

Ahead of World Day against human trafficking, UN expert stresses States' obligation to stop 'gross human rights violations'

Ahead of the [World Day Against Trafficking in Persons](#), the UN human rights expert on the issue emphasized on Friday that both victims and potential victims' rights must be upheld – especially women and children – and appealed for all States to prevent and combat the global scourge.

Many of those falling prey to traffickers are migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers who have left their country of origin for various reasons; including conflict, natural disaster, persecution or extreme poverty.

“They have left behind their social protection network, and are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation,” said Maria Grazia [Giammarinaro](#), Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, in her statement marking the Day.

Ms. Giammarinaro observed that in the current “poisonous anti-migration political atmosphere,” migrants are often targeted as a threat, while in fact they are a net-gain for host countries where they live and work.

Against that backdrop, the UN expert stressed that anti-trafficking discourse is often misused “to justify restrictive migration policies and push-back activities.”

“Taking a stand against xenophobic and racist approaches, as well as violence, hatred and discrimination, is a moral duty which is in everyone's power,” she underscored.

Calling it “a gross human rights violation,” Ms. Giammarinaro argued that States have an obligation to prevent trafficking.

Turning to the [Global Migration Compact](#), the UN expert asserted that in addition to international protection schemes, States should establish individualized approaches to gauge migrants' vulnerabilities, and provide them with tailored protections.

“In many countries, human rights activists and civil society organizations have been criminalized and ostracized for acting in solidarity with migrants and victims, and potential victims of trafficking,” she flagged.

Dismissing as “unacceptable” any attempt to delegitimize their humanitarian work, Ms. Giammarinaro said that civil society organizations globally play “a pivotal role” in saving lives.

Non-governmental organizations are also important in identifying trafficking victims, which according to the UN expert is “essential for ensuring access to protection and rehabilitation for victims, and should be prioritized, including during large mixed migration movements.”

“On World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, my message is that, even in difficult times, inclusion, not exclusion, is the answer,” she concluded

UN Special Rapporteurs serve in their individual capacity, independent from any government or organization.

Action needed to find, test, treat millions unknowingly infected with viral hepatitis – UN health agency

Millions of people globally who have viral hepatitis are unaware or unable to receive treatment, the United Nations health agency said Friday, on the eve of World Hepatitis Day, raising the alarm to “find, test and treat the missing millions.”

Both worldwide and in the South-East Asia Region, less than one-in-10 infected people are estimated to know their status, while less than 10 per cent of those who do know are actually receiving treatment, according to the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#).

“This lack of awareness and treatment leads to progressive liver damage and can cause [life-threatening](#) conditions, such as fibrosis and liver cancer, resulting in an estimated 410,000 deaths in the Region every year,” said Poonam Khetrpal Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia.

“It also allows viral hepatitis to spread: Region-wide, an estimated 40 million people live with chronic hepatitis B while an estimated 10 million live with chronic hepatitis C,” she added.

Pointing out that “urgent action is needed to find, test and treat the missing millions,” she highlighted the agency’s Regional Action Plan, which aims to expand the number of people aware of their status to 50 per cent, with at least 75 per cent of those diagnosed with the disease, receiving treatment by 2020.

Greater awareness among the public and high-risk groups is key to eliminating the viral hepatitis health threat by 2030.

She urged health authorities region-wide to send clear messages on the

disease's signs and symptoms, where they can get tested and seek treatment, and how infection can be prevented – such as through hepatitis B vaccinations, practicing safe sex and safe needle usage.

The Regional Director underscored the importance of health workers having better access to quality diagnostics and affordable, quality-assured testing kits.

For people diagnosed with hepatitis B or C, she said “access to effective and affordable treatment is vital.”

Every second person who injects drugs is living with hepatitis C –
Yury Fedotov, UNODC Executive Director

“While treatments have existed for hepatitis B for some time, Directly-acting antiviral drugs can now cure hepatitis C in up to 95 per cent of cases,” she said, noting that dramatic reduction in cost.

World Hepatitis Day

World Hepatitis Day marked on Saturday, is focussing on raising awareness of the global burden of viral hepatitis as a major health problem in need of an urgent international response.

Marking World Hepatitis Day, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)) called on people globally to take action to find the “missing millions,” including intravenous drug users and people in prison.

“Every second person who [injects drugs](#) is living with hepatitis C,” said Yury Fedotov, UNODC Executive Director, indicating that women in this category have a 38 per cent higher risk of contracting hepatitis C than men.

“The prevalence of hepatitis B infection among people who inject drugs is 7.5 per cent,” he added.

Due to contaminated equipment and unsafe injection of drugs, along with other risk factors such as unsafe tattooing and skin piercing, a 2016 global review indicated that, of the estimated 10.4 million people incarcerated worldwide, 15.1 per cent have hepatitis C and 4.8 per cent have chronic hepatitis B.

[UN chief welcomes new law giving extra autonomy to Muslims in Southern](#)

Philippines

The [UN Secretary-General](#) on Friday welcomed a new law which grants extra autonomy to Muslim communities living in the Southern Philippines, describing it as a “landmark achievement on the road to lasting peace”.

