

Syria: 'Actions, not words' needed to save lives in East Ghouta – UN humanitarian wing

Following Sunday's military operations in Syria's east Ghouta, which claimed 30 lives, including women and children, reliable reports indicate that fighting continued and that shelling between East Ghouta and Damascus was ongoing in both directions, the United Nations humanitarian wing reported Tuesday.

"The UN is ready to move convoys into East Ghouta, and to evacuate hundreds of casualties, as soon as security conditions permit," Jens Laerke, spokesperson for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)), told reporters at Tuesday's regular press briefing in Geneva.

"In the current situation, that is not possible," he added.

Responding to questions, Mr. Laerke said that what people in East Ghouta and throughout Syria urgently needed is "the immediate implementation of the 30-day ceasefire, in accordance with the recent Security Council resolution," calling on all sides involved of the conflict to abide by its terms.

"Actions, not words, are needed to save lives in East Ghouta" he stressed. "Only a change in the situation on the ground will enable lifesaving programmes to be implemented."

Mr. Laerke maintained that if the Security Council-mandated ceasefire is not observed by all the warring parties, there can be no genuine cessation of hostilities.

At the same time, Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the UN Information Service in Geneva, said the Organization was ready to act but "had to be sure that there were no obstacles, physical or administrative standing in its way."

She echoed Mr. Laerke in saying that a ceasefire required the full implementation of the Council's resolution, reminding the press that it had been passed unanimously and needs to be fully implemented.

For his part, World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) spokesperson Tarik Jašareviæ said that a medical evacuation plan for East Ghouta had been drawn up in 2017, noting that "if and when the plan was implemented, the Syrian Red Crescent Society would be taking the leading role."

In response to a question, Mr. Jašareviæ said that more than 1,000 names had been listed of potential evacuees from East Ghouta – some 600 of whom had been classified as moderate or severe cases.

Mr. Laerke, added that Syrian government authorities would be involved when

the evacuations took place.

Responding to a question on the safety of persons being evacuated, Mr. Laerke said that all humanitarian actors agreed that the only way to guarantee their safety was for all sides in the fighting to accept the terms of the ceasefire.

With proposed reforms, UN closer than ever to a development system that is 'fit for purpose'

In his address to the opening of the annual [operational segment](#) of the Economic and Social Council ([ECOSOC](#)), Mr. Guterres warned that the world is facing a crisis of legitimacy, confidence and trust, rooted in legitimate fears

And while the benefits of globalization should be clear to all, “too many are being left behind.”

“Women are still far less likely to participate in the labour market – and gender pay gaps remain a global concern. Youth unemployment is at alarming levels. And inequalities are rampant – stretching the fabric of societies to the breaking point and undermining the social compact,” he stated, pointing out that “a handful of men hold the same wealth as half of humanity.”

Mr. Guterres underscored that exclusion resulted in frustration, alienation and instability.

“All of this compels us to do all we can to achieve inclusive and sustainable development – a goal in its own right, but also our best form of prevention against all kind of risks,” Mr. Guterres stressed.

An economic and social model that drives exclusion and environmental destruction cause deaths, missed opportunities, division and future conflicts.

“We need a global economy that works for all and creates opportunities for all,” he asserted.

According to the UN chief, the 2030 Agenda is crucial to rebuild the trust needed for fair globalization.

The Secretary-General flagged poverty eradication as the UN’s top priority, with the 2030 Agenda acting as its roadmap and the goals and targets its tools to get there.

He saw the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as outlining the Organization's commitment to expand dignity and opportunity for all on a healthy planet by empowering women, meaningfully including young people, reducing climate risk, creating decent jobs and mobilizing clean investments for inclusive growth.

"Finance is pivotal," espoused Mr. Guterres, pointing to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda as stressing the importance of upholding Official Development Assistance commitments.

He underscored the need to support countries' efforts to mobilize domestic resources, which must be accompanied by the international community's commitment to fight tax evasion, money laundering and illicit financial flows, which threaten development.

"We are focused on building a system that is demand-driven, oriented around achieving results at scale, and accountable in providing support to achieve the 2030 Agenda," Mr. Guterres said, mentioning a proposed a set of global adjustments to make operations on the ground "more cohesive, effective and efficient."

He encouraged all present to take inspiration from the 2030 Agenda to forge the future we want.

"We are now closer than ever to repositioning sustainable development at the heart of the organization and to having a development system that is an even stronger partner as we seek to deliver for people," said the UN chief.

"Together, let us make good on our shared promise to humanity – a future of prosperity, peace and dignity for all," he concluded.



