

Joint UN-Red Cross appeal to end rising sexual violence as a weapon of war

Sexual violence in conflict – and the stigma that survivors often face – must be addressed urgently, [UN chief António Guterres](#) said on Monday, in a joint appeal for more funding and international action, together with the head of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer.

Describing how he was “frequently horrified” by the first-hand accounts of survivors in his previous role as head of the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), Mr. Guterres said that only last year, Rohingya refugees who had fled into Bangladesh spoke of the mass gang-rape of women and girls in their homes, before they fled northern Myanmar.

“The world is growing ever more aware of the ubiquity of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence,” he said. “We must do everything in our power to end the horror and stigma that affects hundreds of thousands of women and girls, as well as men and boys, worldwide.”

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His comments were echoed by women’s rights defender Julienne Lusenge, who heads a coalition of organizations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that help victims of sexual violence seek justice through the judicial system.

“During this month of February, our medical centre, Karibuni Wa Mama in Bunia, has received in a week 28 children, including a two year-old” who were all “victims of serious sexual violence,” said Ms. Lusenge, who is the Director of the Fund for Congolese Women and President of Solidarité Feminine pour la Paix et le Développement Integral (SOFEPADI).

“We keep receiving women...sexual slaves of various armed groups in our different offices. They are suffering from sexual slavery but also forced marriage, forced labour, mental, physical and economic violence as well as inhuman and degrading treatment.”

Appeal for \$27 million, and for countries to ‘re-state their commitment’

Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross ([ICRC](#)), warned that the world was facing a grave protection failure amid

rising sexual violence in conflict.

“We are asking States to re-state their commitment to international humanitarian law,” he said. “The law is clear: rape and other forms of sexual violence are violations. The Geneva Conventions made this prohibition clear and universal and yet 70 years on, we continue to face failures of behaviour and accountability.”

In an appeal for \$27 million to fund a better response to the issue in 14 countries, Mr. Maurer described the lasting damage caused by sexual and gender-based violence, which is used as a tactic of war to dehumanize victims and destabilize communities.

“We work with the survivors of horrific acts, including with women and girls given as rewards in war, fathers whose sons have been abducted and raped, young women fleeing disaster and conflict only to be sexually enslaved, and with detainees when sexual atrocities are wielded as means of torture,” he said.

Following the joint appeal in Geneva, the United Nations and Red Cross pledged to listen to survivors and victims of these crimes, to enable their voices to be heard and to support them through local organizations – particularly women’s organizations – in conflict zones.

In addition, the UN will promote women’s participation in conflict prevention and resolution and in all formal peace processes; instruct its peacekeeping operations to ensure they have systems in place to prevent conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence; and pursue justice for victims and survivors.

An additional way to tackle the prevalence of such violence against women, girls – and to a lesser extent, boys and men – is to promote gender equality, Mr. Guterres told journalists in Geneva.

“If we want to address the problems of violence, sexual violence against women and girls and also, indirectly, with a positive impact on sexual violence against men and boys,” said the UN chief, “it’s absolutely essential to look into the questions of power in our societies”.

“And, maybe you call it feminism, I can tell that the most important reform I am making at the United Nations is to make sure we have gender parity at all levels of the organization.”

Youth, indigenous peoples, migrants

and refugees boost hope for human rights: Guterres

Addressing the Geneva-based forum on the opening day of its [40th session](#), Mr Guterres underlined the Council's key role as the "epicentre" for dialogue and cooperation on all human rights issues: civil, political, economic, social and cultural.

Beyond its doors, other key voices were also demanding their rights and making their voices heard, he said, particularly "youth, indigenous people, migrants and refugees".

Milestones have been reached in recent years, that are key to human rights, the UN chief maintained. "One billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in just a generation," he said. "More than two billion people have gained access to improved sanitation. And more than 2.5 billion people have gained access to improved drinking water resources. The mortality rate for children under five has declined by almost 60 per cent."

Despite this, the UN chief insisted that ongoing gender inequality remains a major modern-day challenge: "Untold women and girls still face insecurity, violence and other violations of their rights every day," he insisted, while glass ceilings "abound".

"It will take two centuries to close the gap in economic empowerment," he continued. "I do not accept a world that tells my granddaughters that economic equality can wait for their granddaughter's granddaughters. I know you agree. Our world cannot wait."

