

Half of Afghan children out of school, due to conflict, poverty, discrimination: UNICEF

Nearly 3.7 million Afghan children are missing out on school, due to on-going conflict, grinding poverty, and discrimination against girls, according to a new report from the UN Children's Fund, [UNICEF](#).

That represents almost half of all children aged between seven and 17, and it marks the first time that the out-of-school rate has increased, since 2002, said UNICEF.

The figures are part of the *Global Initiative on Out of School Children* report, released on Saturday, which indicates that persistent discrimination against girls is a major factor driving down school attendance.

Girls account for 60 per cent of those being denied an education, putting them at a particular disadvantage, and compounding gender-based discrimination, says the report. In the worse-affected provinces – including Kandahar, Helmand, Wardak, Paktika, Zabul and Uruzgan – up to 85 per cent of girls are not going to school.

The study notes that displacement and child marriage are major obstacles to classroom participation, together with a basic lack of women teachers, poor facilities, and insecurity in conflict-affected areas.

“Business as usual is not an option for Afghanistan if we are to fulfil the right to education for every child” – *Adele Khodr, UNICEF*

“Business as usual is not an option for Afghanistan if we are to fulfil the right to education for every child,” said UNICEF [Afghanistan Representative](#), Adele Khodr. “When children are not in school, they are at an increased danger of abuse, exploitation and recruitment,” she added.

But there are rays of hope in the study. It notes that dropout rates are low, with 85 per cent of boys and girls who start at the primary level, managing to stay in school to complete all grades, while the figures are even higher for those who begin at secondary school level.

“We commend the Government of Afghanistan for prioritising and declaring the year 2018 as the year of education,” said Ms. Khodr. “Now is the time for a renewed commitment, to provide girls and boys with the relevant learning opportunities they need to progress in life and to play a positive role in society,” she added.

“Getting girls and boys into school is so much more than sitting in class,” she said, adding that it was about providing routine and stability, “which is a wise investment given the insecurity across parts of the country.”

The report calls for a continued commitment on the part of the Afghan government and civil society groups to address the country’s classroom crisis.

[Security Council fails to adopt competing texts on protection of Palestinian civilians in Gaza](#)

The United Nations Security Council on Friday failed to adopt two competing draft resolutions; one produced by Kuwait, in response to the killing of dozens of Palestinian protestors in Gaza, and the other tabled by the United States, which vetoed the initial resolution saying it was “grossly one-sided” against Israel.

The UN had repeatedly for calm last month along the border of the Gaza Strip – the Palestinian enclave occupied by Israel – where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians participated in “the Great March of Return” from 30 March to 15 May.

But at the climax of demonstrations on 14 May to mark “al-Nakba” or “the Catastrophe,” by which Palestinians remember their mass displacement during the 1948-1949 war, at least 60 Palestinians were killed at the border fence by Israel security forces who fired live ammunition, rubber bullets and tear gas.

They were protesting United States recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, and the official opening that day of its embassy there.

The UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov, said at that time that “Israel has a responsibility to calibrate its use of force, to not use lethal force, except as a last resort.”

Mr. Mladenov also called on Hamas, the extremist militant group which controls Gaza, not to use the protests as an excuse for carrying out violent attacks at the border, and to provoke Israeli forces.

The draft proposed by Kuwait garnered 10 votes in favour, but the US vetoed the text, which it said failed to even mention Hamas, and the group’s responsibility for protecting civilians.

Four countries abstained. If one of the Council's five permanent members – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom or the US – casts a negative vote on a resolution, the text cannot be adopted.

The draft would have urged the Council to consider “measures to guarantee the safety and protection” of Palestinian civilians and requests a report from the UN Secretary-General on a possible “international protection mechanism.”

The US version would have called on Hamas and Islamic Jihad to “cease all violent activity and provocative actions, including along the boundary fence.” This text did not get any support except from the US itself, with three Security Council Members rejecting it and 11 abstaining.

