

# At global health forum, UN officials call for strong, people-focused health systems

Everyone, everywhere must have equal access to quality health care, said top United Nations officials on Monday, urging greater focus on comprehensive health and well-being.

In a [video message](#) to the opening of the seventy-first session of the World Health Assembly in Geneva, [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) reiterated that the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is a fundamental human right.

The World Health Assembly is the highest decision-making body of the [World Health Organization](#), WHO. It determines the agency's policies, supervises financial policies, and reviews and approves the proposed programme budget.

"We need strong resilient systems that place people at the centre," said Mr. Guterres.

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Ensuring that everyone, everywhere has access to quality health care and services, is also vital for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), stressed the UN chief.

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*Secretary-General António Guterres*

In particular, [Sustainable Development Goal 3](#) (SDG 3), which has specific targets to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being at all stages in life. In addition, health improvements feature prominently in many of the other ambitious Goals.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO's Director-General, also addressed the [Assembly](#), emphasizing the importance of universal health coverage, as illustrated by the ongoing Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The WHO chief outlined a number of initiatives at the UN health agency to advance universal coverage and [urged greater political commitment](#): "It's clear that the twin messages of health security and universal health coverage resonate loudly with world leaders," he said.

Mr. Tedros also highlighted critical upcoming events focussed on global health, including two high-level meetings; on non-communicable diseases and on tuberculosis at the upcoming session of the UN General Assembly which begins in September.

“The people who suffer from these diseases all over the world are relying on us: the people who cannot get the care they need; the people who cannot afford the care they need; the people who aren’t even aware they are infected with a potentially deadly pathogen,” he said.

“We owe it to them to ensure that we do not waste the opportunities.”

### **DRC Ebola outbreak: Vaccination of health workers commences**

Separately on Monday, WHO announced that the [vaccination of health workers in areas of the DRC effected by the Ebola virus](#), has begun.

Together with the Government and partner organizations, WHO is also preparing to start a so-called ring vaccination programme, whereby the contacts of confirmed cases and the contacts of those contacts will be offered immunization, using the experimental drug.

“We need to act fast to stop the spread of Ebola by protecting people at risk of being infected with the Ebola virus, identifying and ending all transmission chains and ensuring that all patients have rapid access to safe, high-quality care,” said Peter Salama, the WHO Deputy Director-General for Emergency Preparedness and Response.

While the rVSV-ZEBOV Ebola vaccine is yet to be licensed, it was highly protective against Ebola in a major trial in 2015 in Guinea, said WHO.

Earlier results have been promising with the agency reporting that among the 5,837 people who received the vaccine, no positive cases were recorded nine days or more after vaccination.

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## **‘Alarming levels’ of methamphetamine trafficking in Asia’s Mekong, UN warns**

Organized crime groups in Asia’s Mekong region have intensified the production and trafficking of highly-addictive methamphetamine, extending the illegal trade into countries such as Australia, Japan and New Zealand, senior drug policy leaders warned on Monday at a United Nations-backed regional conference.

“Significant changes have been underway in the [regional drug market](#) for a

number of years now,” Jeremy Douglas, Regional Representative of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)), told the conference, which opened in Myanmar’s capital, Nay Pyi Taw.

“Responding to the situation requires acknowledging some difficult realities, and agreeing to new approaches at a strategic regional level,” he added.

The conference brings together senior drug policy leaders from Cambodia, China, Lao, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam to consider the latest data, and discuss drug law enforcement, justice, health and alternative development strategies and programmes.

It also reviews the implementation of the last Mekong strategy that the countries agreed under the so-called [Mekong Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\) on Drug Control](#) and negotiates a new strategic plan.

The Mekong has long been associated with the production and trafficking of illicit drugs, particularly heroin, but has undergone “significant transformation” in recent years, according to UNODC.

Opium and heroin production have recently declined, while criminal gangs have intensified production and trafficking of both low grade yaba methamphetamine – commonly known as meth – and high purity crystal methamphetamine, to “alarming levels”.

Several Mekong countries have already passed the total number of seizures for all of last year, just a few months into 2018, and methamphetamine from the Golden Triangle – the border areas of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar – is being seized in high volumes across Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Malaysia, Indonesia, UNODC said.

For affected countries, the shift to synthetics like methamphetamine is particularly difficult to address; partly because the remote and clandestine makeshift laboratories where it’s manufactured, can easily be moved.

“Methamphetamine and heroin are currently estimated to be worth US \$40 billion in the regional drug market,” said UNODC Advisor Tao Zhiqiang. “Effective coordination between countries is essential and the Mekong MOU remains the best vehicle available for this coordination.”

He stressed that law enforcement operations are part of the solution, but addressing growing regional demand is also important.