Human rights 'is DNA of UN's founding Charter'

In his 15-minute address, Mr. Guterres touched on his own experience living under the dictatorship of António Salazar, the authoritarian ruler of Portugal who oppressed both his fellow citizens at home and the people of the then-Portuguese colonies in Africa.

"It was the human rights struggles and successes of others around the world that moved us to believe in change and to make that change happen," Mr. Guterres said of Portugal's struggle to rid itself of the Salazar regime. "Human rights inspire and drive progress. And that truth is the animating spirit of this Council. It is the DNA of our Organization's founding [Charter](#). And it is vital to addressing the ills of our world."

'Clear threats' must be addressed: General Assembly President

The Secretary-General's concern about conflict and instability around the globe was echoed by the President of the UN General Assembly, [Maria Fernanda Espinosa](#), in her address.

“Political crises, wars, transnational organized crime, social exclusion and lack of access to justice, constitute clear threats that demand adequate answers from this Council and from the entire international system for the protection of human rights,” she said.

In common with the UN chief, Ms. Espinosa expressed concern about the widening gap between the planet’s haves and have-nots.

“Perhaps one of the most sensitive challenges for the human rights agenda is inequality,” she said. “The concentration of wealth has increased to such an extent that, in 2018, 26 individuals had more money than the 3,800 million poorest people on the planet.”

Climate change a priority that States ignore at their peril: Bachelet

In her address to the Council, Michelle Bachelet, [High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), highlighted the dangers of ignoring climate change.

“How can any State’s interests be advanced by policies that damage the well-being of all humans?” she said. “This is true of climate change; you may know the saying, ‘If you think economic interests are more important than environment, try counting your money while holding your breath.’”

Ms. Bachelet also hailed the young climate activists inspired by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg.

The 16-year-old who had grabbed the attention of the world’s media, recently travelled to the Davos World Economic Forum (WEF) in Switzerland where she called for the world’s decision makers to take swifter action to limit carbon dioxide emissions and reduce global temperature rise to 2°C above pre-industrial levels.

“In recent weeks I have watched children marching for sound climate change policies and other measures,” the High Commissioner said. “As a parent, a grandparent and quite simply as a human being, they inspire in me a fierce determination to continue our struggle to uphold their rights.”

Hate speech ‘spreads like wildfire’

In addition to improving women’s rights, the UN Secretary-General expressed alarm about the “shrinking civil space in every region of the globe”; and a rise in harassment, attacks and inflammatory rhetoric.

“Hate speech is a menace to democratic values, social stability and peace,” Mr Guterres said. “It spreads like wildfire through social media, the internet and conspiracy theories. It is abetted by public discourses that stigmatizes women, minorities, migrants and refugees and any so-called ‘other’. Indeed, hate is moving into the mainstream, in liberal democracies and authoritarian States alike.”

To tackle this, the UN chief announced the creation of a fast-track strategy

to scale up the organization's response to hate speech and present a global plan of action, headed by his Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide, [Adama Dieng](#).

This kind of initiative was necessary in light of the political capital earned at the expense of migrants and refugees, who some leaders had blamed for a rise in crime and terrorism, the Secretary-General insisted.

"We must re-establish the integrity of the international refugee protection regime and continue to work for common values and international cooperation to reassert rights and help protect people from ruthless traffickers, smugglers and other predators," he said.

The current session of the Human Rights Council continues until 22 March.

[Tensions escalate in Venezuela, civilians killed and injured: top UN officials lament excessive use of force by authorities](#)

As tensions escalated on Saturday at various points along Venezuela's borders with Colombia and Brazil, as well as within the country itself, resulting in the death and injury of various civilians, the United Nations chief, António Guterres, and the head of the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)), Michelle Bachelet, expressed their shock and appealed for calm.

The UN Secretary-General [called](#) for violence to be "avoided at any cost and for lethal force not to be used in any circumstances". He urged "all actors to lower tensions and pursue every effort to prevent further escalation".

Ms. Bachelet condemned "the excessive use of force used by the Venezuelan security forces, as well the involvement of pro-government elements", which have resulted in at least four confirmed deaths and more than 300 injuries on Friday and Saturday, according to OHCHR.

"People have been shot and killed, others have reportedly received wounds from which they will never completely recover, including losing eyes," she deplored. "These are disgraceful scenes. The Venezuelan government must stop its forces from using excessive force against unarmed protesters and ordinary citizens."

