

Sand and dust storms, a “human well-being” issue, says high level panel

From higher morbidity and mortality rates to reduced economic growth, the impact of sand and dust storms can be major, especially for lower-income nations and vulnerable communities. However, with stronger collaboration and improved information-sharing, much of the risk could be managed and mitigated, a UN meeting heard on Monday.

The high level General Assembly meeting examined the risks posed by sand and dust storms, known by the acronym SDS, and the various opportunities available to mitigate those risks and fill the existing knowledge gaps.

“For people, the stakes of inaction on this issue are high,” said Miroslav Lajčák, President of the UN General Assembly. “Human well-being is at risk.”

Various studies have revealed the severe effects that sand and dust storms can have on health, including respiratory, cardiovascular, skin and eye diseases.

The panel also highlighted the major economic impact that these meteorological events can have: “One sand or dust storm can cost hundreds of millions of dollars,” explained Mr. Lajčák. “The losses are really felt in the agriculture, transportation and infrastructure sectors. These are resources that could have been channeled towards sustainable development at a time when we need to mobilize more for the 2030 Agenda”.

As this is a phenomenon that affects more than 45 countries – principally in the Sahel, Central and East Asia, the Middle East as well as North America and the Caribbean – Governments and experts have sought solutions to mitigate the risk, build resilience and strengthen the amount of information on the subject globally. The [UN World Meteorological Organization](#)’s Warning Advisory and Assessment System is now capable of issuing forecasts as far as three days in advance. However, ensuring that this information reaches the most vulnerable to reduce death rates as well as negative impacts to their livelihoods, is a challenge that remains to be tackled.

“It is unconscionable that information that can help the health of people affected...is not available to them,” said Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General, in a video played at the event.

Among the solutions proposed, the panelists cited: greening areas where SDS events tend to be born by planting more trees; improving information channels so even the most vulnerable communities can adequately prepare and protect themselves; and enhancing cross-border collaboration so countries can share lessons learned and implement holistic disaster risk reduction measures.

“For the last three years, the General Assembly has pledged to take action on sand and dust storms. But we cannot do this alone,” said Mr. Lajčák,

calling for “more Member States to work in tandem with the Rio Conventions, on climate change, biodiversity, and importantly, combatting desertification” and address the issue in a durable and lasting fashion.

[Cause for ‘celebration’ and ‘concern’, General Assembly president tells SDG forum](#)

One week after zeroing-in on how to build sustainable, resilient societies, key players from around the world debated on Monday at United Nations Headquarters in New York, how to keep up the momentum to turn the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development into a reality.

“We do not have any time to waste,” said General Assembly President Miroslav Lajčák, opening the major ministerial meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development ([HLPF](#)) as well as the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council ([ECOSOC](#)).

Mr. Lajčák focused on four main points where progress had been made: “We have taken a [sledgehammer](#) to extreme poverty,” he began. “Innovations in healthcare are allowing people to live longer and healthier lives. Fewer children are forced to work – and more are where they belong: in school.”



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

General Assembly President Miroslav Lajčák delivers remarks at the opening of the Ministerial segment of 2018 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable

Development.

In his second point, he spoke of “huge challenges ahead,” citing that gains made to reduce extreme poverty, have not benefitted everyone, with many are still dying from curable diseases. One-in-six people still lack safe drinking water; women and girls globally remain excluded or oppressed; and “the planet is, quite literally, melting,” he said.

“Moreover, we know that our demands for water, food, energy and housing are already unsustainable,” he added.

There is progress, but generally not at a sufficient speed to realize the SDGs by 2030 – Marie Chatardová, ECOSOC President

Thirdly, he painted a grim picture of how “the world would be a very scary place” without the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)). Without the 17 Goals “unilateralism, protectionism and extremism would have even larger draws.”

Finally, he said better financing was as urgent priority as we “do not have enough money to meet our goals...But it is out there,” he stated. “We just need to go beyond our traditional models to get it.”

For her part, Economic and Social Council ([ECOSOC](#)) President, Marie Chatardová, examined progress that, at first glimpse, looked positive.

She pointed to extreme poverty, saying that even at one-third of the 1990 value, it was still imprisoning 10.9 per cent of world’s population. Moreover, while 71 per cent have access to electricity – a 10 per cent jump – a billion people still remain in the dark.