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

[Secretary-General António Guterres](#) (centre) and Marc Pecsteen de Buytswerve, Permanent Representative of Belgium to the UN and Vice-President of the UN Economic and Social Council (centre right) address the Council's operational activities for development, by UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Development system 'fit for purpose'

Opening the meeting, Marc Pecsteen de Buytswerve, Permanent Representative of Belgium to the United Nations and Vice-President of ECOSOC said that repositioning the UN's development system would be a unique opportunity to create a more integrated, effective, efficient and accountable system that matches the world's commitments.

In short, he said, a development system that is "fit for purpose."

He referred to the 2030 Agenda as demonstrating the commitment of Member States to promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies based on human rights, gender equality, empowerment of all women and girls, and free from poverty and fear and violence.

Mr. Pecsteen recalled the Secretary-General's vision and concrete proposals to realign and reinvigorate the UN development system, which is necessary for the adequate and timely response Member States expect from the UN in the 21st century to help deliver on the 2030 Agenda promises.

He thanked Mr. Guterres for his leadership, vision and determination "to take on a challenge that is not easy," adding that it was now up to the Member States to be "as bold in their desire to transform the system."

He detailed that the ECOSOC Segment for Development will lay the groundwork for the consensus that will be forged in the coming weeks.

Panelists include senior government representatives from capitals, board chairs, UN leaders and key partners in the system.

Also addressing the meeting, Amina Mohammed, the UN Deputy Secretary-General, reiterated the importance of utilizing the opportunities offered by the 2030 Agenda to address the myriad challenges facing the world as well as to seize the momentum offered by it to ensure that the Organization is "fit to support" national efforts to realize the global goals.

In that context, she highlighted the important role that UN Resident Coordinators have to play.

"We know that if we want to strengthen our ability to support the 2030 Agenda in a cohesive, effective, accountable and efficient manner – then we must strengthen the Resident Coordinator system," underscored the deputy UN chief, noting that a "reinvigorated" Resident Coordinator system is at the core of the proposals to reposition the UN development system.

"And it is at the centre of the mandate of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review," she added.

The Policy Review is the mechanism through which UN Member States assess the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and impact of UN development work. It also provides policy orientations for development cooperation at country level.

In her remarks, Ms. Mohammed also stated that strengthened Resident Coordinator system would ensuring a more accountable UN development system on the ground, one that is more responsive to national needs and more capable to deliver meaningful results.

“A system that can draw on the expertise across all entities – including non-resident entities, DESA [the Department of Economic and Social Affairs] and the regional economic commissions – to respond to country priorities,” she added.

[UN can help, but Yemen’s warring parties must commit to peace – outgoing UN envoy](#)

A destructive pattern of zero-sum politics has plunged Yemen into ever deeper poverty and desolation, the United Nations envoy for the war-torn country said Tuesday, emphasizing that while the UN and the wider international community can try to bring about a favourable environment for a path to peace, Yemeni decision-makers must stop the fighting and bloodshed.

[“Conflict has gradually destroyed the economy, healthcare services, housing, roads and schools](#) – everything that Yemenis need in order to live and prosper,” said the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, briefing the Security Council a final time before he steps down at the end of the month.

“I call on the parties to cease hostilities, reactivate negotiations aimed at a peaceful settlement,” he urged.

Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed said the country was already embroiled in conflict when he took up his post in April 2015, and he said that as the conflict deepened, so did the socio-economic misery, making Yemen the world’s largest man-made humanitarian crisis, which has claimed thousands of lives and driven many times more from their homes.

Across the country, more than three-fourths of the population – over 22 million persons are in [need of humanitarian assistance](#), including more than 8.4 million who are severely food insecure.

Prices of essential commodities in the country have skyrocketed, the value of the currency has dwindled, salaries have not been paid in months and in some cases, years, and the country's health, water and sanitation, basic services and education system are in tatters, with money which could have been used to maintain such services and stimulate economy being used to fund the war.

Worst affected are Yemen's women, who remain at a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence and have seen their rights "shrink by the day," added Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed.

"I heard many Yemeni women saying that they 'live in a big prison' where their freedom of speech is restricted. Those who do speak up face a constant threat of persecution and violent attempts to silence them," he expressed.

The UN Special Envoy concluded by saying that a roadmap for peace in Yemen exists but the parties to the conflict need to build confidence among themselves and launch it.

"The only part missing is the commitment of parties to make concessions and give priority to the national interest," he said, wishing Martin Griffiths – a seasoned former diplomat and humanitarian worker, appointed by the UN Secretary-General as his new Special Envoy for Yemen – every success in his efforts.