Ms. Bachelet said she had received reports of numerous and, in some cases prolonged, violent incidents, at different points along the borders with

Colombia and Brazil, as the Venezuelan security forces tried to halt the aid supplies coming into the country through closed border points.

OHCHR also received several reports pointing at the involvement of armed pro-government elements in the violent attacks on protestors, and Bachelet urged the Government “to rein in these groups and arrest those among them who have used force against protestors”.

“The use of proxy forces has a long and sinister history in the region,” she added. “And it is very alarming to see them operating openly in this way in Venezuela. The Government can, and must, stop them from exacerbating an already highly inflammable situation.”

[UN and partners to hold conference seeking urgently needed funds to save millions in Yemen from ‘horrific’ plight](#)

Preparations are being finalized at the UN for a \$4.2 billion [appeal](#) to scale up help to millions of people in [Yemen](#), where years of war have created the world’s worst humanitarian emergency.

But the situation remains “horrific” for people everywhere in the war-torn country, according to Jens Laerke, spokesperson from the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA):

“It has really been a horrific year for millions and millions of people in Yemen who are literally balancing on the edge of starvation and indeed, famine. And they need massive amounts of other kinds of aid: in the health sector, water and sanitation, education for their children, and so on and so forth. We are really at a crossroads.”

He stressed that while the UN and its humanitarian partners were indeed aware of, but “we need to address the root causes to find a political solution but meanwhile, while all this happens, people are suffering, and we have reached a scale that we have not seen in living memory.”

Last year, humanitarian programmes were scaled up to reach eight million people with direct assistance per month, up from 3.5 million in 2017.

In a [briefing](#) to the [Security Council](#) earlier this week, UN emergency relief chief [Mark Lowcock](#) explained that although Hudaydah is calmer than in recent months, the violence has continued elsewhere.

Clashes have even escalated in some front-line areas – particularly in Hajjah, in north-west Yemen, he said, such that about 80 per cent of the population – some 24 million people – need humanitarian assistance and protection.

Of that number, 14.3 million have “acute” needs – 27 per cent higher than last year, OCHA says, and two-thirds of the country’s districts are in a “pre-famine” situation.

“Some 20 million people need help securing food, including nearly 10 million who are just a step away from famine,” he said. “Nearly 240,000 of those people are right now facing catastrophic levels of hunger.”

In addition, almost 20 million people lack access to adequate healthcare, and nearly 18 million don’t have enough clean water or access to adequate sanitation.

Led by the governments of Sweden and Switzerland and with UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) in attendance, the Yemen appeal also aims to raise awareness that more than three million people – including two million children – are acutely malnourished.

Some 3.3 million have also been forced from their homes, including 685,000 who have fled fighting along the west coast since June 2018.

“It’s a plan that aims to reach up to 19 million people in the country,” said OCHA spokesperson Jens Laerke. “It requests \$4.2 billion, that is the scale of the crisis – it is the largest country appeal that has ever been launched after four years of almost continual conflict...Last year, we received \$2.6 billion which is the equivalent of 83 per cent of what we asked, which is around \$3 billion.”

According to the UN human rights office, OHCHR, the total number of civilian casualties since March 2015 stands at 18,173.

That includes 7,025 killed and 11,148 injured – “not the whole picture”, spokesperson Rupert Colville told journalists in Geneva, since this total only refers to victims that OHCHR staff have been able to independently verify.

“When there’s a major incident we try to get staff there, which is how we are also able to identify in most cases the likely perpetrator,” he said, “but we wouldn’t claim that this is every single case, because there are some places we can’t get to, and of course some casualties may simply not be reported.”

Of those killed in the conflict in the last four years, OHCHR has attributed 4,585 deaths to actions by the Saudi-led international coalition, 1,448 to the Houthi opposition militia and their allies, and 367 to extremists Al Qaeda and ISIL.

[Another somber milestone for Afghanistan: 2018 saw record-high civilians killed in decade – UN report](#)

With over 3,800 civilian women, children and men killed in just one year, Afghanistan has hit yet another “deeply disturbing and wholly unacceptable” record, according to a new report issued on Sunday by the UN political mission in the country ([UNAMA](#)) and the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)).

Fighting and brutal violence claimed exactly 3,804 civilian lives in 2018 – including 927 children, another tragic record for the year – according to data carefully collected by the UN. The number represents an increase of 11 per cent compared to 2017.