The Mekong MOU has provided a platform in recent years for the countries to agree to standard operating procedures for multi-country law enforcement operations, as well as a framework to exchange ideas and experience.

In a significant development, the Mekong MOU was aligned last year with the recommendations that came out of the UN General Assembly Special Session on tackling illegal drugs on a global level, ensuring a strong emphasis on reducing demand and the impact on health.

The recommendations also include creating alternative development programmes,

to provide alternative means of income for communities where drugs are being made, and beefing up law enforcement targeting the criminal gangs at the centre of the trade.

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## [UN, Somali Government seek \\$80 million in immediate relief to flood-affected populations](#)

The United Nations and the Somali Government on Sunday launched a joint appeal for \$80 million to provide immediate help for the people affected by recent flooding in the country's centre and south.

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), the flooding – caused by the heaviest rainfall there in more than three decades – has led to fatalities, massive displacement, and damage to infrastructure and cropland, compounding an already fragile humanitarian situation.

OCHA said more than 750,000 people are estimated to have been affected by the flooding, with at least 229,000 displaced. Humanitarian partners are unable to rely on the existing \$1.5 billion humanitarian response plan for Somalia for 2018, which is only 24 per cent funded.

The new [\\$80 million appeal](#), launched at a high-level event in Mogadishu, would provide short-term relief to the affected communities that were already vulnerable due to ongoing conflict and previous droughts.

Speaking at the event, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia, Peter de Clercq, highlighted the longer-term risks facing populations affected by floods, and the need for investment to build resilience to extreme weather events.

“As climate change risks invariably increase, more resources are needed to address the root causes of fragility, chronic poverty and low human development that are affecting the bulk of the population,” he said.

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## [UN chief welcomes start of Church-mediated national dialogue in Nicaragua](#)

The United Nations chief has welcomed the start of a national dialogue in Nicaragua between civic groups and the government, following deadly clashes between security forces and people protesting the country's planned social security reforms.

"The Secretary-General welcomes [the start of a national dialogue](#) led by the Catholic Church in Nicaragua," said UN Deputy Spokesperson Farhan Haq, in a statement issued on Friday.

"At the same time, the Secretary-General remains concerned about recent violence and calls on all Nicaraguans to abide by the rule of law, respect for human rights and the peaceful resolution of differences," he added.

According to media reports, demonstrations that started in mid-April swelled into a nationwide revolt against President Daniel Ortega's 11-year rule after they were met with lethal repression by pro-government forces, and the talks mediated by Nicaragua's Roman Catholic Church were attended by the President.

Human rights groups reported that at least 65 people, many of them student protesters, have been killed so far.

Mr. Haq said the Secretary-General also saluted the arrival in the country of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights – an organ of the Organization of American States – whose mission is to promote and protect human rights in the American hemisphere.

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## [Afghanistan: UN mission condemns blasts that leave 8 dead at cricket stadium](#)

The United Nations mission in Afghanistan on Saturday condemned the attack in Jalalabad that killed at least eight people and injured at least 55 at a cricket stadium in the country's east.

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said that four explosives

were detonated on Friday, targeting those gathered, after evening prayers, to watch a local match at the venue in Jalalabad.

“I am outraged by this attack that used four bombs carefully calculated to kill and maim civilians watching [a cricket match](#),” said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan. “This cold and brutal act can have no justification whatsoever; those responsible must be held accountable.”

UNAMA said two of the explosives were detonated inside the stadium, and the other two outside, apparently timed to target those fleeing the first blasts. The explosions left scores dead, with many of the injured now in critical condition.

According to media reports, no one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, and the Taliban militant group has denied any involvement. Afghanistan has been in protracted conflict for nearly four decades.

Armed conflict in Afghanistan killed 763 civilians and injured 1,495 in the first three months of this year. The 2,258 civilian casualties, [documented](#) by UNAMA, included 511 deaths and 989 injuries caused by anti-Government groups, including the Taliban and the Islamic State (IS), also known as Da’esh.



UN Photo/Fardin Waezi

United Nations Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA, Tadamichi Yamamoto, addresses reporters at a press conference in Kabul, Afghanistan. (file)

Attacks targeting civilians are violations of international humanitarian law. Under international humanitarian law, such attacks may amount to war crimes. The United Nations maintains that all parties to the conflict must at all times uphold their obligations to protect civilians from harm.

“At a time when Afghans are looking toward much-needed peace, we must not

allow such attacks to deter our collective resolve to make progress on ending the conflict," said Mr. Yamamoto, who is also head of UNAMA. "The United Nations stands with Afghans in solidarity and remains committed to an Afghan-led peace process that will end the war and enable Afghanistan to allocate more resources to protect all citizens from such atrocities."

Mr. Yamamoto expressed his condolences to the loved ones of those killed in the attack and wished a full and speedy recovery to those injured.