

Promote tolerance, respect diversity, UN chief urges ahead of International Day against racial discrimination

People worldwide are being encouraged by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres to think about how they can better promote tolerance, inclusion and respect for diversity.

The UN chief made the appeal in [a speech](#) to the General Assembly in New York on Tuesday, ahead of [the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#).

“It is time all nations and all people live up to the words of [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), which recognizes the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human race,” he stated.

Mr. Guterres said while there has been progress since the Declaration’s adoption 70 years ago – for example, in the advancement of the rights of women, children, indigenous people and persons with disabilities – there is still far to go in ending discriminatory attitudes, actions and practices.

He listed pressing issues such as gender inequality; the “alarming rise” in xenophobia, racism and intolerance, and a resurgence in far-right political parties and neo-Nazi viewpoints.

Refugees and migrants are also being denied their rights, in addition to being falsely vilified as threats to the societies they seek to join, he continued.

“So, on this International Day, let us all consider how we can better promote tolerance, inclusion and respect for diversity in all nations and among all communities,” the UN chief said.

“Let us work to eliminate messages of hatred – the concept of ‘us’ and ‘them’; the false attitude that we can accept some and reject and exclude others simply for how they look, where they worship or who they love.”

Like the Secretary-General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also looked to the landmark Declaration in his address to the gathering.

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein highlighted how discrimination against individuals affects society as a whole.

“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights warns very clearly that if rights are not protected, conflict may follow,” he said.

“Experience has repeatedly demonstrated that discrimination, intolerance, prejudice and scapegoating not only lead to disastrous splintering within

societies, endangering national cohesion; they also frequently generate threats to regional peace and lead to a conflict.”

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is observed annually on 21 March.

It commemorates the lives of 69 people killed during a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville, South Africa, on that day in 1960.

They were among thousands protesting laws that required black citizens to carry a type of internal passport known as a passbook which restricted their movements: a manifestation of the then apartheid system which upheld racial segregation.

As the UN chief pointed out, apartheid “was ultimately – and thankfully – consigned to history” after Nelson Mandela was released from prison and later ascended to the presidency.

Mr. Mandela, who died in 2013, was the first democratically-elected president of South Africa and the country’s first black head of state.

While the UN observance provides an opportunity to reaffirm rejection of racism, xenophobia and intolerance, Mr Guterres was saddened that these attitudes persist in countries and among communities around the world.

“A stark and tragic example lies in the egregious treatment of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar,” he said, referring to the ethnic minority community whose members have been fleeing to Bangladesh by the thousands to escape persecution.

[UN rural development agency invests in power and potential of women](#)

Although rural women make up one-fifth of the global population and around 43 per cent of all agricultural workers, inequality restricts their access to land, markets or even the training and technology that could improve their lives and livelihoods, according to the United Nations agency fighting to stamp out hunger and poverty.

The Rome-based International Fund for Agricultural Development ([IFAD](#)) believes promoting gender equality is critical to reducing rural poverty and ensuring that all people have enough to eat.

“I think if poverty had a face, it would be the face of a rural woman,” IFAD’s newly-appointed vice-president Cornelia Richter told *UN News*.

“Women are producers of nutrition, and there is a lot of potential. Women are not only victims: they also bear the changes and challenges of development, and I think we in IFAD are trying to invest in the potential of women and not victimizing women.”

Overall, some three billion people – roughly 40 per cent of the planet – live in rural areas of developing countries. Although they grow the food that feeds their nations, most are living in extreme poverty.

IFAD believes investing in these people benefits all people. That’s because global challenges such as hunger, poverty, youth unemployment and forced migration, are rooted in rural areas. Therefore, investing in small-scale agriculture and rural development could have far-reaching impact.

For Ms. Richter, women are central to any effort to improve these communities.

“I can’t imagine any kind of development without women,” she stated.

Rural women and girls front and centre at UN this month

Since 1946, the UN Commission on the Status of Women ([CSW](#)) has been shaping global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Its latest session, currently underway at UN Headquarters, focuses on the challenges facing rural women and girls.

In her [opening address](#), the head of [UN Women](#), the UN agency working to advance gender equality, challenged participants to find solutions that support this group.

“Women in rural areas need innovative technology and connectivity; infrastructure that brings sanitation, clean drinking water, energy and transport, and that supports productivity and mobility,” UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka told delegates.

“They need access to credit, climate justice, markets and high-value agrifood chains. They need an end to discriminatory laws and norms that sustain harmful cultural practices like female genital mutilation and early and forced marriages. They need respect for sexual and reproductive health and rights. And they need an end to violence in all its forms.”

I think if poverty had a face, it would be the face of a rural woman– *IFAD Vice-President Richter*

Ms. Richter also took part in this year’s session of the Commission which dovetails with her agency’s priorities.

She said IFAD understands that “a holistic approach” is the only way to transform the lives of rural women.

“This means that we cannot only address one single topic: for example, education, or law enforcement. We have to come up with a well-designed approach where we address the different levels by which women and girls are hampered,” she explained.

Ms. Richter believes dismantling legal barriers that affect women is a good place to start.