Several members said the US text was tabled without prior consultation, and did not take into account the overall context of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Before voting on the Kuwaiti text, US Ambassador Nikki Haley said that the terrorist group Hamas bore primary responsibility for the “awful” living conditions faced by civilians in Gaza.

“A necessary precondition for peace is recognition of reality. One of those realities is that Hamas is a major impediment to peace. They are in charge of Gaza, and they use their resources not to help the people of Gaza but to wage war against Israel,” she said.

“Another reality is when the United Nations sides with terrorists over Israel, as the Kuwait resolution does, it only makes a peaceful resolution of this conflict harder to reach,” she added.

Immediately following the US veto, Mansour Ayyad Al-Otaibi, Permanent Representative of Kuwait to the UN, said that the failed resolution had been submitted on behalf of the Arab countries and has been supported by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) at its recent summit in Istanbul.

“We deplore that the Council failed to adopt the resolution, which stipulates protection should be provided to the Palestinians” who he said were in dire need and enduring a “tragic situation in the face of massacres by Israel, the occupying Power”, he said.

'They are always in our hearts' says Guterres, leading remembrance of UN peacekeepers who made the ultimate

sacrifice

Commemorating the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers at the Organization's headquarters, in New York, [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) paid tribute to the service and sacrifice made by UN "blue helmets" for the cause of peace around the world.

Since the first peacekeeping mission deployed 70 years ago, more than 3,700 military, police and civilians who chose to serve, have [lost their lives](#).

"These peacekeepers gave their lives to protect the lives of others. [We are forever in their debt](#), and they are always in our hearts," said Mr. Guterres on Friday at a wreath-laying ceremony at the UN Headquarters.

Last year saw the highest number of fatalities – 132 individuals from 37 countries – for UN peacekeepers as a result of malicious acts; the highest in many years.

While 2017 was challenging in the face of rising threats, it also showed the value of UN peacekeeping, said the Secretary-General.

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We are forever in their debt, and they are always in our hearts –
Secretary-General Guterres

"The closure of two of them, in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, is a landmark on the road to peace and stability in a region that was once in chaos. When the right strategies, resources and political support are in place, United Nations peacekeeping saves and improves lives for millions of people."

Marked annually on 29 May, the [International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers](#) was established by the General Assembly to pay tribute to the contributions of uniformed and civilian personnel to the work of the Organization.

This year, the UN chief spent the International Day in Africa, with peacekeepers at MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali; currently the most dangerous in the world. Since its establishment, in 2013 to help stabilize the north-African country, 169 military, police and civilian peacekeepers have lost their lives.

He said he was deeply impressed by the work being done by all personnel in the mission, given the daunting challenges they face: "Threatened by terrorists, criminals and armed groups of all kinds, they are helping to build peace, to protect civilians and guarantee the political process," said the UN chief.

Dag Hammarskjöld Medal ceremony

Also today, the Organization awarded the Dag Hammarskjöld Medal to military, police and civilian personnel who lost their lives while serving under the UN flag.

At the [Medal ceremony](#), the Secretary-General spoke of the increasingly complex challenges facing peacekeepers on the ground, and that despite the overwhelming difficulties, civilian and uniformed UN personnel who had made the ultimate sacrifice – collectively and individually – had a “profound impact on the communities they served”.

“Most were deployed far from home, while others served in their own conflict-affected countries as national staff. [Every one of them made our world a better place](#),” he said.

The medal is named after Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN Secretary-General, who along with his entourage died in a plane crash in what is now Zambia in 1961.

[UN agencies and Myanmar lay ground work for possible Rohingya return](#)

United Nations agencies and Myanmar have agreed a framework which it is hoped will lead to the repatriation of Rohingya refugees, but only if their “voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable” return from camps in Bangladesh can be guaranteed.

Since the conditions are not yet conducive for return, this agreement to sign a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MoU) is being seen as a first and necessary step.