Philippine President, Rodrigo Duterte, signed the new legislation, formally known as the Organic Law for Bangsamoro in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, on Thursday, raising hopes that years of separatist violence involving central Government troops and militants from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, can be brought to an end.

“The Secretary-General congratulates negotiators for the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Bicameral Conference Committee, the Bangsamoro Transition Commission and civil society groups for their efforts,” said the UN chief, [in a statement](#) issued by his Spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric.

According to news reports, the long-anticipated new autonomy came four years after the Government signed a peace deal with the separatist group, which dropped its bid for full independence, seeking instead a new deal over self-rule.

The Front began its uprising in 1978, marking a period of violent confrontation which left around 120,000 dead. The new expanded autonomous region in the south, will be led initially by a transitional authority, before being run by a new parliamentary body, say reports.

The statement from the UN chief said that the UN “will continue to support the Philippines in the implementation of the law, and to help build the capacity of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority as an effective conduit for peace, democratic governance, and human rights”.

UN ‘committed to continue to support’ Pakistan’s Electoral Commission in wake of general election

The [United Nations Secretary-General](#) has congratulated the people of Pakistan for “exercising their constitutional right to vote” on Wednesday, thereby reaffirming “their commitment to a democratic Pakistan.”

In [a statement](#) issued on Friday, on behalf of UN chief António Guterres, Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric commended Pakistan's Electoral Commission "for the organization of the elections, noting positive initiatives related to training and efforts to enhance the inclusion of women, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups, as well as first-time voters, in the electoral process."

He said the UN was committed to continue to support the Electoral Commission, as the smooth transfer of power remained in doubt on Friday, with latest news reports suggesting that a group of Pakistani political parties were rejecting the results, alleging vote rigging.

According to the official results released so far, the party headed by former international cricket star and national team captain, Imran Khan, is in the lead, but does not have sufficient seats to secure power without forming a coalition.

Mr. Dujarric said that the Secretary-General was looking forward to the formation of the new government and "wishes it success in providing the people of Pakistan a stable, democratic, and prosperous future."

The 'used and abused' children of Syria must learn what 'peace' really means, Security Council hears

More than 7,000 children have lost their lives or been maimed as a result of the brutal conflict in Syria, a senior United Nations official told the UN Security Council on Friday, stressing that they had been abused by the warring parties for far too long.

"It is time for the children of Syria to believe in their own future and to learn what peace means," Virginia Gamba, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, told the Security Council.

"It is time for them to retake the childhood that was taken away from them. It is time for them to stop being victims and become game changers, in the restoration of normality in peace and justice. They have been used and abused by, in and for armed conflict, for far too long," she added.

Ms. Gamba said that since the beginning of the Syria crisis in March 2011, the UN has verified the killing or maiming of more than 7,000 children in the conflict, now in its eighth year.

It is time for them to stop being victims and become game changers, in the restoration of normality in peace and justice – *Virginia Gamba*

“I must stress that this is the verified number alone, the unverified reports reflect numbers that go way beyond 20,000 child casualties”, she added.

She said they had suffered multiple appalling violations; in their homes, communities, schools, detention centres and displacement camps.

In 2005, the Security Council adopted a resolution that established a monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM) for six grave violations against children in armed conflict situations.

The six violations are: killing and maiming; recruitment or use as soldiers; sexual violence; abduction; attacks against schools or hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access.

Based on the resolution, the mechanism for the situation in Syria was established in 2013.

“Every year since then, there has been a tremendous increase in all grave violations committed by all parties to the conflict”, she said.

Since the beginning of this year, the mechanism has verified more than 1,200 violations against children. More than 600 children have been killed or maimed; more than 180 were recruited and used; more than 60 schools have been attacked, while over 100 attacks on hospitals and medical facilities or personnel have been verified.

Ms. Gamba said most of these violations have occurred in the context of military surges by various parties in the areas of Afrin, Hama, Idlib, east Ghouta and Dara’a in the last six months.

“I am deeply disturbed by the stories of children born and raised throughout this conflict, children who have never seen peace in Syria”, she said. “They do not know the meaning of the word ‘peace’”.

Also briefing the Security Council was the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, who gave detailed updates on the humanitarian situation across the war-ravaged country.

“The appalling suffering this war has wrought on Syria’s children is truly unimaginable”, he said. “Yet, it is Syria’s children who are the future of the country. Ensuring that their rights are respected, protected and fulfilled must be at the centre of all of our efforts.”

Mr. Lowcock, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, said that since November 2017, the total number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Aleppo and Idleb governates has increased by nearly 600,000, to a total of around 4.2 million.

He said that humanitarian needs remain high in eastern Ghouta, though there are also reports of markets beginning to function again and the return of other activities resembling normal daily life.

About 10,000 people from east Ghouta, mostly men between the ages of 15 and 65, are reported to remain in displacement sites across Rural Damascus. In the north east, returns to the liberated city of Raqqa – the former ISIL terrorist stronghold – have continued, despite risks due to high levels of explosive hazard contamination.

There are also very serious concerns about civilians trapped in areas held by ISIL, otherwise known as Da'esh, in the eastern part of Deir-ez-Zor governorate.