

Civilians 'continue to pay highest price' in Ukraine conflict, with peace prospects losing 'momentum'

"Civilians continue to pay the highest price" arising from Ukraine's on-going conflict with separatist rebels in the east, the UN Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator told the Security Council on Tuesday, a conflict which is still claiming lives.

"More than 3,300 civilians have been killed, and up to 9,000 injured since the conflict began in 2014," Ursula Mueller, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, told Council Members, adding that 1.5 million have been internally displaced.

In 2019, she said, 3.5 million people will need humanitarian assistance and protection services, "many of whom are elderly, women and children".

The impact of the conflict has destroyed livelihoods, exhausted limited resources and damaged infrastructure, "compounding people's struggle".

"The parties to the conflict must take all feasible precautions to avoid, and in any event minimize, civilian harm" she stressed. "International humanitarian law must be upheld to protect civilians and critical civilian infrastructure, at all times, everywhere and by all parties".

Ms. Mueller painted a picture along the contact line which divides Government forces from separatist militia, of "shelling, sniper-fire and landmines" constituting "a daily reality for millions."

"We have not forgotten you. We will continue to do everything we can to alleviate your daily suffering, and to call for lasting peace", she said, concluding her briefing on the humanitarian situation.

'Largely unimplemented' Minsk Agreements

Miroslav Jenca, Assistant Secretary-General for Europe, Central Asia and the Americas for the Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations, briefs the Security Council on the situation in Ukraine., by UN Photo/Cia Pak

Briefing on the latest moves towards implementing the only "agreed framework" for halting the guns in eastern Ukraine, known as the Minsk Agreements, Miroslav Jenča, Assistant Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, told the Council that "negotiations appear to have lost momentum, with the main stakeholders either unable and, or unwilling to reach an agreement on the key steps forward or being distracted from focusing on the

implementation of agreed steps”.

The February 2015 Minsk Agreements, agreed by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany, set out the necessary steps to restore peace to Eastern Ukraine.

Mr. Jenka recalled the Council’s June 2018 Presidential statement unanimously reaffirming the centrality of the Minsk Agreements, noting that it remains, four years later, “largely unimplemented”.

Emphasizing the stalled progress, he called on all parties to “fully implement the Measures, including a much-needed comprehensive and lasting ceasefire”.

As consistently highlighted over the past years, the conflict in eastern Ukraine is “neither dormant, nor frozen” said Mr. Jenča, but it “continues to claim victims”.

Pointing out that another round of discussions will be taking place in the capital of Belarus this week convened by the Trilateral Contact Group – representatives from Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – he spelled out “the UN’s sincere hope and expectation” for tangible outcomes.

“There is an urgent need to agree on the additional measures that would make the ceasefire sustainable and irreversible”, Mr. Jenča emphasized.

He said that the parties’ withdrawal of heavy weapons from populated areas, disengagement of forces and protection of critical civilian infrastructure needed to be a “priority”.

“Over half a million people are living within five kilometres of the contact line and they are the most exposed to periodic shelling, gunfire, landmines and unexploded ordnance” he said, adding that the area around the contact line remains “among the most mine-contaminated areas in the world”.

Noting that the conflict will soon be entering its sixth year, he called it “an active threat to international peace and security”.

“The conflict in Ukraine is first and foremost tragically affecting the Ukrainian people” he said, but it also “continues to test the credibility of international and regional organizations”.

He urged Member States to work together in the interest of regional stability. “We urge all parties to demonstrate the necessary political will to ensure the earliest possible end to the conflict and help bring about peace and stability in all of Ukraine”, concluded Mr. Jenča.

Speaking via video conference from Minsk, Belarus, Martin Sajdik Special Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE cited some positive developments, including water deliveries and infrastructure repairs; and encouraging efforts in maintaining mobile communications, telecommunications, which are “especially vital for the elderly to receive pensions in

government-controlled territory”.

Thousands flee fresh violence in South Sudan, many ‘suffering from trauma’

Over the past few days thousands of desperate civilians have been fleeing a fresh outbreak of violence in South Sudan’s Equatoria state, seeking safety in neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), many “suffering from trauma.”

Some 5,000 people have settled in several villages along the border near the town of Ingbokolo in Ituri province in north-eastern DRC, the United Nations Refugee agency (UNHCR) said on Tuesday.

“Most are women, children and the [elderly](#)” said UNHCR spokesperson Babar Baloch, explaining that they have been arriving by foot “exhausted, hungry and thirsty”.

“Among them are people suffering malaria or other illnesses” he continued, noting that many of those traumatized have “witnessed violent incidents, including armed men reportedly murdering and raping civilians and looting villages”.

According to reports, the violence has displaced another 8,000 people inside South Sudan, near the town of Yei.

