

[Biggest ever UN aid delivery in Syria provides relief to desperate civilians](#)

The biggest UN humanitarian convoy yet to operate inside Syria has successfully distributed aid to 40,000 desperate people in a hard-to-access desert camp near the country's southern border with Jordan, the Organization announced on Friday.

Jens Laerke from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)), highlighted that Thursday's delivery to Rukban was only the second time the UN has been able to reach the remote site from within Syria, where at least eight children had recently died, and some women have had to resort to "survival sex" just to stay alive.

"It was a complex, large-scale aid operation, it's the biggest ever carried out by the United Nations in Syria," he said, adding that it was carried out with UN partner the Syrian Arab Red Crescent ([SARC](#)).

"The mission lasted nine days, it consisted of 133 trucks in total, 118 loaded with relief supplies and 15 carrying logistics support," he said. "With more than 300 staff, volunteers and commercial suppliers that took part. It took more than two months of advocacy and negotiations with all parties to ensure safe access."

One of Syria's most challenging places to reach

Rukban is around 300 kilometres from the capital Damascus and one of the last remaining remote and hard to reach locations, in dire need of regular aid from the UN and partners.

Some women are subjected to serial marriages and some told us they had turned to survival sex as a last resort, *UNHCR's Andrej Mahecic*

Supply routes are often blocked and the majority of people at the site are displaced women and children who have been living there for years in harsh conditions, according to the [World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#).

Spokesperson Hervé Verhoosel said in a statement that amid significant poverty and a lack of basic goods, many families lack firewood and "end up collecting garbage and plastic to make a fire to cook and keep warm".

Children 'walk barefoot in puddles'

Prices of the limited food and non-food items "are exponentially high", the UN food agency added, and commodities have to be smuggled into the market – a drastic situation underlined by the UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)), which described children "walking around barefoot through puddles and mud, in cold

and the rain. The winter months has obviously been hard on these people and there also fatalities among the youngest”.

Spokesperson Andrej Mahecic added that in order to survive, early marriages were also “common” for girls.

“Some women are subjected to serial marriages and some told us they had turned to survival sex as a last resort,” Mr. Mahecic explained, noting also that many women were “essentially terrified to leave their mud huts or tents and to be outside, as there are serious risks of sexual violence, sexual abuse and harassment”.

Newborns at mortal risk amid freezing temperatures

The [UN Children’s Fund \(UNICEF\)](#) also highlighted the deadly cost of a lack of basic medical care in Rukban.

“There are no certified doctors and only a few poorly supplied clinics,” said spokesperson Christophe Boulierac. “Since December last year, at least eight children – most of them newborns – died in the camp because of freezing temperatures and lack of medical care.”

According to UNICEF, 30 of the convoy’s 118 trucks were loaded with the agency’s life-saving supplies for children.

This included health and nutrition supplies for around 20,000 children and mothers, hygiene kits for more than 40,000 people, recreational kits, school books, stationery and school bags for more than 8,000 children.

After almost eight years of war in Syria, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and millions have been displaced inside and outside the country.

UN will play post-war role in reconstruction, says UN Envoy

Basic infrastructure has also been destroyed and will need to be rebuilt before Syrians can go home – an issue that the United Nations would “definitely contribute to”, depending “of course on the donor community to be able to move forward”, [UN Special Envoy for Syria](#), Geir Pedersen, told journalists in Geneva.

“Obviously for Syria to come out of the crisis we need a comprehensive approach,” he said. “And obviously that approach should lead to the IDPs (internally displaced people) being able to return to their homes, the refugees being able to return to their homes, but of course there are certain requirements for that to happen and the voluntary return of refugees, will be important for the future of Syria. And hopefully then we can have a political process that will enable this to happen.”

Asked about the likelihood of a meeting of the Constitutional Committee in the Swiss city, in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254 and its call for a genuine, credible and inclusive process to end the conflict, Mr.

