

## On 'Zero Discrimination Day' UN urges tackling everyday biases; ask yourself 'what if...?'

To mark Zero Discrimination Day, the United Nations agency coordinating the global effort to tackle HIV/AIDS is challenging people to recognize where everyday discrimination takes place and take action to stop it by asking themselves simple questions: 'What if the person you bought your vegetables from was living with HIV? Would you buy tomatoes from him?'

"We will never guarantee the right to health and end the AIDS epidemic if we exclude people," said the Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Michel Sidibé. "However, [huge structural barriers](#) stand in the way of the health and well-being of millions."

This year's [Zero Discrimination Day campaign](#) invites people to ask themselves 'what if' questions to reflect upon their everyday actions, such as: What if the person you bought your vegetables from was living with HIV? Would you buy tomatoes from him? What if your neighbour had tuberculosis? Would you stop to chat?

UNAIDS says no one should ever be discriminated against because of their HIV status, age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, race, ethnicity, language, geographical location or migrant status, or for any other reason.

Discrimination is often based on misinformation or fear of the unknown, the agency says, warning that allowing discrimination to continue is not only wrong, it is bad for communities, bad for the economy and bad for the future.

Ending discrimination requires action from everyone. Zero Discrimination Day is an opportunity to highlight how everyone can be a part of the transformation and take a stand towards a more fair and just society, UNAIDS says.

Zero Discrimination Day is annually observed on 1 March.

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## UN condemns deadly attacks on 'blue helmets,' armed forces in Mali

Secretary-General António Guterres and the United Nations Security Council

have strongly condemned the attack in Mali that killed four Bangladeshi peacekeepers and seriously injured four others in Mopti region on Wednesday

“The Secretary-General recalls that attacks targeting United Nations peacekeepers may constitute [war crimes](#) under international law and that the perpetrators must be apprehended and prosecuted,” said UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric. Mr. Dujarric.

“The Secretary-General conveys his condolences to the Governments of Bangladesh and Mali and his profound sympathies to the families and loved ones of the victims,” he continued, adding that Mr. Guterres wished a swift recovery to the injured.

The Secretary-General pointed out that this incident came one day after six members of the Malian armed forces died from another improvised explosive device attack in central Mali.

“These cowardly acts will not deter [MINUSMA](#)’s [UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali] determination to support the Malian authorities in their efforts to protect civilians and accompany the Malian people in their quest for peace and stability,” the statement concluded.

At the same time, the Security Council issued a press statement condemning the attack against the MINUSMA convoy “in the strongest term,” detailing that it took place on the axis between Boni and Douentza.

The Council members also expressed their deepest condolences and sympathy to the victims’ families, Bangladeshi Government and MINUSMA and wished a speedy and full recovery to those who were injured.

Underlining that “attacks targeting peacekeepers may constitute war crimes under international law,” they paid tribute to the peacekeepers who risk their lives and called on the Government to “swiftly investigate the attack and bring the perpetrators to justice.”

They stressed that involvement in planning, directing, sponsoring or conducting attacks against MINUSMA peacekeepers constitute a basis for sanctions designations pursuant to Security Council resolutions.

They also stressed that those responsible for the killings should be held accountable, and urged all States, in accordance with their obligations under international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, to “cooperate actively with all relevant authorities” in this regard.

The members expressed their concern about Mali’s security situation and the transnational dimension of the terrorist threat in the Sahel region, urging the Malian parties to implement the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation without further delay – noting that its full implementation and the intensification of efforts to overcome asymmetric threats can contribute to improving the security situation across the country.

Finally, the Council further spotlighted the importance that MINUSMA have the

necessary capacities, including combat convoy companies, to fulfil its mandate and promote the safety and security of the UN peacekeepers.

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## [Some 19 million newborns at risk of brain damage every year due to iodine deficiency – UN](#)

Nearly 19 million babies born globally every year – 14 per cent – are at risk of permanent yet preventable brain damage and reduced cognitive function due to a lack of iodine in the earliest years of life, according to a United Nations-backed report released Thursday.

The report from the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and its partner, the Global Alliance of Improved Nutrition (GAIN), notes that insufficient iodine during pregnancy and infancy results in neurological and psychological deficits, reducing a child’s IQ by 8 to 10 points.

“The nutrients a child receives in the earliest years of life influence their brain development for life, and can [make or break their chance of a prosperous future](#),” said UNICEF Senior Nutrition Adviser Roland Kupka.

“By protecting and supporting children’s development in early life, we are able to achieve immense results for children throughout their lifespan,” he added, noting that salt iodization is both cost effective and economically beneficial at only \$0.02–0.05 per child annually.

Every dollar spent on salt iodization is estimated to return \$30 through increased future cognitive ability.