The clashes started on 19 January between the army and a rebel group known as the National Salvation Front, UNHCR says, blocking humanitarian access to affected areas. The conflict in South Sudan has created over 2.2 million refugees since 2013.

Armed groups continue child release, but 19,000 remain: UNICEF

Every child no longer with an armed group represents a childhood restored and a future regained – *UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore*

Meanwhile, the [UN Children’s Fund](#), UNICEF, reported that an armed group in South Sudan released 119 children on Tuesday in the south-west town of Yambio, who had been held captive by the militia group known as the South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSLM), which signed a peace agreement with the Government in 2016.

Of the newly-released, 48 were girls, with the youngest child being 10-years-

old. More than 3,100 children being held by armed groups have now been freed.

“Every child no longer with an armed group represents a [childhood restored](#) and a future regained,” said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore.

During the process, each child was registered and provided with a certificate stating they were no longer affiliated with the group. They then met social workers, health workers and education specialists, so their immediate needs could be assessed.

UNICEF said that for each released child given help, one vulnerable child and their family from the host community receiving them, is also being supported to foster acceptance and promote a boost the chances of successful reintegration.

“More and more children are being freed from armed groups and armed forces in South Sudan, and while this is an encouraging development, there is a long way to go before all of the more than 19,000 children still in their ranks are returned to their families,” asserted Ms. Fore.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which requires governments to meet the basic needs of children and to help them reach their full potential, according to the UNICEF chief.

“Five months after the signing of a peace agreement, UNICEF calls on all parties to South Sudan’s conflict to recommit themselves to upholding these rights and to ensuring that children are never soldiers”, concluded Ms. Fore.

[‘Shared responsibility’ to stop 420,000 needless deaths from tainted food each year, UN, world leaders warn](#)

Each year, food contaminated with bacteria, viruses, parasites, toxins or chemicals cause more than 600 million people to fall ill, and 420,000 to die worldwide, prompting a call from world leaders on Tuesday for greater international cooperation to make the food chain safer.

On Tuesday, the [First International Food Safety Conference](#), in Addis Ababa – organized by the United Nations’ [Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#), [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) World Trade Organization (WTO) and the African Union (AU) – shone a light on the need to root out dangerous food, which is also hampering progress towards sustainable development everywhere.

Food should be a source of nourishment and enjoyment, not a cause

of disease or death – *WHO chief*

“Safeguarding our food is a [shared responsibility](#). We must all play our part”, said FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva at the Conference. “We must work together to scale up food safety in national and international political agendas.”

Unsafe food-related illness overloads healthcare systems and damages economies, trade and tourism. Moreover, the impact of unsafe food costs low- and middle-income economies around \$95 billion in lost productivity each year.

“There is no food security without food safety,” underlined the FAO chief, calling the conference “a great opportunity for the international community to strengthen political commitments and engage in key actions”.

Food safety must be a paramount goal at every stage of the food chain, from production to harvest, processing, storage, distribution, preparation and consumption, conference participants stressed.

“Food should be a source of nourishment and enjoyment, not a cause of disease or death”, said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, who pointed out that although unsafe food is responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths annually, it has “not received the political attention it deserves”.

“Ensuring people have access to safe food takes sustained investment in stronger regulations, laboratories, surveillance and monitoring”, he continued, adding: “In our globalized world, food safety is everyone’s issue.”

For his part, WTO Director-General Roberto Azevedo flagged food safety as “a central element of public health” which will be “crucial in achieving the 2030 [Sustainable Development Goals](#)”.

“Trade is an important force to lift people out of poverty... when we reconvene in Geneva in April we will consider these issues in more depth,” he added, referring to a follow-up event billed as the International Forum on Food Safety and Trade, due to take place in Geneva.

The current and forthcoming meetings are expected to galvanize support and lead to actions in key areas that are strategic for the future of food safety.

Meanwhile, Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairperson of the African Union Commission, underscored that the UN-AU partnership has been “longstanding and strategic,” calling the food safety conference “a demonstration of this partnership”.

The conference aims to identify key actions to ensure safe food and a strengthened commitment to scale up food safety in the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development.

Some 130 countries are participating in the two-day conference, including

ministers of agriculture, health, and trade; scientific experts; partner agencies; civil society organizations; and the private sector.

There is no food security without food safety – *FAO chief*

While technological advances, digitalization and processing methods provide opportunities to enhance food safety while improving nutrition, livelihoods and trade, climate change, globalized food production and a growing global population pose new challenges to food safety.

Food systems are becoming ever more complex and interlinked, blurring regulatory responsibility lines and requiring concerted international action.

Food safety systems must also keep pace with food production and consumption. This requires coordinated approaches for regulatory legislation and disease surveillance and food monitoring programmes that are supported by information technologies, shared information and training.