Pedersen said that his hope that it would meet “as soon as possible”.

Once finalized, the Constitutional Committee will comprise three groups: the Government of Syria, a broad opposition delegation; and one comprising Syrian experts, civil society, independents, tribal leaders and women.

Mr. Pedersen added: “We have had good discussions with the relevant parties, I think we had identified the challenges and we have agreed on how we should move forward and that I see as a very positive sign.”

[Two States ‘side-by-side’ is the ‘peaceful and just solution’ for Israel-Palestine conflict: Guterres](#)

A “peaceful and just solution” to the Israel-Palestine conflict can “only be achieved” through two States “living [side-by-side](#) in peace and security”, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres reiterated on Friday

In his address to the [Committee](#) on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, which was established by the UN General Assembly in 1975, Mr. Guterres said on Friday that “based on relevant UN resolutions, long-held principles, previous agreements and international law”, Jerusalem should be the capital of both States.

“Unfortunately, over this past year, the situation has not moved in that direction”, he continued, pointing to protests that began along the border fence with Gaza last year that left hundreds dead and thousands wounded by Israeli security forces.

He also cited “security incidents and provocations by Hamas and other militants in Gaza”, including the launching of rockets and incendiary kites that dangerously escalated the situation.

“Thanks to UN and Egyptian mediation efforts, a major escalation was avoided”, he continued, appealing to Hamas authorities in Gaza to “prevent provocations”. The UN chief said that under International Humanitarian Law, “Israel, too, has a responsibility to exercise maximum restraint”, except as a last resort.

Settlements are illegal under international law – *UN chief*

Mr. Guterres underscored that the UN firmly supports Palestinian reconciliation and “the return of the legitimate Palestinian Government to

Gaza”, as “an integral part of a future Palestinian State”.

Spelling out that the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza must be “immediately addressed”, he detailed that some two million Palestinians “remain mired in increasing poverty and unemployment, with limited access to adequate health, education, water and electricity”, leaving young people with “little prospect of a better future”.

“I urge Israel to lift restrictions on the movement of people and goods, which also hamper the efforts of the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies, without naturally jeopardizing legitimate security concerns,” the Secretary-General stated.

Lauding the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East ([UNRWA](#)) for its “critical work” in Gaza, the occupied West Bank and across the region, he called on the international community to “significantly” increase efforts to revitalize Gaza’s economy.

Turning to the “risk of further unrest in the West Bank”, the UN chief flagged that Israeli construction and settlement plans have expanded, including in East Jerusalem.

“Settlements are illegal under international law” he asserted. “They deepen the sense of mistrust and undermine the two-State solution”.

Mr. Guterres said he regretted Israel’s decision [not to renew](#) the mandate of the [Temporary International Presence](#) in Hebron, saying: “I hope an agreement can be found by the parties to preserve this long-standing and valuable arrangement.”

“Palestinians have endured more than a half-century of occupation and denial of their legitimate right to self-determination” with both sides continuously suffering from “deadly cycles of violence”, said the Secretary-General.

He indicated that leaders bore the responsibility to “reverse this negative trajectory and pave the way toward peace, stability and reconciliation” and praised the Committee for keeping the focus on the ultimate objective of a “peaceful solution with two States coexisting in peace and security” as the only way to achieve the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

“As I have said repeatedly, there is no Plan B”, concluded Mr. Guterres.

[**‘Endemic’ sexual violence surging in South Sudan: UN human rights office**](#)

A surge in sexual violence in South Sudan’s Unity state targeting victims as

young as eight years old, has prompted a call from the UN human rights office, [OHCHR](#), for urgent Government measures to protect victims, and bring perpetrators to justice.

Despite the signing of a peace deal between belligerents last September, UN investigators found that at least 175 women and girls have been raped or suffered other sexual and physical violence between September and December 2018.