“There is progress, but generally not at a sufficient speed to realize the SDGs by 2030,” Ms. Chatardová said.

Despite that backdrop, Ms. Chatardová argued that the 2030 Agenda was being translated into concrete policies and measures: “It seems new ways of making policies are taking root, with many examples of more inclusive and evidence-based approaches,” she said.

Underscoring the importance of science and technology in advancing the goals, she outlined how they are being used to close gaps, such as on investing in renewable energy production and lowering prices; and countering major challenges in cities, from boosting housing affordability to accessing public spaces.

Ms. Chatardová stressed that the same level of engagement must be maintained in the years ahead, urging the world’s leaders to reaffirm their political commitment to the Agenda in 2019, when the high-level forum will also meet in September during the General Assembly.



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohamed addresses the opening of the Ministerial segment of 2018 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed also highlighted progress in some areas, including maternal and child mortality; tackling childhood marriage; addressing global unemployment; and cutting the rate of forest-loss around the globe.

She also stressed that we are either moving too slowly, or losing momentum, citing that for the first time in a decade, the overall number of people who are undernourished has increased – from 777 million people in 2015, to 815 million in 2016 – fundamentally undermining our commitment to leaving no one behind.

Taking the podium, [UN Youth Envoy](#) Jayathma Wickramanayake, drew attention to the world's 1.8 billion youth between the ages of 10 and 24, who have a key role to play in the 2030 Agenda.

“Young people will be the ones leading this agenda in the years to come. In fact, in many places they already are,” upheld the youth envoy, arguing that having been brought up in a world of technological innovation, today's digitally-savvy youth are the world's most interconnected generation ever.

“To solve the most pressing issues of our time, we must tap into the dynamism of young innovators, activists, entrepreneurs and advocates, who have the potential to disrupt the status quo and be a strong force for positive change,” Ms. Wickramanayake declared.

UN chief condemns violence against civilian protesters in Nicaragua

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on Monday deplored and condemned the ongoing violence against civilians, including against students, in Nicaragua.

Speaking on behalf of Mr. Guterres at the UN Headquarters, Deputy Spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters that “the use of lethal force is not only unacceptable but is also in itself an obstacle to obtaining a political solution to the current crisis”.

The UN chief called on the Nicaraguan Government to “provide effective protection to its population against attacks, ensure respect for human rights and establish accountability for the violence.”

According to media reports, at least 10 people were shot dead in Nicaragua on Sunday as police and paramilitary groups supporting the government, sought to remove roadblocks set up by anti-government demonstrators, who have been demanding that President Daniel Ortega step down.

The current wave of anti-government protests began following the announcement of changes to Nicaragua’s pension system on 18 April, which have since been scrapped.

The government says that the protesters are attempting to stage a coup d’etat against the administration of Mr. Ortega. It recently launched “Operation Clean-up” to try to remove the barricades and retake full control of urban areas.

Hundreds have been reportedly killed since the protests began.

Earlier this month, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, called on the Nicaraguan authorities to “take real steps” to prevent further loss of life in the country.

“Status quo in Libya cannot be sustained,” UN Envoy tells Security Council

Despite encouraging signs on the political and humanitarian front, efforts

must be sustained and intensified in Libya to avoid further “economic collapse, the breakdown of public services, and more frequent and intense outbreaks of violence”, said the United Nations Special Envoy for the country on Monday.

Ghassan Salamé, was [briefing the Security Council by video-link](#) from the capital Tripoli, on the situation in Libya and progress in implementing the UN Action Plan, unveiled during the General Assembly’s session in September 2017, to support the country’s recovery.

“For the first months of this year, Libya enjoyed relative quiet from military actions”, Mr. Salamé stated, highlighting that the number of civilians killed by military action was down to four in March and five in April. “Regrettably, the last two months have been marked by military actions and violent developments,” he added, noting that had exposed “frustrations with regards to the distribution of wealth and the endemic plundering of resources” across the country.

“Concerns remain over human rights abuses, including summary execution and extra-judiciary arrests,” he added, reiterating the call for “all parties to the conflict to fully respect international humanitarian law, including by taking all feasible precautions to protect civilians.”