For example, according to IFAD, poor rural people – especially women, youth, indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups – generally have weak or unprotected land tenure rights, putting them at risk of losing access to what is often their only source of security.

“We also have to make sure that we strengthen rural institutions and invest in capacity development in order to create more advocacy for rural women and girls,” Ms. Richter continued.

“And then, I think at the beginning of development is the empowerment of women. How do we empower women? Through education. And education in the 21st century can’t happen without investing in new technologies.”

A recent IFAD-supported project ensured that more 2,000 women smallholder farmers in Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda had access to modern technology.

The women received mobile phones and radios, which they used to share information on agricultural practices but also to learn about gender issues.

This is just one example of how IFAD grants and low-interest loans have reached more than 460 million people over the past four decades.

Going forward, Ms. Richter sees the UN agency expanding its field presence.

Although she joined IFAD in February, she spent more than two decades in managerial positions with German development cooperation agencies, in a career that took her to countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

“I would like to support IFAD in its very clear mandate and also provide strategic direction in a very ambitious reform agenda on which IFAD is embarking in order to achieve more efficiency in the field, which is a very clear commitment and expectation from our member States,” she said. “So, you will find more IFAD offices in the coming months and years.”

[Turkey's 18-month state of emergency](#)

has led to profound human rights violations – UN report

The United Nations on Tuesday called on Turkey to end its 18-month-old state of emergency, saying that the routine extension of emergency powers has resulted in “profound” human rights violations against hundreds of thousands of people and may have lasting impact on the country’s socio-economic fabric.

“One of the [most alarming findings of the report](#) [...] is how Turkish authorities reportedly detained some 100 women who were pregnant or had just given birth, mostly on the grounds that they were ‘associates’ of their husbands, who are suspected of being connected to terrorist organizations,” said Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in a news release announcing the findings.

“Some were detained with their children and others violently separated from them. This is simply outrageous, utterly cruel, and surely cannot have anything whatsoever to do with making the country safer,” he added.

While taking note of the complex challenges Turkey has faced in addressing the attempted coup in July 2016, as well as a number of terrorist attacks, the [report](#) cites that the sheer number, frequency and lack of connection of several emergency decrees to any national threat seem to point to the use of emergency powers to stifle any form of criticism or dissent vis-à-vis the Government.

During the 18-month state of emergency, nearly 160,000 people have been arrested; 152,000 civil servants dismissed, many arbitrarily; and teachers, judges and lawyers dismissed or prosecuted.

The report also documents the use of torture and ill-treatment in custody, including severe beatings, threats of sexual assault and actual sexual assault, electric shocks and waterboarding by police, gendarmerie, military police and security forces.

This is simply outrageous, utterly cruel, and surely cannot have anything whatsoever to do with making the country safer – *High Commissioner Zeid*

It also notes that about 300 journalists have been arrested under allegations that their publications contained “apologist sentiments regarding terrorism” or other “verbal act offences” or for “membership” in terrorist organisations.

Over 100,000 websites were reportedly blocked in 2017, including a high number of pro-Kurdish websites and satellite TV channels.

Covering the period January to December last year, the report also states that the April 2017 referendum which extended the President's executive powers into both the legislature and the judiciary as seriously problematic, resulting in interference with the work of the judiciary and curtailment of parliamentary oversight over the executive branch.

By the end of 2017, 22 emergency decrees were promulgated with a further two more since the cut-off date of the report.

The report further underlines the need ensure independent, individualized reviews and compensation for victims of arbitrary detentions and dismissals and calls on Turkey to promptly end the state of emergency, restore normal functioning of State institutions, as well as revise and release all legislation not compliant with its international human rights obligations, including the emergency decrees.

"I urge the Government of Turkey to ensure that these allegations of serious human rights violations are investigated and the perpetrators are brought to justice," said Mr. Zeid, also calling on the Government to allow full and unfettered access to his Office (OHCHR) to be able to directly, independently and objectively assess the human rights situation in the southeast of the country.

Syria: Displacement surges as twin military offensives drive thousands from Afrin and east Ghouta

"In Eastern Ghouta alone, more than [45,000 Syrians](#) have fled their homes in recent days," Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson of the UN refugee agency, told reporters in Geneva, Switzerland.

In the northern Afrin region, he added, an estimated 104,000 people have been uprooted from their homes by the latest escalation in fighting.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) said the newly displaced people from east Ghouta are currently sheltering in rural Damascus but the existing accommodation facilities are extremely congested and overcrowded and lack basic sanitation as the needs are growing by the hour. There are also serious health risks.

In addition, hundreds of thousands of civilians are still trapped in east Ghouta by fierce fighting and are in dire need of aid.

"UNHCR and its partners have been working around the clock to provide life-saving assistance," Mr. Mahecic said, noting that so far 180,000 core relief

items, such as mattresses, high thermal blankets, plastic sheets, winter clothes kits, solar lamps, jerry cans, and kitchen sets, have been delivered.

He stressed the importance of full and unhindered humanitarian access to civilians in need, as well as of full respect of the civilians' freedom of movement and choice of place where they feel safe.

UNHCR call on all parties to respect international humanitarian law and human rights law in the treatment of civilians both in and fleeing east Ghouta.