In addition, 7,189 people were injured in 2018, 5 per cent more than in the previous year.

Overall, close to two thirds of the civilian casualties were caused by armed opposition groups, including the Taliban, Islamic State and other undetermined groups. However, civilians were also collateral victims of pro-Government forces (including the Afghan military and international forces) responsible for close to one quarter of all civilian casualties.

According to the report, the increase is largely due to a spike in suicide attacks by armed opposition groups, as well as increased harm to civilians from aerial and search operations by pro-Government forces.

“The report’s rigorously researched findings show that the level of harm and suffering inflicted on civilians in Afghanistan is deeply disturbing and wholly unacceptable,” said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN’s Special Representative for Afghanistan. “All parties need to take immediate and additional concrete steps to stop a further escalation in the number of civilians harmed and lives destroyed.”

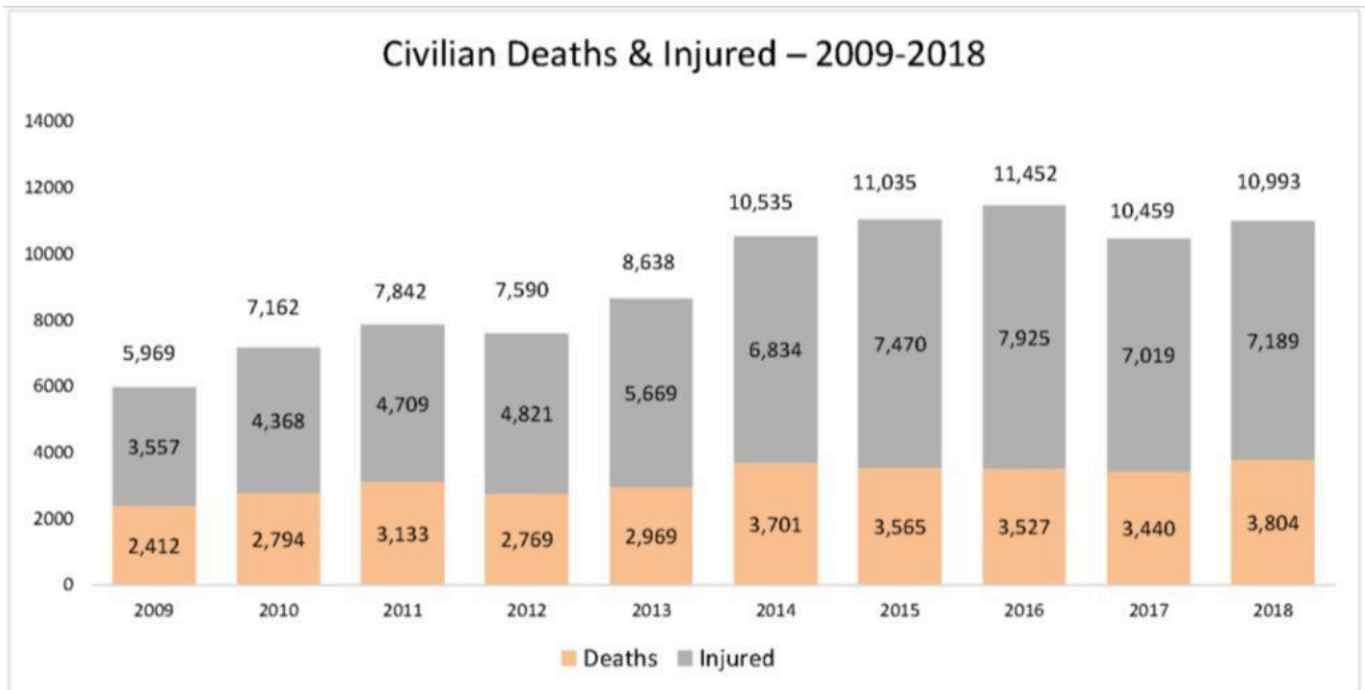
The report is the UN’s tenth annual report documenting the plight of civilians in the Afghan conflict: in a decade, more than 32,000 civilians have been killed and around 60,000 have been injured.

The conflict, which has now gone on for a total of four decades, has claimed thousands and thousands more lives.