Since August last year, some 700,000 mainly-Muslim Rohingya have fled Rakhine State, in majority-Buddhist Myanmar, for neighbouring Bangladesh. Most say they were fleeing violence and persecution, including a military campaign by Myanmar forces, which began in response to violent attacks by Rohingya insurgents.

The agreement – reached by the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR), the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of Myanmar – will be officially signed within a week or so, with the exact date to be confirmed.

Under the agreement, UNHCR and UNDP will be given access to Rakhine State, including to refugees’ places of origin and potential new settlement areas,

that so far the UN has been unable to access since the violence escalated last August.

The access, once effective, will allow UNHCR to assess local conditions and help the refugees to make informed decisions on voluntary return.

The agreement will also allow the two UN agencies to carry out needs assessments in affected communities and strengthen the capacity of local authorities to support the voluntary repatriation process.

The Advisory Commission on Rakhine State – a neutral and impartial body composed of six local experts and three international experts, chaired by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan – has proposed concrete measures for improving the welfare of all people in Rakhine State.

Its recommendations include establishing a clear and voluntary pathway to citizenship and ensuring freedom of movement for all people there, irrespective of religion, ethnicity or citizenship status.

Meanwhile, the UN migration agency, known formally as the [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#), is helping Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, properly [prepare for the monsoon season](#), which is about to begin.

Radios, megaphones, first aid kits, stretchers, protective clothing, warning flags and sirens are among the items being distributed to more than 500 Rohingya emergency volunteers in the largest camp there.

With most of the refugees forced to live on steep and sandy slopes in low-lying hills, surveys by IOM and other agencies have found that around 200,000 people will be in serious danger from landslides and serious flooding when the worst monsoon weather arrives.

[UNHCR alarm over deadly detention centre escape in Libya](#)

More than a dozen people have been killed or wounded by traffickers as they attempted to flee a detention centre in Libya last month, the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), said on Friday, describing it as the “latest horror story” to emerge from the war-torn country.

The victims were among a group of around 200 Eritreans, Ethiopians and Somalis who escaped on 23 May.

UNHCR spokesperson William Spindler told journalists in Geneva that survivors described how “people were shot while trying to escape, and during attempts

to recapture them” in Bani Walid, nearly 200 kilometres south of the capital Tripoli.

It is one of many areas of the North African country that have been under the control of armed groups since the overthrow of the late President Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

The survivors also spoke of “torture, abuse and exploitation at the hands of traffickers”, Mr. Spindler said, adding that some had been detained for up to three years.

According to UNHCR, the survivors have been transferred to an official detention centre closer to Tripoli, where they have been given relief items and psychosocial support.

The agency is in discussion with the Libyan authorities to build an open reception centre for migrants and refugees, but for the time being, detention is “mandatory”, Mr. Spindler said:

“The issue in Libya is that there are, so far, no places where people who are found in this situation can be taken”, who don’t fall into the migrant category, he said, adding that “detention is mandatory for all undocumented people who find themselves in the country, whether they are refugees or economic migrants”.

Among the survivors are “a large number of unaccompanied children” and UNHCR is working to identify the most vulnerable who may need international protection.

Mr. Spindler described the incident as “the latest horror story coming out of Libya” where people are being held by traffickers in horrific conditions and sold into a life of what is, in effect, modern-day slavery.

But he said that apart from the extraordinary circumstances of the escape, the deaths were “not an isolated case”, and warned that many refugees and migrants may still be hiding, or in captivity, in or near Bani Walid.

The oil-rich State has attracted nationals seeking work from neighbouring countries for decades, and more recently those fleeing war and persecution from the African continent and beyond.

A recent study by the UN human rights office, [OHCHR](#), and the UN Support Mission in the country, known as [UNSMIL](#), estimated that some 6,500 people are being held in official prisons in Libya.

Thousands more are in facilities run by armed groups, some of which are affiliated with the State, the study found.