[‘Urgent need’ to stop Mali violence with ‘effective’ military response: UN expert](#)

The state of human rights and security across Mali is a “cause of grave concern,” the independent UN rights expert for the northwest African nation said in a statement on Tuesday, in which he called for an “effective military response” to end the violence and protect the civilian population.

Alioune Tine noted that central and northern areas, where conditions are continuing to worsen, and the Government presence is weak, are being particularly hard hit. That, combined with growing extremist violence, combined with counter-terrorism operations by Malian and international forces – as well as organized crime – are creating a “deep sense of fear and insecurity.”

The Malian Government has been seeking to restore stability and rebuild following a series of setbacks since early 2012, including a failed military coup d’état, stalled peace agreements, and renewed fighting between Government forces and Tuareg rebels.

Areas that were untroubled just months ago, are now affected by violence, the expert added, including “serious and recurrent violations and abuses of human rights, including allegations of extrajudicial executions, abductions, torture, ill-treatment and illegal detention.”

The UN expert said that a comprehensive and coordinated strategy involving the various Governmental forces seeking to wrest control of all parts of Mali from armed groups, is needed to prevent human rights abuses. He said acknowledgement was needed that in the absence of concrete development initiatives and solutions to the “rampant” poverty in the northern and central regions, it will be difficult to eradicate violence.

Mr. Tine urged the Malian Government to “take the bull by the horns,” and “eradicate the cancer of impunity”. He noted the start of investigations into the alleged involvement of Malian soldiers in reports of human rights violations and abuses. And called for the responsibility of all those involved in serious human rights violations to be established in courts following fair trials.

He also welcomed the deployment of defence and security forces after the recent deadly attacks on the village of Koulogon Peul, as well as the presence of the President Ibrahim Keïta and Prime Minister Soumeylou Maïga, who travelled to the area to express their solidarity with the people.

[UN guidelines unveiled to prevent rising hearing loss among young smartphone listeners](#)

More than one billion 12 to 35-year-olds, risk irreversible hearing loss from exposure to loud sounds such as music played on their smartphone, UN health experts said on Tuesday, unveiling new guidelines to help address the problem.

The recommendations to prevent noise-induced hearing loss and related conditions such as tinnitus – commonly experienced as a ringing sound inside the ear – include better functions on personal audio devices that monitor how loud, and for how long, people listen to music.

“Over a billion young people are at risk of hearing loss simply by doing what they really enjoy doing a lot, which is listening regularly to music through their headphones over their devices,” said Dr Shelly Chadha, a Technical Officer, working on preventing deafness and hearing loss, at WHO.

Given that we have the technological know-how to prevent hearing loss, it should not be the case that so many young people continue to damage their hearing – *WHO chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus*

“At the moment, we don’t really have anything solid other than our instinct to tell us: are we doing this right, or is this something that is going to lead to tinnitus and hearing loss a few years down the line?”

The joint [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) and International Telecommunications Union ([ITU](#)) [initiative](#), is an attempt to tackle the lack of awareness about what constitutes too much noise, amid data showing that around 50 per cent of young people listen to unsafe levels of sound through personal audio devices including smartphones, whose use continues to grow globally.

Today, hearing loss which is not addressed is estimated to cost the global economy \$750 million, WHO says.

“Think of it like driving on a highway but without a speedometer in your car or a speed limit,” Dr Chadha explained. “And what we have proposed is that your smartphone comes fitted with a speedometer, with a measurement system that tells you how much sound you’re getting and tells you if you’re going over the limit.”

A parental volume control option is also included in the UN recommendations to industry, which participated in two-years of discussions, along with experts from government, consumer bodies and civil society.

The guidelines also propose using technology to generate individualized listener profiles by monitoring how much people use their audio devices, then letting them know how safely – or not – they have been listening.

“What we propose are certain features like automatic limiting of, or automatic volume reduction and parental control of the volume,” explained Dr Chadha, “So that when somebody goes over their sound limit they have the option that the device will automatically reduce the volume to a level which is not going to harm their ears.”

According to the WHO, more than one in 20 people – 432 million adults and 34 million children – has disabling hearing loss, which impacts on their quality of life.

Most sufferers live in poor and middle-income countries, the UN agency notes, adding that by 2050, more than 900 million people will have significantly impaired hearing.

Around half of all cases of hearing loss could be prevented through public health measures, WHO insists, its recommendations coming ahead of [World Hearing Day](#) on Sunday 3 March.

“Given that we have the technological know-how to prevent hearing loss, it should not be the case that so many young people continue to damage their hearing while listening to music,” said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. “They must understand that once they lose their hearing, it won’t come back.”