

Report highlights UN progress in fight to stamp out sexual exploitation and abuse

The number of allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by personnel serving with the United Nations dropped from 165 in 2016 to 138 last year, according to the latest [report](#) by the UN Secretary-General on implementing a zero-tolerance policy for these crimes.

The Special Coordinator on Improving UN Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, [Jane Holl Lute](#), outlined some of its main messages during a press conference at UN Headquarters in New York on Tuesday.

“The report underscores the Secretary-General’s consistent message that no one serving under the UN flag should be associated with sexual exploitation and abuse,” she said.

“It remains one of his key priorities.”

Ms. Lute said data from 2017 indicates a “downward trend” in the number of allegations reported.

Overall, there were 138 allegations last year, compared to 165 in 2016.

Of this number, 62 concerned personnel deployed to UN peacekeeping and special political missions: down from 104 the previous year.

However, she said allegations emanating from other UN entities and their implementing partners increased over the same period: from 42 to 75.

At the same time, there was “a sharp decline” in allegations involving non-UN forces, from 18 in 2016 to one in 2017.

Ms. Lute reminded journalists of measures the UN has implemented over the past year since [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) launched [a system-wide strategy](#) to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.

The initiatives focus on areas such as putting victims first, ending impunity and increasing partnerships; for example, with civil society.

They include the appointment of a [Victims’ Rights Advocate](#), responding rapidly to allegations and ensuring that UN staff [understand](#) their responsibilities and obligations to prevent and report incidents.

“On ending impunity, the Secretary-General has strengthened mandatory reporting through the development of a uniform incident reporting form,” Ms. Lute continued.

“We have strengthened investigations in cooperation with Member States. We have encouraged Member States to promptly appoint and deploy national investigation officers where allegations have been reported, and we continue to support the capacity building and training of national investigative officers.”

Ms. Lute added that a [trust fund](#) to support victims has seen a three-fold increase in contributions, and she encouraged countries to “maintain this positive momentum.”

The trust fund was established in March 2016. As of December 2017, it stood at \$1.89 million in commitments and/or contributions.

Additionally, grants have been made available or approved to support victims through projects, services and training in three countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic and Liberia.

[Rohingyas could face further violence if they return to Myanmar, UN adviser warns](#)

International crimes were committed against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and those who fled the country could face further persecution if they return now, a senior United Nations official said Tuesday.

“Rohingya Muslims [have been killed](#), tortured, raped, burnt alive and humiliated, solely because of who they are,” said Adama Dieng, UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, following his visit to Bangladesh, where almost 700,000 Rohingyas from Myanmar had arrived in the space of just six months.

His visit from 7 to 13 March was to assess the situation of the Rohingya population who have crossed the border since the most recent violence in Myanmar’s northern Rakhine state in October 2016 and August 2017.

He visited refugee camps in Cox’s Bazaar, where survivors told horrifying stories of what they endured.

“All the information I have received indicates that the intent of the perpetrators was to cleanse northern Rakhine state of their existence, possibly even to destroy the Rohingya as such, which, if proven, would constitute the crime of genocide,” Mr. Dieng said.

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forces since August 2017 against the Rohingya population was predictable and preventable. But the international community has buried its head in the sand.

“The scorched earth campaign carried out by the Myanmar security forces since August 2017 against the Rohingya population was predictable and preventable,” he stressed, noting that “the international community has buried its head in the sand” and failed to save the Rohingya from losing their lives, dignity and homes despite his numerous warnings of the risk of atrocity crimes.

Underscoring the need for the root causes of the problem to be addressed, Mr. Dieng said that “the Rohingya has been sealed since the day they were born” and that they must be given the opportunity that every human being should be afforded in life: to enjoy their fundamental human rights in freedom and safety.

He also said there must be accountability for the crimes that have been committed and the Rohingya must receive protection and support as refugees while in Bangladesh.

Mr. Dieng said that the majority of the Rohingya want to return to Myanmar, but only when they can do so in safety, dignity and with access to their basic rights.

