

'Worst devastation I have seen,' says UN refugee envoy Angelina Jolie, as she visits West Mosul

After visiting the shattered streets of West Mosul over the weekend, the long-standing United Nations Refugee Agency envoy, Angelina Jolie, said that she had never seen such devastation, in her 17-years of working in the field.

Mosul was liberated by an Iraqi government-led coalition last July, just over three years after the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL (also known as Da'esh) seized Iraq's second city, and following an intense battle which lasted for months.

"This is the worst devastation I have seen in all my years with [UNHCR](#)," Ms. Jolie [lamented](#), which is saying a lot, considering that this is her 61st mission – and fifth to Iraq – since she started representing the agency in 2001.

She arrived in the city on the second day of Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday marking the end of Ramadan. After walking among the bombed-out buildings and meeting families beginning to return, she urged the world not to forget their agonies nor ignore the struggles they continue to face.

"These people have lost everything, and the trauma and the loss that they have suffered is unparalleled," the Special Envoy said in front of the ruins of al-Nuri Mosque in the Old City.

She marveled at the ability of residents to carry on: "I have no words for the strength it must take to rebuild after loss like this," Ms. Jolie asserted. "They are clearing their homes with their own hands, and volunteering and helping each other. But they need our assistance," she added.

One local family showed Ms. Jolie the damage to their ancestral home, built a century ago. Mohamed, 47, spoke of how he was born and married there, and how a mortar tore through the roof one morning last June, gravely injuring his 17-year-old daughter. When they carried her to get medical care, he said, they were turned away and she bled to death.

"I want to rebuild the house and come back here," Mohamed said. "Even if I have painful memories in this house, where else would I go? I have to come back home."

Throughout Mosul, some 40,000 homes need rehabilitation. UNHCR and its partner, Human Appeal, have begun providing cash assistance to the returning families who are overwhelmed by the lack of shelter, infrastructure, services and jobs – at risk for sliding deeper into poverty.

In the al-Zanjely district, Ms. Jolie met Hassan, a 33-year-old vegetable vendor who spoke of losing his home twice: first when militants confiscated it, and then when an air strike reduced it to rubble. He finished the first phase of rebuilding, in time for Eid, erecting several new walls, windows and doorways. Soon he will begin work on the roof, he told UNHCR.

He, his wife and their three young children now rent space in a modest house with another family and the children are back in school.

“This is my country, my people, my neighbours. Why would I go? One doesn’t leave his home.” Hassan said.

Such resolve may be a crucial element in building a stable future in Mosul, Iraq and the region. But people like Hassan will need more support from a world that has turned its eyes away.

“It is deeply upsetting,” Ms. Jolie said, “that people who have endured unparalleled brutality have so little as they try, somehow, to rebuild the lives they once had.”

[UN mobilizes in Rohingya camps to support babies born of rape, as young mothers face stigma](#)

Members of the mainly-Muslim minority community began fleeing Myanmar’s Rakhine state last August following a military crackdown targeting extremists, during which homes were destroyed, men and boys killed, and countless women and girls raped.

In early May, UN News [published a special report](#) highlighting the concerns being voiced by several leading UN officials over the legacy of what Andrew Gilmour, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, described as a “frenzy of sexual violence”.

On Tuesday, the world marks the [International Day](#) for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, and we have been finding out how some of the survivors have been coping, now that dozens of children of rape have been born – and what UN agencies are doing to provide them with vital services and support.

“Sameera” (not her real name) is among the Rohingya refugees now sheltering in the crowded camps of the Cox’s Bazar region in south-eastern Bangladesh.

The 17-year-old had only been married for a couple of months when her husband was killed.

She was raped just days after his death, when three soldiers showed up at her door, together with two other Rohingya girls, who were also raped.

“As I will give birth to the baby, he or she will be mine, no matter who the father is,” she told the [UN Children’s Fund \(UNICEF\)](#).

‘Forgotten victims of war’

Since August, more than [16,000 babies](#) have been born in the refugee camps, according to the UN agency.

It is difficult to determine exactly how many were conceived through rape, said [Pramila Patten](#), the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

“You also have the stigma of a pregnancy as a result of rape which makes it very hard for (women) to come out openly with the fact of their pregnancy,” she told *UN News* last month, shortly after returning from a mission to the Kutupalong camp, one of the largest refugee camps in the world.

“And in fact, there are many reports from local Rohingyas that many girls, especially young adolescents, are actually hiding the fact of their pregnancy and will never seek medical care, for example, for the delivery.”

UNICEF has collected testimonies from several women and girls like “Sameera,” whose children are among what UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) has called the “[forgotten victims of war](#).”

Conceived through conflict-related rape, these boys and girls grow up struggling with their identity, or fall victim to stigma and shame. At the same time, their mothers are marginalized or even shunned by their communities.

For the past three years, the UN has designated 19 June as [the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict](#) to promote solidarity with survivors.