If we go by the main road we are raped, if we go by the bush, we are raped. I was raped among others in the same area repeatedly – testimony to UN investigators

The actual level of violence is likely to be considerably higher, OHCHR spokesperson Rupert Colville told journalists in Geneva on Friday.

“Obviously (it is) not the whole picture, but they found 175, women and girls who had been either raped, gang-raped or sexually assaulted or physically harmed in other ways,” he said. “And 49 of those girls who were raped, were children.”

According to a joint [report](#) by OHCHR and the [UN Mission in South Sudan \(UNMISS\)](#), attacks against women have decreased significantly since the peace accord was signed on 12 September.

Nonetheless, it warns that such incidents are “endemic” in northern Unity state, on the border with Sudan, creating a sense among communities that it is normal to be a victim of sexual violence.

Victim’s testimony recalls recurring attacks

Citing the testimony of one victim, Mr. Colville explained that many women are raped while fetching firewood, food or water – often more than once – as they lack any protection.

“She said, ‘If we go by the main road we are raped, if we go by the bush, we are raped. I was raped among others in the same area repeatedly on three separate occasions.’”

The surge in conflict-related sexual violence is attributed to many factors including the breakdown in the rule of law, the destruction of livelihoods, forced displacement and food insecurity, after years of civil war.

Large numbers of armed young men, a ‘toxic mix’

But one of the main reasons is the large number of fighters in the area, who have yet to be reintegrated into the national army, according to the peace deal.

Most of the attacks are reported to have been carried out by youth militia

groups and elements of the pro-Taban Deng Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition, SPLA-IO (TD), as well as South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF).

In a few cases, attacks were perpetrated by members of the group affiliated with reinstated Vice President and peace deal participant, Riek Machar, Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO (RM)), the UN report says.

"Particularly in this area, there are essentially three main groups who...are involved in these rapes, including the National Government force," said Mr. Colville. "And a lot of these young men who are heavily armed, are just waiting around...This is a very toxic mix, and there are also youth militia which some of these official groups ally with and you don't know exactly who they are; they've been heavily involved as well."

Rule of law 'just not applied'

A key challenge is tackling the prevailing impunity throughout Unity state, which is linked to the volatility of the situation across the country, OHCHR maintains.

"There's been very little accountability in South Sudan for what is chronic, endemic problem of sexual violence against women and girls," Mr. Colville said. "Virtually complete impunity over the years, as a result, very little disincentive for these men not to do what they're doing. The rule of law has just not been applied."

Mobile courts provide glimmer of hope for victims

Among the practical measures taken to a bid to help vulnerable communities in Unity state, UNMISS has cleared roadsides to prevent attackers from hiding from potential victims.

A mobile court system is also operational in towns, including Bentiu, which has had "some success" in bringing perpetrators to trial, OHCHR's Mr. Colville said, noting nonetheless that "this is just a drop in the ocean".

"There are thousands and thousands of perpetrators, there are officers involved, there are commanders who've got command responsibility who instead of being investigated and brought to book...have been promoted, and are still in charge of groups operating in this area who are still raping women," he concluded.

[Security Council condemns 'heinous and](#)

cowardly' attack in Iran

The United Nations Security Council has condemned “in the strongest terms” Wednesday’s “[heinous and cowardly](#)” terrorist attack in south-east Iran’s Sistan-Baluchestan Province.

Council Members expressed their deepest sympathy and condolences to the Government and families of the 27 victims on Thursday and wished a “speedy and full recovery” to the 13 injured.

According to news reports, a suicide bomber targeted a bus carrying members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard travelling on a road between two cities in the province, which straddles the border with Pakistan, where armed groups and drugs smugglers regularly operate. A car filled with explosives reportedly detonated alongside the bus.

Terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security – *UN Security Council*

“Terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security”, reaffirmed the Council, underlining the need to hold “perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of these reprehensible acts of terrorism accountable and bring them to justice.”