Since armed conflict erupted in Libya in 2011, close to 200,000 have been internally displaced. Drawing attention to the dire humanitarian situation in Libya, he said: “The current situation of internally displaced people is unsustainable from both a political and financial standpoint, given the lack of available resources to support them. They should be given the right to integrate in their host communities, as efforts are made to facilitate their return.”

Among encouraging developments cited by Mr. Salamé was the holding of local elections in various localities thanks to the support of the UN on the ground; the reestablishment of the UN office in Tripoli and soon in Benghazi; and the launch of a consultative process to ensure the active participation of Libyans in the design of “the future of their nation.”

“This bottom-up process is an integral part of the Action Plan,” he explained. “It puts the Libyan people at the heart of the political process, whoever or wherever they may be. For many communities, this was the first time they had been actively engaged in the political process and consulted.”

The Special Envoy said the consultations had “taught us that the Libyan people want clear and effective leadership by legitimate bodies, formed through elections,” adding that “members of the House of Representatives should take notice. Libyans are demanding elections, and are becoming impatient with those who find multiple ways and means to postpone this moment.”

Mr. Salamé urged the members of the Security Council to press parliamentarians “to deliver” on what he termed their “historic

responsibility, and achieve this goal in a timely fashion.”

“The status quo in Libya cannot be sustained,” he concluded. “If we are to avert this and support the Libyan people to chart a course to the future they deserve, the unified support of this Council, Member States involved in Libya and our partner regional organisations, is vital.”

[In Gaza, UN envoy urges Israel, Palestinian factions to step back from brink of a war that ‘everybody will lose’](#)

With a ceasefire largely holding after a day-long flare-up in fighting between Israel and Gaza militants, the United Nation envoy on the Middle East peace process was in the enclave on Sunday urging Israelis and Palestinians to pull back from the brink of a confrontation “that nobody wants...and everybody will lose.”

“Yesterday we were [on the brink of war](#). And it has taken the concerted efforts of everyone to make sure that we step back from confrontation,” UN [Special Coordinator](#) Nickolay Mladenov told a press conference in the Gaza Strip earlier on Sunday.

Telling Palestinians in Gaza that he knew the difficult conditions they lived in and how hard it was to believe anyone who tells them that their lives would be improved, Mr. Mladenov appealed “to all Palestinians, to all parents of all children in Gaza today to step back and keep the protests peaceful.”

He appealed to the Palestinian factions to not provoke incidents at the fence, to stop the firing of rockets and mortars, to stop the incendiary kites and to “give peace a chance.”

“I appeal to Israel, to be very restrained in its responses to the situation in Gaza. I appeal to snipers not to shoot children,” said the envoy, adding: “I appeal to everybody to step back from the brink!”

Mr. Mladenov laid out in detail the grim series of events that had led to this most recent face-off between Israel and Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip, citing the rapid deterioration in the humanitarian situation with the collapse of the economy and ongoing water and electricity shortages; the stalled Palestinian reconciliation process; and the dire security situation in the wake of Israel’s deadly response to the recent series of [Palestinian protests that began at the Gaza border fence](#) in March.

I appeal to everybody to step back from the brink! – UN Special Coordinator on the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov

“I want to begin by expressing deepest condolences to the parents of all the children whose lives have been lost in the past few weeks; to all journalists and to all medical professionals, who have lost their lives in the line of duty,” said Mr. Mladenov.

For any progress to be made in tackling these challenges and easing the current flaring tensions, he called for concerted efforts by all to pull back from “a confrontation that nobody wants, nobody needs and in which everyone will lose.”

Further, the international community has the responsibility to act immediately and meet the expectations not only of providing aid to the people of Gaza, but of designing a political path to move forward,” he said, and key allies in this effort would be the Palestinian people in Gaza themselves.

Getting the reconciliation process back on track was vitally important and he appealed to the leadership of both Hamas and Fatah and all Palestinian factions, to take Egypt’s initiatives very seriously.

“The only realistic perspective today is this: avoid war, fix the humanitarian problems of Gaza, and get back to the reconciliation process.”

“If we are able to do this, we can achieve a lot. But we need and I hope we will have the full cooperation of all Palestinians and all Israelis who are sick and tired of war and conflict, who want to live in peace, and who want to see their lives not constantly threatened by rockets or air strikes,” Mr. Mladenov underscored.

The full transcript of Special Coordinator Mladenov’s press remarks can be found [here](#).