

UN-sponsored group tightens controls on spread of crop-attacking pests

With an estimated \$220 billion of the global harvest lost to plant pests each year, the agency charged with fighting this scourge has adopted new standards and measures to safeguard internationally traded agricultural and forestry products.

Preventing the introduction of plant diseases and pests to new environments is “[challenging work](#) with high stakes,” the deputy head of the UN agriculture agency, Maria Helena Semedo, said in Rome Wednesday at the annual meeting of the [International Plant Protection](#) Convention (IPPC).

“Each year an estimated 10-16 per cent of our global harvest is lost to plant pests – a loss estimated at \$220 billion,” said Ms. Semedo, the Deputy Director-General of the UN Food Agriculture Organization (FAO). The agency oversees implementation of the plant protection treaty as part of its mandate to fight world hunger and promote the development of farming and forestry.

Crop pests are “dangerous hitchhikers,” as experts put it, that can wreak havoc on biodiversity, food security and trade by jumping borders through trade in infected fruits, crops, seeds and even ornamental plants. The wooden containers and boxes they travel in can act as vectors, while timber and wood products like furniture can also harbour stowaways.

For instance, oriental fruit flies, or *Bactrocera dorsalis*, which originated in Asia, have now spread to at least 65 countries, and their presence in Africa costs the continent an estimated \$2 billion in annual losses because other countries have banned the import of fruits from afflicted countries.

New measures adopted by the IPPC include a stronger standard for the use of heat vapour to kill oriental fruit flies. The control technique outlined under the new measure kills 99.98 per cent of the bug’s eggs and larvae.

IPPC endorsed new diagnostic protocols for sudden oak death, a fungi-like organism of unknown origin that attacks a wide range of trees and shrubs in nurseries, introduced into western North America and western Europe through the ornamental plants trade.

The latest rules also include cold treatment techniques that freeze and kill pests, those that raise temperatures past their survival threshold, as well as a new diagnostic protocol for tospoviruses, which affect 1,000 plant species and are causing devastating losses, especially to tomato, potato and squash and cucumber yields.

Since its establishment in 1952, the IPPC has promulgated some 100 standards covering a broad range of phytosanitary issues, and it also runs numerous programs to share best-practices and build the capacity of developing countries to manage plant diseases and pests, both at home and in trade

flows.

Mediator seeks 'relaunch' of UN-led Syrian talks

A renewed United Nations-led diplomatic push is under way for a “meaningful relaunch” of [intra-Syrian talks](#) by the Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, his office has announced.

In a [statement](#) released on Wednesday, the veteran negotiator is said to be engaged in “high-level consultations [...] with the aim of proactively ascertaining the options” for kick-starting the UN-facilitated political process as called for in Security Council [resolution 2254](#) (2015).

Agreed by the 15-member body in 2015, that text calls for free and fair elections for all Syrians and a newly-drafted constitution, as the basis for a Syrian-led, Syrian owned process to end the conflict.

More than seven years of war there have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, displaced millions and levelled entire cities.

Since January 2016, the Special Envoy has conducted several rounds of negotiations between the warring Syrian parties, the last of which was held in Geneva in December 2017, followed by Vienna talks in late January.

So far this week, Mr. de Mistura has met foreign ministers from several countries participating in the League of Arab States summit in Saudi Arabia.

He was due to hold discussions with senior officials in Turkey on Wednesday, before heading to Russia and Iran for more high-level meetings, according to his team.

Mr. de Mistura is also expected to consult European ministers and senior representatives from the United States at a conference in support of Syria and the region, including bolstering the UN-led political process, taking place in Brussels next week.

The statement by the Office of the Special Envoy follows a warning by the UN Secretary-General last weekend that tensions risk escalating beyond Syria.

Antonio Guterres's call came in response to air strikes by the United States, France and the United Kingdom, that followed an alleged chemical weapons attack on opposition-held territory outside the capital Damascus 11 days ago.

Earlier today, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons ([OPCW](#)) reported that a UN-led security team sent to assess the sites of the

suspected attacks and prepare for the arrival of OPCW inspectors [came under small arms fire](#) and an explosive was detonated.

“At present, we do not know when the [Fact-finding Mission] team can be deployed to Douma,” OPCW chief Ahmet Üzümcü said. The team is to look into the alleged use of toxic chemicals, reportedly chlorine, at the sites, which reportedly left dozens dead.

[UN launches global plan to strengthen protection of internally displaced persons](#)

With multiple crises forcing millions of people away from their homes, United Nations agencies, Governments and partners have launched a set of measures to strengthen protection of internally displaced persons as well as find solutions to address their problems.

“Addressing the protection needs of the forcibly displaced and seeking solutions to their plight contribute to greater stability for countries and whole regions,” said Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in a news release announcing the three-year Plan of Action.

“[The consequences of our failure](#) to resolve internal displacement can be devastating,” he stressed.

The framework, formally called the [Plan of Action for Advancing Prevention, Protection and Solutions for Internally Displaced People \(2018-2020\)](#), calls on all relevant actors to step up efforts to prevent, respond to and resolve internal displacement.