Ms. Patten’s office is co-hosting an [event](#) at UN Headquarters in New York to mark Tuesday’s international day, where strategies will be discussed on how to change the perception that these children and their mothers are somehow complicit in crimes committed by the groups that violated them.



UNICEF/Brian Sokol

Sitting in her bamboo and plastic shelter in a refugee camp in Bangladesh, Rohingya refugee, Maryam, recounts the events that forced her from her home in Myanmar following a sexual assault that left her pregnant at 16 years old.

Midwives and monsoons

Back in Bangladesh, the arrival of the monsoon winds and rains just over a week ago is making life even more difficult for the Rohingya refugees and the humanitarians assisting them.

More than 720,000 Rohingya have arrived in Cox's Bazar as of the end of May, according to the UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)), joining some 200,000 others who had fled earlier waves of persecution and discrimination.

UN agencies are responding to the overwhelming needs, though a [\\$951 million humanitarian plan](#) is less than 20 per cent funded.

Since the start of the crisis, the UN Population Fund ([UNFPA](#)) has [deployed](#) 60 highly skilled midwives to the area who are also trained in clinical management of rape and family planning counselling.

Nineteen women-friendly spaces have also been created in the camps.

UNFPA said key among "protection challenges" is scaling up assistance to survivors of gender-based violence, and other vulnerable populations, including through psychosocial support and counselling, and psychological first aid.

So far, 47,000 Rohingya mothers-to-be have received antenatal check-ups while 1,700 babies were safely delivered in clinics supported by the Fund.

UNFPA recently Tweeted that its midwifery and reproductive health services

were still available “24/7” even though there was no electricity in the camps.

“Midwives and case workers have weathered the storms and walked on slippery and waterlogged roads to our facilities,” its office in Bangladesh further [reported](#).

Reluctance to return

Meanwhile, an [agreement](#) signed earlier this month by the UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)), the UN Development Fund ([UNDP](#)) and the Government of Myanmar could pave the way for thousands of Rohingya to return home.

It also will give the two UN entities access to Rakhine State.

Knut Ostby, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Myanmar, said the most important conditions for the safe and voluntary return of the refugees are citizenship rights and an end to violence.

Though resident in Myanmar for centuries, the mostly Muslim Rohingya are stateless.

“There will need to be programmes for reconciliation, for social cohesion. And these will have to be linked to development programmes. It is not enough to deal with this politically,” he [told UN News](#).

However, Rohingya women and girls are wary about going back to Myanmar, according to Ms. Patten.

“They would be prepared to return only if they have full citizenship rights, but they doubt whether that’s possible. They are very realistic about it,” she said, while also echoing their concerns about safety.

“They all seem to request some kind of a UN mission presence in Myanmar should they go back. But they do not look very hopeful. It’s not the first time that there has been this kind of exodus. And for them, there’s simply no trust.”

Ms. Patten said overall, the Rohingya refugees are pinning their hopes on possible action by the UN Security Council.

A delegation of the 15 ambassadors [travelled](#) to Bangladesh and Myanmar just ahead of her visit to Cox’s Bazar.

“Now they put a face to the Security Council,” she said. “And they are expecting no less that the members of the Security Council translate their shock and their outrage into concrete action.”

[For video game addiction, now read official 'gaming disorder': World Health Organization](#)

The UN health agency has for the first time, tagged compulsive video [gaming](#) as a mental health condition in its updated classification manual, released on Monday.

“For gaming disorder to be diagnosed, the behavior pattern must be of sufficient severity to result in significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning and would normally have been evident for at least 12 months,” said the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO).

While some media reports welcomed the formal designation of “gaming disorder” within WHO’s [International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems](#) (ICD) as helpful to sufferers, others saw it as causing needless concern among parents.

“There are few truer snapshots of a country’s wellbeing than its [health statistics](#),” said WHO. While broad economic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product may skew impressions of individual prosperity, data on disease and death reveal how a population is truly faring.

According to WHO, ICD is the “bedrock for health statistics,” codifying the human condition from birth to death, including all factors that influence health.

These statistics form the basis for healthcare provision everywhere and are at the core of mapping disease trends and epidemics; helping governments decide how money is spent on health services.

Crucially, in a world of 7.4 billion people speaking nearly 7,000 languages, ICD provides a common vocabulary for recording, reporting and monitoring health problems, says WHO.

“Fifty years ago, it would be unlikely that a disease, such as schizophrenia, would be diagnosed similarly in Japan, Kenya and Brazil. Now, however, if a doctor in another country cannot read a person’s medical records, they will know what the ICD code means,” WHO explained.

Without the ICD’s ability to provide standardized, consistent data, each country or region would have its own classifications that would most likely only be relevant locally.

“Standardization is the key that unlocks global health data analysis,” said WHO.