“It is time to put an end to this human misery and tragedy. The best way to halt the killings and maiming of civilians is to stop the fighting. That is why there is all the more need now to use all our efforts to bring about peace. I urge all parties to seize every opportunity to do so,” stated Mr.

Yamamoto, who also heads UNAMA.

[Election-related violence](#) was particularly deadly for civilians in 2018, including on 20 October – polling day – when UNAMA recorded the highest number of civilian casualties in any single day for the whole year.

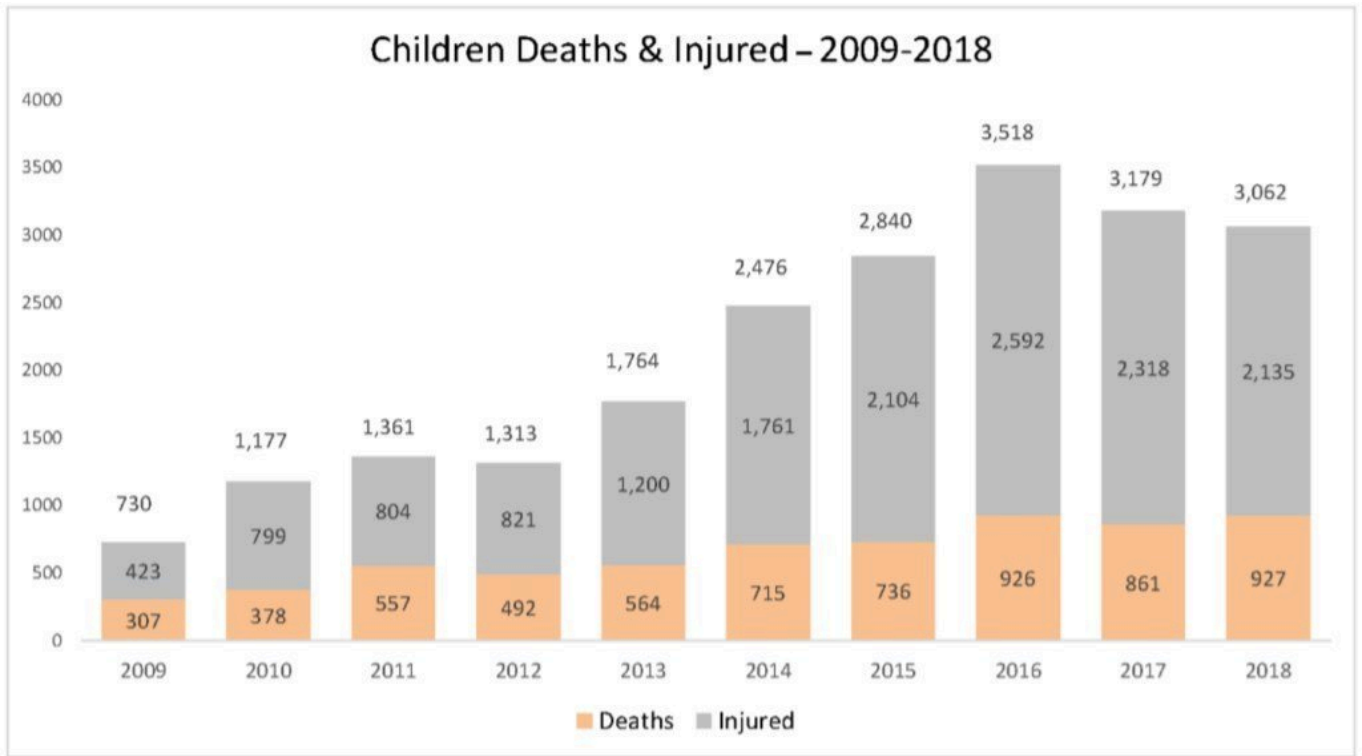


UNAMA report

Number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, 2009-2018.

“The conflict in Afghanistan continues to kill far too many civilians and has caused long-lasting suffering, both physical and psychological, to countless others,” said the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet.

“The fact that the number of children killed this year is the highest on record, is particularly shocking. In addition to the lives lost, the dire security situation is preventing many Afghans from enjoying their economic, social and cultural rights, with thousands of children already handicapped for life because of attacks on schools and medical facilities,” she added, calling on all parties to the conflict to fully respect international humanitarian and international human rights law to protect the lives of all civilians.



UNAMA report

Children killed and injured in Afghanistan, 2009-2018.