In the country's northwest, UNHCR has scaled up its response to the Afrin crisis, delivering 100,000 core relief items in the last two days.

Some 75,000 are sheltering in Tal Rifaat, while another 29,000 have sought safety in Nubol and Zahraa and surrounding villages in northern rural Aleppo. In addition, some 10,000 people are reportedly stranded at Az-Ziyara.

"A UNHCR team was on the ground in Nubol yesterday where they heard stories of their exhausting journey, walking long hours through the mountains," Mr. Mahecic said.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) is also responding to the crises in Afrin and east Ghouta.

"It is now 20 days since we were last able to deliver health and nutrition supplies to Afrin district," said UNICEF spokesperson Marixie Mercado in a briefing to the media in Geneva.

The source of water to Afrin city was reportedly damaged by fighting. UNICEF-supported trucks, however, have not been able to deliver much-needed safe water to vulnerable areas in the city since March 15 due to the escalation of violence.

In east Ghouta, about 70 per cent of the 45,000 to 50,000 people who have been evacuated since March 13 are women and children.

Despite many challenges at the shelters, "there is a palpable sense of relief – especially among the children," she said, noting that they arrive hungry and exhausted, but the sound of their laughter fills the yards of the shelters.

The children said how much they wanted to go back to school, and described how, when schools would open in eastern Ghouta, they would go to their classes at 5 a.m., before the sun was out, and return at 8 a.m., before the fighting started.

UNICEF is also concerned about the thousands of those who remain inside Afrin and besieged locations in eastern Ghouta.

She said UNICEF had initially planned to meet the needs of 50,000 people, but are now preparing to cover around 200,000 people from east Ghouta, including those inside the besieged areas.

Meanwhile, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, briefed Security Council members on the human rights situation in Syria during an informal gathering on Monday.

“The siege of Eastern Ghouta by the Syrian Government forces, half a decade long, has involved pervasive war crimes, the use of chemical weaponry, enforced starvation as a weapon of warfare, and the denial of essential and life-saving aid – culminating in the current relentless, month-long bombardment of hundreds of thousands of terrified, trapped civilians,” he said.

“In the city of Afrin, which was captured by Turkish forces yesterday, scores of civilians have been killed and injured due to airstrikes, ground-based strikes, and explosive hazards, and thousands have been displaced,” he added.

Find his [full remarks](#) here.

[Cameroonians pour into Nigeria, stretching scant resources – UN refugee agency](#)

As more and more Anglophone Cameroonians flee a violent crackdown in the region and seek asylum in Nigeria, the United Nations refugee agency warned on Tuesday without more funding and assistance, their situation and that of the Nigerian communities hosting them, will become even more desperate.

“Anglophone Cameroonians began [fleeing violence](#) in October 2017 and continue to pour into Nigeria’s Cross River, Taraba, Benue and Akwa-Ibom states,” Aikaterini Kitidi, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said at the regular briefing in Geneva.

“In total, over 20,000 refugees have been registered in the area. Women and children account for four-fifths of the population,” she added.

A recent assessment by humanitarian groups shows how grim the situation has become – with 95 per cent of the asylum seekers having only three days of food.

Most families are down to one meal per day and their coping strategies people are themselves risky, ranging from borrowing money to cutting food portions or saving food only for children.

Most say they are having to drink water from streams, ponds and other unsafe sources, because of inadequate or dysfunctional drinking water facilities.

“Essential relief items, such as clothing, blankets and plastic sheeting, are available to fewer than 25 per cent of them,” explained Ms. Kitidi.

Moreover, only five in every 100 Cameroonians have proper or independent shelter. The rest have little or no privacy, squatting in rooms with some 10 to 15 people.

A lack of protection from the cold is increasing health concerns as the start of the rainy season approaches.

Additionally, malaria is reportedly increasing. Many participants at the assessment were suffering from fear and anxiety, poor sleep and flashbacks.

According to UNHCR, about 20 to 30 per cent of the asylum seekers have some kind of vulnerability, such as a physical disability.

Three-quarters of the children who recently fled currently cannot access school, because their families cannot afford to pay for books and uniforms. Adults are also struggling to make ends meet.

“A political solution to the situation in Cameroon is urgently needed, so that the Cameroonians can safely and voluntarily return home,” stressed Ms. Kitidi.

“Until then,” she continued, “UNHCR and its partners will continue their efforts to provide assistance and support to this population as long as we are able.”

While UNHCR has worked on an \$18 million contingency plan to help cover their needs, to date, no funds have been received.

Earlier this month, the Nigerian authorities allocated land to UNHCR for shelters, to ensure the refugees’ safety, security and self-reliance.

In line with humanitarian principles, UNHCR acknowledges the authorities’ commitment to assist in moving the refugees at least 50 kilometres from the border.

The UN refugee agency also remains concerned over reports of further Cameroonian nationals’ arrests in Nigeria.

“UNHCR urges the Nigerian authorities to refrain from the forcible return of individuals who may have fled persecution in their country of origin, and to respect the principle of non-refoulement or no forced returns,” concluded the UNHCR spokesperson.