Ready for the 21st century

The eleventh edition of ICD was released on Monday to allow Member States time to plan implementation before it is presented for adoption at the 2019 World Health Assembly.

Noting that it has been updated for the 21st century WHO said: “Over a decade in the making, this version is a vast improvement on ICD-10,” adding that it now reflects critical advances in science and medicine.

Moreover, the guidelines can also be integrated with modern electronic health applications and information systems – making implementation significantly easier, vulnerable to fewer mistakes and allowing more detail to be recorded.

[UN rights chief slams ‘unconscionable’ US border policy of separating migrant children from parents](#)

As part of his final global update, the United Nations human rights chief on Monday voiced his deep concern over recently-adopted United States border protection policies that have seen hundreds of migrant children forcibly separated from their parents.

“In the past six weeks, nearly two thousand children have been [forcibly separated](#) from their parents,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said in his opening remarks to the 38th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva – the last session before his four-year term expires in August.

Mr. Zeid said that the American Association of Pediatrics in the US, had called it a cruel practice of “government-sanctioned child abuse” which may cause “irreparable harm” with “lifelong consequences”.

“The thought that any State would seek to deter parents by inflicting such abuse on children is unconscionable,” he said, calling on the United States to immediately put a stop to the policy, and ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In a statement issued on Monday, UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) defended the rights of migrant and refugee children, but did not single out the US.

“[As a matter of principle](#), the Secretary-General believes that refugees and

migrants should always be treated with respect and dignity, and in accordance with existing international law," said a statement issued by his Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric.

"Children must not be traumatized by being separated from their parents. Family unity must be preserved," said the statement.

The human rights situation in the US was one of the many topics to be discussed at the latest Human Rights Council session, which runs through 6 July.

Mr. Zeid also expressed his deep concern about a bill presented to Parliament in Hungary last month which, if adopted, would effectively criminalize human rights monitoring at borders and within border zones, as well as criminalizing the provision of information, legal aid and assistance to migrants.

The High Commissioner stressed that "people do not lose their human rights by virtue of crossing a border without a visa".

At the onset of his speech, the UN human rights chief warned of the return of "chauvinistic nationalism" around the world, and urged leading politicians to combat this "menace that stalks our future."

"Is it not the case, for example," he asked, "that historically, the most destructive force to imperil the world has been chauvinistic nationalism – when raised to feral extremes by self-serving, callous leaders, and amplified by mass ideologies which themselves repress freedom."

He said that the UN had been conceived to prevent the rebirth of chauvinistic nationalism, which was a primary cause of The Second World War.

"Chauvinistic nationalism is the polar opposite of the UN, its very antonym and enemy. So why are we so submissive to its return? Why are we in the UN so silent?" he exclaimed.

"The UN's raison d'être is the protection of peace, rights, justice and social progress. Its operating principle is therefore equally clear: only by pursuing the opposite to nationalism – only when States all work for each other, for everyone, for all people, for the human rights of all people – can peace be attainable," he added.

Mr. Zeid said that that over the last few years, he and his Office had rightly lived by the motto that "only fearlessness is adequate to our task at this point in time", adding that they were "not ducking for cover, or using excuses or resorting to euphemisms" but displaying "fearlessness approaching that shown by human rights defenders around the world – for only by speaking out can we begin to combat the growing menace of chauvinistic nationalism that stalks our future," he said.

High Commissioner highlights abuse challenges around the world

On Syria, he said that the horrific violations and abuses committed since the

conflict began – principally by the government and its allies, but including also the violent extremists and their supporters – have destroyed much of the country along with many of its people.

On Myanmar, he said, there are clear indications of well-organised, widespread and systematic attacks continuing to target the Rohingyas in Rakhine State as an ethnic group, amounting possibly to acts of genocide if so established by a court of law.

On North Korea, he said that “making human rights part of peace talks contributes to meaningful and sustainable peace in the long-term.”

Reflecting on how being in the top UN human rights job had affected him personally, Mr. Zeid said that it had been “the hardest, most challenging, most fulfilling responsibility I have held”. He noted that it had affected his relationship with the country of his birth, Jordan, which he had previously represented as UN Ambassador, for seven years up to 2007.

“However, this price is small in comparison to that paid by so many human rights defenders, and civil society more broadly, who sacrifice so much more, again and again, and who to me are the real heroes, genuine heroes of the human rights movement,” he said.

FROM THE FIELD: Rohingya babies conceived out of ‘incomprehensible brutality’

A photojournalist has been talking of the “incomprehensible brutality” described to him by Rohingya refugees who are carrying babies after being raped.

Brian Sokol travelled with the [UN Children’s Fund](#), UNICEF, to Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh to interview and photograph Rohingya refugee women who had fled Myanmar over the last year fearing violence and persecution.

He met 14 pregnant women who had been raped, including a 16-year old girl who he calls Maryam.

He tells her story in a personal blog from the field:

<https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/rohingya-shrouded-maternity/>