“So far, the Myanmar authorities have shown no genuine efforts to allow this,” he said, noting that the international community also has a responsibility to protect this population from the risk of further atrocity crimes.

“Under the present conditions, returning to Myanmar will put the Rohingya population at risk of further crimes,” Mr. Dieng warned, stressing that, however, accepting the current *status quo* would be a victory for those who planned the attacks.

“We must not accept either of these scenarios,” he concluded.

Click here for Mr. Dieng's [full statement](#).

[Syria conflict: 2017 deadliest year for children, UN aid official reports](#)

More than 900 children in Syria were killed last year, making 2017 the deadliest year for children in the country's ongoing conflict, a senior United Nations official told the Geneva-based Human Rights Council on Tuesday, warning that the grim statistics may only be the tip of the iceberg.

UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis [Panos Moumtzis](#) alongside UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights [Kate Gilmore](#) addressed a [high-level panel](#) discussion looking at rights violations against children caught in the fighting, which is entering its eighth year.

“In 2017, documentation of violations of children’s rights during the conflict – by all sides – was the highest since the beginning of the conflict. Simply put, 2017 was the deadliest year of the Syrian war for children,” Mr. Moumtzis told the Council.

The Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism verified that in 2017 alone, at least 910 children killed and 361 injured, the large majority of child casualties occurring in Idleb, Aleppo and Deir-ez-Zor, and other locations.

“There is a child and a grieving family behind every single one of these numbers. Verification of additional cases continues and these numbers only provide the tip of the iceberg of the actual case and scale of violence suffered by children in Syria.”

The UN estimates that overall, 400,000 people have been killed in Syria, and more than a million injured.

The fighting has also pushed more than [five million Syrians](#) across the border to neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, as well as to Europe and beyond.

Mr. Moumtzis reported that children make up over 40 per cent of the 13.1 million people inside Syria who require life-saving humanitarian assistance. And of the more than five million across the country who are in acute need, 663,000 are under the age of five – a figure he described as “shocking.”

The UN humanitarian official also expressed deep concern over continued reports of the recruitment and use of children in the fighting by all sides.

“In 2017, 25 per cent of cases involved boys and girls under the age of 15 – of course considered a war crime and prohibited under international humanitarian law,” he said.

“Nine out of 10 recruited children served in a combat role: in uniform, armed and with military training. Growing up in conflict, they may have little choice or alternative; they may also have no way out, as killing or detention by the other side may await them.”

Ms. Gilmore, the UN deputy human rights chief, reported that 2017 also saw the highest number of violations against Syrian children.

“The scale, scope and gravity of crimes committed against children are shocking. Widespread human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law affecting or targeting children are being committed by the Syrian authorities. And perpetrated too by armed groups,” she stated.

“Children are arrested and detained for their family’s alleged association with opposing armed forces. Girls, in particular, are subjected to sexual

violence, including rape, forced marriage and sexual slavery by armed groups.”

She recalled that the Syrian conflict began with, in her words, “the denigration of a child” whose “tragic fate” became a rallying call for scores across the country.

Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb, 13, had been detained during protests in the city of Daraa in April 2011. His brutalized body was returned to his family a month later.

Ms. Gilmore said the years of unending fighting means millions of Syrian children have been denied their fundamental human rights and robbed of their childhood.

She concluded her remarks with a warning to the warring parties and their supporters:

“Those responsible for this violence – within Syria and beyond – should know that they are being identified; that dossiers are being built up for their prosecution; and that, with evidence in hand, and before duly convened tribunals, they will be held legally accountable for those crimes that with malice, indifference and great cruelty they continue to wage with scant regard for Syria’s children,” she stated.

[UN urges ‘post-ISIL’ new Iraq to draw on religious diversity, support minorities](#)

As Iraq rebuilds after defeating a terrorist group, the Government must draw on religious diversity and protect minorities, including Yezidi and Christians, a senior United Nations official has said.

“Iraq needs all its components, all its ethnic and religious groups, to rebuild in the [post-Da’esh period](#) and prosper in the future as a stable and united country,” said the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq, Ján Kubiš, in a press release issued Monday.