UN Photo/Manuel Elias

John Ging, Director of Operations at the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) briefs the Security Council on the situation in Yemen.

Also briefing the 15-member Security Council today, John Ging, the Director of Operations at the UN Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, also underscored that an end to hostilities and "meaningful" engagement of the parties is vital to ensure a lasting political solution.

However, until that happens, humanitarian response is critical to save lives.

“Securing full funding for [the \$2.96 billion [Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan](#)] is a top priority,” he said, noting that the Central Emergency Response Fund recently allocated \$50 million to humanitarian efforts in the country.

Mr. Ging also underscored the need to ensure unhindered, safe and secure humanitarian access into as well as within the country to allow resources be delivered to those in need. At the same time, allowing and maintaining free flow of commercial imports is imperative, as is ensuring that Government employees and civil servants are paid their salaries.

“Finally, it remains important to emphasize that protection concerns remain at the centre of the response,” urged the senior UN aid official, reiterating that all parties to the conflict are obligated to spare civilians and civilian infrastructure in military operations.

[UN peacekeeping chief wraps up three-day visit to Lebanon](#)

The head of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations has wrapped up a visit to Lebanon with a call on leaders from Lebanon as well as Israel to take advantage of the role UN peacekeeping can play in finding political solutions to conflict.

The Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, concluded on Tuesday the Lebanon leg of his wider Middle East tour to visit UN missions, including the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), and high-ranking government officials in the region.

While in Lebanon, Mr. Lacroix met with President Michel Aoun and other senior officials, and saw first-hand the crucial work done by UNIFIL, in close coordination with the national armed forces.

UNIFIL was established in 1978 following Israel’s invasion of southern Lebanon after the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) carried out a deadly attack on its territory.

Today, some 10,500 peacekeepers from 41 countries are serving in its area of operations and at sea as UNIFIL is complemented by a six-vessel Maritime Task Force: the first and only one of its kind in UN peacekeeping.

Mr. Lacroix praised the Lebanese Government’s continuous support and cooperation in implementing the UNIFIL mandate, which includes monitoring the cessation of hostilities in the wake of the July 2006 conflict.

The UN peacekeeping chief also underlined the need for the parties to work together to build on the years of relative calm since then.

“It is important for the leaders on both sides to take advantage of the window of opportunity that UNIFIL has helped provide to work towards a permanent ceasefire and long-term solution to the conflict as envisaged in UN Security Council resolution 1701,” he said. “A peacekeeping operation helps create the space for political solutions.”

Security Council resolution 1701, adopted in August 2006, called for an end to hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah in south Lebanon.

It mapped out steps for a permanent ceasefire and a long-term solution to the conflict.

Mr. Lacroix toured the UNIFIL area of operations and the Blue Line, a border demarcation established in June 2000 to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon following another invasion in June 1982.

“I am impressed with the work of UNIFIL and its high tempo of patrolling both during the day and at night as well as their activities to maintain stability, especially along the Blue Line,” he said.

Mr. Lacroix expressed appreciation for the UN force’s efforts to de-escalate tensions through its participation in a forum bringing together senior Lebanese and Israeli officials which was chaired by UNIFIL Head of Mission and Force Commander, Major General Michael Beary.

[Dry, hot weather likely to reduce harvests in southern Africa, UN warns](#)

Southern Africa’s water sources and crops are under serious pressure as a long dry spell and high temperatures have taken hold in the region, the United Nations agriculture agency said Tuesday, warning that after record maize production in 2017, food shortages are set to worsen this year.

The [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO) said that while cereal stocks in the region are ample, the spell of [dry weather and erratic rains](#) earlier in the season signals multiple risks to agricultural yields and may aggravate the impact of the Fall Armyworm pest.

Reduced harvests are foreseen to intensify food insecurity in 2018, increasing the number of people in need of assistance, according to a new [Special Alert](#) issued by FAO’s Global Information and Early Warning System ([GIEWS](#)).

Maize production hit a record level in 2017 in the Southern Africa subregion, a welcome development after sharp output declines in the previous year caused by an unusually strong El Niño. Cereal production in the sub-region in 2018 is foreseen to fall due to erratic rains, along with an intense dry period in January.

The alert comes as FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva, speaking in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, emphasized the importance of boosting the resilience of communities – particularly in Africa – in making sure that "[Zero Hunger](#) is possible."

Precipitation trends also matter greatly for the [Fall Armyworm](#), an invasive species that has now been detected in all countries of the subregion, except Lesotho and Mauritius. While recent heavy rains in some localities may have contributed to containing the pest's spread, the general dry weather may help it spread and could exacerbate the impact on yields.