Titled “[Brighter futures: Protecting early brain development through salt iodization](#),” the report also notes that more than 1 in 4 affected children – 4.3 million – lives in South Asia.

While South Asia is home to the largest proportion of babies at risk globally, the region has the second highest iodized salt coverage rate at 87 per cent of the population, preceded by East Asia and the Pacific at 91 per cent coverage.

The lowest coverage with iodized salt was seen in Eastern and Southern Africa, where around 25 per cent of the population do not have access to iodized salt, leaving 3.9 million babies every year unprotected against iodine deficiency disorders.

The earliest moments of life, from conception up to age 2, are the most

critical for a child's development. Nutrition – along with protection and stimulating activities like play and early learning – during a child's first 1,000 days shape brain development for life.

The report outlines urgent steps to reduce the risk of mental impairment to babies' growing brains, including the integration of salt iodization into national plans to support children's nutrition and brain development in early childhood and the establishment of surveillance systems to identify unreached populations.

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## [UN Committee against Torture issues new guidelines on asylum seekers' rights](#)

New guidelines developed by the United Nations Committee against Torture aim to help Governments avoid violating international human rights law, and to help asylum seekers avoid torture or other ill-treatment.

The [new document](#) addresses governments' implementation of an article under the Convention against Torture that deals with *non-refoulement* – a ban on expelling, returning (“refouling”) or extraditing a person to another State where he or she could face torture, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)).

The new document helps the Committee against Torture give guidance to States, and also helps Governments assess whether an asylum seeker faces a personal risk of torture or ill-treatment in his or her country of origin, if returned. It provides a checklist, which among other things, asks Government authorities to keep in mind that torture victims and other vulnerable persons frequently suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“The list could also help people at risk of being sent back, by assisting them in making their claims before the national authorities,” said Committee Chair Jens Modvig.

The checklist was updated in response to the migration crisis and the consequential increase in complaints from people alleging they risked torture or other ill-treatment if forcibly removed from their countries of asylum to their countries of origin.

The 10-member expert Committee monitors implementation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment by its State parties.

The full document is available [here](#).

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## [Airstrikes, shelling continue in Syria despite Security Council's ceasefire call – top UN officials](#)

Despite the Security Council's demand for a ceasefire throughout Syria, violence continues to plague the war-ravaged country, worsening the humanitarian situation and the suffering of its people, top United Nations political and relief officials said Wednesday, calling on all parties to the conflict to "fulfil their obligations to end the fighting."

"The brief respite you [Security Council members,] unanimously demanded only days ago in resolution 2401 has not materialized. [The airstrikes, shelling, and ground offensives continue](#). There are even reports of yet another chlorine gas attack," Jeffrey Feltman, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said at a Council meeting on the situation.

"What we need is implementation of 2401, and that is not happening."

Speaking alongside Mr. Feltman, Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator relayed some questions received by the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which he heads up, since the resolution was adopted this past Saturday.

One question asked what has happened in Syria in the last few days?

"More bombing. More fighting. More death. More destruction. More maiming of women and children. More hunger. More misery. [More, in other words, of the same](#)," answered Mr. Lowcock.

Both Mr. Lowcock and Mr. Feltman underscored that the resolutions adopted by the Security Council, including [resolution 2401](#), must be implemented for any positive change to be possible.

Meanwhile, on the ground, the [situation remains precarious](#): millions of Syrians are unable to access any assistance and hundreds of thousands, such as those in eastern Ghouta, remain trapped in sieges.

Speaking on other parts of the country, Mr. Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, said that in Deir ez-Zor, the first UN assessment mission in three and a half years found that while the town is about 80 per cent destroyed, it is still home to 100,000 people.

The situation in Damascus city, Idleb, Afrin, Aleppo, Raqqa, Rukban, and in

other places also remains concerning, he added.

In two weeks, the conflict in the country will enter into its eighth year, during this time, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and millions have been displaced from their homes or forced as refugees in neighbouring countries.



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, addresses the Security Council meeting.

“There are no words to express our frustration over the collective failure of the international community to end this war. But that frustration is nothing compared to the suffering and destruction visited ceaselessly upon the Syrian people,” said Mr. Feltman, warning that the conflict also continues to threaten regional and international.

Underscoring that there is no military solution to the conflict, the UN political chief stressed that that the Organization “remains convinced that a political solution is the only way forward” and called on positive and constructive engagement of all stakeholders.

“Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura is pressing forward on facilitating the establishment of a constitutional committee in Geneva, as part of the overall intra-Syrian political process towards full implementation of [resolution 2254](#),” he added, noting that the full support of the Security Council and the international community is vital if UN efforts “are to have a chance of reinvigorating a serious and meaningful political process.”

“I trust that [Mr. de Mistura] will have that support.”