He urged the authorities to proactively support these communities and ensure the return of minorities who had been persecuted by the terrorist group, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Millions of Iraqis have been displaced since the rise of ISIL and due to a battle to oust the terrorists.

His call comes in the wake of recent criminal and terrorist acts that targeted members of minority communities in Iraq.

Christians are one of the ancient communities in this country, dating back to the early days of Christianity and Mesopotamia. This indigenous community, which in the 1980s counted almost 1.3 million, has dwindled to an estimated 400,000 today, according to community leaders.

Last Thursday, three Christian family members were killed in Baghdad by armed men who stormed their house and stabbed them to death. In the last three years, Christians, particularly in Ninewa Governorate, suffered from the Da'esh terrorism.

Also last week, a member of the Sabeen Mandaean community was kidnapped from his shop in Baghdad and his body was later found on a street. In Nassiriyah in the country's south, another Sabeen Mandaean was stabbed at his shop but survived after his Muslim neighbours came to his aid.

"Iraq draws its strength from [its cultural and religious diversity](#), and its rich history. This treasure should be protected and nurtured by the Government and the people of Iraq," Mr. Kubiš said.

"There is no place for intolerance and discrimination, for targeting and suppressing minorities," he added, urging the Government to support and protect Yezidi, Christians, Shabak, Sabeen Mandaean, and other minorities.

[Syria 'bleeding inside and out' as conflict enters eighth year, says UN chief](#)

Despite a United Nations Security Council demand to institute a 30-day ceasefire across Syria, airstrikes, shelling and ground offensives have intensified in Eastern Ghouta, Secretary-General António Guterres reported Monday, warning that the conflict is entering its eighth year with the "grimmiest" reality on the ground.

A country known for its ancient civilization and with a people known for their richness of diversity, "Syria is bleeding inside and out," the UN chief told the 15-member body in his [briefing](#) on the implementation of [Security Council resolution 2401](#) unanimously adopted on 24 February.

Along with a 30-day ceasefire, the resolution calls for delivering aid, evacuating the sick and wounded, lifting sieges, accelerating humanitarian mine action, and protecting civilians and infrastructure.

On Thursday, this conflict will enter its eighth year. I refuse to lose my hope to see Syria rising from the ashes.

According to UN data, the conflict has produced more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees and 6.1 million internally displaced people, with more than 13 million people inside the country requiring humanitarian assistance, including nearly six million children.

“Let me highlight just one stark fact on this grimmest of anniversaries: In 2017, more children were killed in Syria than during any other year since the war began,” he said.

However, violence continues in Eastern Ghouta and beyond, including in Afrin, parts of Idlib and into Damascus and its suburbs, Mr. Guterres said, warning that in Eastern Ghouta, airstrikes, shelling and ground offensives have even intensified and claimed many hundreds of civilian lives, some even saying more than 1,000 were killed.

He reported that none of the Council’s directives have been implemented: the provision of humanitarian aid and services has not been safe, unimpeded or sustained; no sieges have been lifted and not one critically sick or wounded person has yet been evacuated.

All parties involved should be reminded that even efforts to combat terrorist groups identified by the Council do not supersede these humanitarian obligations.

Mr. Guterres noted, however, that in some areas, like Deir ez-Zour and Douma, the conflict is diminishing in intensity.

A ceasefire between the Government and Jaish al Islam forces in Douma is largely holding, he said, noting that their meeting took place yesterday and today, and there has been progress on civilian evacuations and humanitarian aid.

Mr. Guterres’ oral report detailed latest efforts of his Special Envoy for Syria, [Staffan de Mistura](#), to bring about a political solution to the conflict and UN activities to address the humanitarian crisis.

“On Thursday, this conflict will enter its eighth year. I refuse to lose my hope to see Syria rising from the ashes,” he said, “To see a united, democratic Syria able to avoid fragmentation and sectarianism with its sovereignty and territorial integrity respected and to see a Syrian people able to freely decide their future and choose their political leadership.”

Click here for [full remarks](#) by Mr. Guterees.