In this regard, they urged all States, in accordance with their obligations under international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, “to cooperate actively” with the Iranian Government in the aftermath of the attack, and all relevant authorities.

Terror attacks are not new to Sistan-Baluchistan. On 29 January three members of a bomb squad sent to investigate an explosion in the province capital of Zahedan were wounded when a second device detonated as they were trying to defuse it, according to news reports. In early December, two people were killed, and some 40 others wounded in the port city of Chabahar during an attack by foreign-backed terrorists.

“Any acts of terrorism are criminal and unjustifiable, regardless of their motivation, wherever, whenever and by whomsoever committed”, reiterated the Security Council members, reminding all States to combat “by all means”, in accordance with the [UN Charter](#) and other international law obligations – including international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law – threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts.

UN announces roadmap to Climate Summit in 2019, a 'critical year' for climate action

2019 is a critical year, the “last chance” for the international community to take effective action on climate change, General Assembly President [Maria Espinosa](#) said on Thursday, during a briefing to announce the UN’s roadmap to the [Climate Summit](#) in September.

Ms. Espinosa was speaking alongside the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on the Climate Summit, Ambassador [Luis Alfonso de Alba](#) of Mexico, at UN Headquarters in New York.

Ms. Espinosa said that, with the deadline for achieving the first targets of the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development fast approaching, described by [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) as “the UN’s blueprint for peace, justice and prosperity on a healthy planet”, the world stood at a crossroads.

Two-thirds of these targets, she said, depend on climate and environment goals, and a five-fold increase in commitments from their current levels is needed in order to meet the targets set at the landmark 2015 [Paris Agreement](#) on dealing with greenhouse gas emissions mitigation, adaptation and finance, due to come into force in 2020.

The General Assembly President walked the representatives of Member States through some of the key events of 2019, leading up to, and following, the Climate Summit. All of the events, she said, share two goals: a doubling of commitments and ambition at a national level, and ensuring the inclusion of diverse groups in the process of climate action.

March will see the General Assembly [High-Level Meeting](#) on Climate and Sustainable Development for All, which is intended to build on the success of [COP24](#), the 2018 climate conference in Katowice, Poland, which led to the establishment of a “rulebook” for the reporting of emissions and the progress made in cutting them, every year from 2024.

The March meeting will welcome representatives of the private sector, civil society and young people, and look to harness the enthusiasm of the latter group, who, said Ms. Espinosa, will be most affected by a warming world.

On the 30th of June, in the build up to the Climate Summit, a “stocktaking” event will take place in Abu Dhabi, followed by a [High Level Political Forum](#) under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council in July, which will see a review of the progress made in achieving [Sustainable Development Goal 13](#) (“urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”).

The Climate Summit will be followed by the first-ever [High Level Political Forum on Climate Action](#), sponsored by the General Assembly on September 24. The year will be rounded off by the 2019 Climate Conference [COP25](#), which will take place in Chile.

Multilateralism, said Ms. Espinosa, is the only effective to combat climate change, which is one of the main challenges facing the world and can only be overcome with constructive input from all. She concluded with a proverb: “‘If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you wish to go far, go together.’ Let’s travel this road together.”

Ambassador de Alba, following Ms. Espinosa, confirmed that the world is falling well behind targets for combating climate change, with only around a third of the necessary work currently completed. He reminded delegates that there are only between 10 and 12 years left to achieve the goals, and called for a ramping up of ambition.

The Special Envoy added that, despite the challenges, an optimistic signal must be given: that it is possible to counter climate change, enjoy economic growth and eradicate poverty. “We can also meet social needs, healthcare needs and human rights needs,” he said, and bring about a “win-win situation to answer the doubters.”

2019 needs to see action, continued Ambassador de Alba, including partnerships with the private sector and civil society, and a huge mobilization of resources (a target of 1 trillion dollars per year to support developing countries has been set), to invest “in our future, for jobs in a green future.”