions of children, women and men – especially migrants – who, every year, fall prey to traffickers across the world.

“Trafficking in persons is a vile crime that feeds on inequalities, instability and conflict,” UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) in a statement, adding that traffickers “profit from peoples’ hopes and despair,” explaining that women and children are particularly vulnerable.

According to the [UN Children’s Fund](#) (UNICEF) and the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking (ICAT), more than a quarter of identified trafficking victims globally are children. Across regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Central America and the Caribbean, the ratio rises to two thirds of all trafficking victims.

“These children urgently need governments to step up and put measures in place to keep them safe,” said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore, in a press release that denounced “a lack of sustainable solutions for child victims of trafficking – including long-term assistance, rehabilitation, and protection”.

Trafficking in persons is a vile crime that feeds on inequalities, instability and conflict, – *UN Secretary-General Guterres*

Children are often placed in inadequate shelters, where they risk further traumatization and re-victimization, according to the UN’s child protection agency. Trafficked boys face the added complication of conforming to a stereotype of self-reliance that prevents them from getting or seeking the

help they need, while girls risk further exploitation and abuse, due to gender discrimination and gendered poverty.

The UN Migration agency (IOM), flags that people on the move seeking better economic opportunities are also a major target for human traffickers. According to IOM's Director General William L. Swing, every year, "millions of migrants are trafficked within and across borders and find themselves trapped in forced labour...enduring violence, threats or psychological manipulation".

Often, he said, they find themselves indebted via unfair recruitment processes or employment conditions, all the while facing enormous pressures from their families and communities who may have gone into debt themselves, just to start their job search.

Trafficking "is so pervasive it can only be tackled with a global, all-hands approach," said Mr. Swing. "Consumers, especially, must join their governments, their local business community and work together", he added, so that "supply chains are free from human trafficking and other forms of exploitation".

New IOM data shows that in the last ten years, almost 80 per cent of journeys undertaken by victims trafficked internationally cross through official border points, such as airports and land border control points. This highlights the crucial role that border agencies and service providers at border points can play to identify potential victims and refer them for protection and assistance.

"Human traffickers too often operate with impunity, with their crimes receiving not nearly enough attention," stated Secretary-General Guterres. "This must change," he added, stressing that the "United Nations is committed to advancing action to bring traffickers to justice while protecting and supporting their victims".

Earlier this month, UN Member States adopted the final draft Global Compact on Migration, which calls for enhanced cross-border cooperation on proper identification, timely and efficient referral, as well as assistance and appropriate protection of migrants in situations of vulnerability at or near international borders, in compliance with international human rights law.

Middle East: Annan deplures deliberate killings, terror acts; urges sides to

resume talks

“Dismayed” by the escalating violence in the Middle East, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan today condemned the practice of deliberate killings and acts of terror, and [appealed](#) to both the Israelis and Palestinians to stop the cycle of destructive violence and resume peace talks.

A spokesman for the Secretary-General said in a statement that Mr. Annan urged both parties to focus their energies on the implementation of the recommendations contained in a report – embraced by both sides – by former US Senator George Mitchell.

Spokesman Fred Eckhard also said that the Secretary-General “deplores acts of terror” such as the one committed on Sunday by a Palestinian gunman in Tel Aviv.

“He is also disturbed by the fact that Israel continues to use its armed forces for the deliberate killing of pre-selected Palestinian individuals,” the spokesman said, referring to an incident last Tuesday in which eight people were killed, including two young boys, and another over the weekend resulting in one death and five people injured.

The Secretary-General has already condemned this practice, which violates human rights law as well as general principles of law, Mr. Eckhard said.

“Israel’s continued use of it can only further inflame an already very dangerous situation,” the spokesman added. “The Secretary-General appeals once again to the Government of Israel to put an end to it.”

Israeli team meets UN officials to discuss plans to view Middle East video

A high-level military delegation from Israel today met with senior United Nations officials to discuss issues surrounding the videotape made last October by UN peacekeepers in Lebanon, shortly after three Israeli soldiers had been abducted by the Hizbollah.

The Israeli delegation, headed by Israeli Defence Force liaison officer Gen. Arditi, held talks with Assistant Secretary-General Hédi Annabi and UN

military adviser Gen. Timothy Ford presumably to discuss which videotapes Israel wanted to view along with other articles pertinent to the humanitarian aspects of the kidnapping, UN spokesman Fred Eckhard told a press briefing in New York.

“Our offer was to view the edited version of the first videotape, to view an unedited version of the newly discovered videotape, and to view the seven items taken from the car that have traces of blood on them,” Mr. Eckhard said. So far, Lebanon has not responded to any of the UN’s offers to view the video, he added.

The spokesman also confirmed that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had spoken by telephone on Sunday with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The Secretary-General expressed the hope that once the Israeli team had viewed the video, “the issue could be put behind us,” Mr. Eckhard said. “That’s a fervent hope”

Asked about the UN’s decision-making process in handling the video, Mr. Eckhard said that the internal probe ordered by Mr. Annan found that the officials involved did not adequately assess the humanitarian value of the information. “On both the military side and the civilian side, the information should have been moved up the chain of command, at which point a political decision based on humanitarian grounds could have been made to inform the Israelis of the amount of blood,” he said.

In response to a question about Hizbollah’s influence in southern Lebanon, the spokesman recalled that the UN had repeatedly asked the Government of Lebanon to assert its sovereign authority over the south.

“If you look at the Secretary-General’s reports on Lebanon you will see that we have been consistently urging the Lebanese Government to take full sovereign control of the southern part of the country,” Mr. Eckhard said. “And we have said that the remaining element of our mandate in southern Lebanon is to help secure the peace. Hizbollah’s role in southern Lebanon is between Hizbollah and the Lebanese Government. We’re asking the Government to exercise its sovereign control over the south.”

On Hiroshima anniversary, Annan stresses need for conflict prevention

In a [message](#) on the 56th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, Secretary-General Kofi Annan today urged for the implementation of the Millennium Declaration’s pledge to eliminate weapons of mass destruction.

Quoting the Declaration’s goal “to strive for the elimination of weapons of

mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons,” the Secretary-General said the world must “dispel the fearful shadow that weapons of mass destruction cast across every nation.”

“We must replace a culture of reaction with one of conflict prevention,” he said.

Noting that the hope of abolishing nuclear weapons by the end of the 20th century had not been realized, Mr. Annan said States with nuclear capacity had made an “unequivocal undertaking” at last year’s Review Conference of the Parties to the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons to accomplish the total elimination of nuclear weapons.

“It is now time to turn these words into deeds,” he said. “Let us renew our solemn vow never to repeat the tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Let us also resolve to prevent conflict by ending the poverty, inequity and intolerance that foster it.”

The message was delivered at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Ceremony by the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Kenzo Oshima.

The ceremony is held in the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima every year to commemorate the atomic bomb that was dropped on downtown Hiroshima on 6 August 1945.