The consequences of our failure to resolve internal displacement can be devastating – *High Commissioner Filippo Grandi*

It also proposes concrete activities to strengthen the participation of internally displaced persons in decisions concerning them, and expand national laws and policies on internal displacement as well as actions to improve data collection and analysis on displacements globally.

By the end of 2016, more than 40 million people were displaced within their own countries due to insecurity or rights violations. An additional 24 million were driven from their homes due to disasters. Every year, an estimated 15 million people are also displaced by development projects.

Bold and ambitious steps needed

Given this complex conundrum, “bold and ambitious” steps are needed, underscored Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, the UN [Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons](#).

“The Plan of Action seeks to galvanize a strategic dialogue, concerted action and adequate resources to address the plight of the internally displaced, while engaging them in the decisions that affect them,” added the independent expert.

In the same vein, Mark Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs committed that the Organization will continue to work with affected Governments and displaced persons to ensure that their needs are addressed.

Leave no one behind

“The international community has pledged to leave no one behind,” stressed Mr. Lowcock, who is also the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, noting that this promise must extend to all those displaced.

The Plan of Action was drafted under the leadership of the Special Rapporteur, the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA) and the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR).

Its launch coincides with the 20th anniversary of the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#), widely accepted as being the global standard for protecting and assisting internally displaced people.

End ‘daily tragedy’ for millions, tackle root cause of internals displacement, urges UN migration chief

More than 40 million people are displaced by conflict and another 25 million annually by disaster – within the borders of their own countries – with children, on average, making up over half those numbers, the United Nations migration agency said Tuesday.

“In 1998, internal displacement was recognized as one of the world’s [greatest tragedies](#) and 20 years later, it still is,” said William Lacy Swing, who heads the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)), marking the twentieth anniversary of the principles that identify the rights of internally displaced persons.

On 17 April 1998, the then-[UN Commission on Human Rights](#) took note of the [Guiding Principles](#) that identify the rights and guarantees of internally displaced persons, known as IDPs – effectively launching them as a global standard for States and humanitarian actors.

Twenty years later, the footprint of these Principles is clear. They are widely accepted as the standard for protecting and assisting internally displaced people, many States have incorporated them into national legislation, they have inspired regional agreements and they underscore all major work in this area.

“Twenty years on, the number of internally displaced people has nearly doubled due to ongoing new displacements, a lack of solutions for those being left behind in protracted crises and a chronic shortfall of almost 50 per cent of funding needed to meet basic humanitarian needs,” Mr. Swing continued. “The daily tragedy of internal displacement continues for millions.”

As the international community embarks on a year of reflection and action to mark the 20th anniversary, “everyone can and must do more,” he continued.

“More than a humanitarian imperative, it makes good economic sense and is socially advantageous to empower States and populations in their own preparedness, in strengthening their resilience, and in helping to resolve internal displacement,” Mr. Swing said.

“In the spirit of ‘leaving no one behind,’ the momentum behind the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) for 2030, greater attention must be focused on addressing the root causes of displacement and reducing risk,” he said.

According to Mr. Swing, when displacement is a life-saving necessity, concerted efforts must minimize its impact and resolve it as quickly as possible with safety and dignity, using means to prevent it from happening again.

“Throughout this year, with partners, we will use the 20th anniversary of the Guiding Principles as an opportunity to do three vital things: raise awareness on the centrality of the Guiding Principles to the assistance and protection of internally displaced people; call on Governments to incorporate the Guiding Principles into their national legislation; and strengthen partnerships that contribute to effective and accountable programming to help realize the untapped positive potential and agency of internally displaced people in their communities, including empowering them in their own responses and giving a platform to their voices,” he concluded.

Syria: Sustained fighting taking 'enormous' toll on civilians, UN aid chief tells Security Council

Despite the Security Council's demand for cessation of hostilities in Syria, civilians in the war-torn country continue to bear the "enormous" cost of intense military activity by parties to the conflict, the top United Nations relief official said Tuesday.

"Since the passage of [resolution 2401](#), the Secretary-General has on many occasions called for its full implementation," stated Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, referring to the the Council text adopted in late February calling for a 30-day ceasefire across Syria.

"However, rather than implement the resolution of this Council, we have seen parties to the conflict sustain intense military activity at an [enormous human cost](#)."

Briefing the 15-member Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, Mr. Lowcock said that UN agencies and relief partners have been delivering assistance to those in need but the response remains challenged by a number of factors, including severely limited resources.

"As we approach the conference in Brussels on 24-25 April, we have an immediate opportunity to progress on easing the humanitarian suffering by fully funding humanitarian operations," he said, noting that the appeal for Syria is currently less than 15 per cent funded.

"I cannot overstate the importance of sustaining and scaling up the international response," stressed the UN aid chief.

He also informed the Council that about 100,000 displaced persons returned to their homes in Raqqa since the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or Da'esh) was driven out last October.

However, conditions there are not conducive for people coming back as the area remains littered by unexploded ordnance, improvised explosive devices, and other explosive remnants of war, with children most at risk. Furthermore, there is widespread food insecurity among returnee households, and the health and education systems are in near ruin.

Mr. Lowcock also spoke of the situation in Rukban, eastern Ghouta and Idlib.

As to Afrin, in north-west Syria, humanitarian actors continue to struggle to gain sustained access to the area, and freedom of movement for internally displaced persons remains severely limited, he said.