

'Hell on earth' in Syria's eastern Ghouta must end – UN chief Guterres

Syria's war-battered east Ghouta, the troubled Kasais region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Northern Rakhine state in Myanmar, where violence has sparked a major exodus of Muslim Rohingyas, were all in the spotlight as the Geneva-based Human Rights Council opened its session today, with UN officials warning that these situations spiraled into crisis "because not enough was done, early and collectively, to prevent the rising horrors."

The Geneva-based United Nations' Human Rights Council opened a regular session on Monday hearing calls to ensure that counter-terrorism efforts do not supersede international obligations to protect civilians and to end the harmful use of veto in the Security Council.

"It is an honor for me to be here again today and this year, marking the 70th anniversary of [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)," UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) told the opening of a four-week session in the Swiss city, referring to the landmark document adopted in 1948 proclaiming the inalienable rights of every human being.

The session, which runs through 23 March, opens at a time of escalating violence in Syria, where civilian casualties have spiked, a development that prompted the UN Security Council over the weekend to adopt a resolution demanding a cessation of hostilities throughout the war-torn country for at least 30 days.

It was Mr. Guterres' [first opportunity](#) to address a UN body after this action.

"I remind all parties of their absolute obligation and international humanitarian and human rights law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure at all times," he said. "And similarly, efforts to combat terrorism do not supersede these obligations."

The [Human Rights Council](#) is an inter-governmental body of 47 States responsible for promoting and protecting human rights around the globe.

Mr. Guterres highlighted how human rights are fundamental to preventing conflict.

"In today's world, it is also by ensuring the primacy of human rights that conflict can be prevented," he said, noting that all the crisis situations currently being examined by the Security Council are invariably accompanied by human rights violations and abuses and that his office is ready to help the 15-member body strengthen its preventive role.

The UN chief also underscored that the goal of ensuring diverse, inclusive,

peaceful and sustainable societies on a healthy planet under the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) can be achieved only by promoting and protecting human rights.

Mr. Guterres went on to warn that the words of the Universal Declaration are not yet matched by facts on the ground, noting that gender inequality remains a pressing issue, there is a groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance, including anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred, and refugees and migrants are often denied their rights, including the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

“In my experience, the Rohingya are one of the most discriminated against populations in the world – and that was even before the crisis of the past year,” he said, stressing the importance of reconciliation.

Further, Mr. Guterres pointed out that there is still some resistance to support UN action on human rights.

“We must overcome the false dichotomy between human rights and national sovereignty. Human rights and national sovereignty go hand in hand. There is no contradiction,” he said.

“An emphasis on human rights lies at the heart of conflict prevention, which must be our highest priority.”

In his address, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, also welcomed the Security Council’s unanimous decision on a 30-day ceasefire in Syria.



UN Photo/Violaine Martin

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for the Human Rights at the 37th Session of the Human Rights Council, Palais des Nations

However, he emphasized that the resolution must be viewed against a backdrop

of seven years of failure to stop the violence: seven years of unremitting and frightful mass killing.

Mr. Zeid said east Ghouta in Syria, Ituri and the Kasais in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Taiz in Yemen, Burundi, Northern Rakhine state in Myanmar have become some of “the most prolific slaughterhouses of humans in recent times” because not enough was done, early and collectively, to prevent the rising horrors.

“Time and again, my office and I have brought to the attention of the international community violations of human rights which should have served as a trigger for preventive action,” he said. “Time and again, there has been minimal action.”

Turning to the harmful use of veto in the Security Council, he said “second to those who are criminally responsible – those who kill and those who maim – the responsibility for the continuation of so much pain lies with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.”

“So long as [the veto is used](#) by them to block any unity of action, when it is needed the most, when it could reduce the extreme suffering of innocent people, then it is they – the permanent members – who must answer before the victims,” he said.

He commended France for championing a code of conduct on the use of veto, noting that the United Kingdom has also joined the initiative, now backed by over 115 countries. “It is time, for the love of mercy, that China, Russia and the United States, join them and end the pernicious use of the veto,” Mr. Zeid said, naming all the Council’s permanent members.

For his part, the President of the UN General Assembly, Miroslav Lajčák, spotlighted the role of the [Universal Periodic Review](#) – a peer review mechanism for the assessment and advancement of human rights in all 193 UN Member States.



UN Photo/Violaine Martin

Miroslav Lajčák, President of the General Assembly of the United Nations at the 37th Session of the Human Rights Council, Palais des Nation.

“The Universal Periodic Review has now entered its third cycle. It has been over ten years since the General Assembly adopted the resolution to begin this important process of review. And, I believe that our multilateral system is stronger with this mechanism as part of it,” he said.

There are still opportunities to make it better. “When assessing the success of the Universal Periodic Review, [what is most important is its impact on people’s lives](#),” he said.

[South Sudan: A year after averting famine, ‘food insecurity outlook has never been so dire,’ UN warns](#)

One year after famine was declared in parts of South Sudan, three United Nations agencies warned on Monday that without sustained humanitarian assistance and access, more than seven million people in the crisis-torn country— almost two-thirds of the population – could become severely food insecure in the coming months.

“The situation is [extremely fragile](#), and we are close to seeing another famine. The projections are stark,” said Serge Tissot, the [Food and Agriculture Organization’s \(FAO\)](#) Representative in South Sudan.

Should this happen, it will be the highest-ever number of food insecure people in South Sudan.

“If we ignore them, we’ll be faced with a growing tragedy. If farmers receive support to resume their livelihoods, we will see a rapid improvement in the country’s food security situation due to increased local production,” he added.

The period of greatest risk will be the lean season, between May and July.

FAO, the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) and the UN World Food Programme ([WFP](#)) warned that progress in preventing hunger-related deaths could be undone, and more people than ever could be pushed into severe hunger and famine-like conditions during May-July unless assistance and access are maintained.

Particularly at risk are 155,000 people, including 29,000 children, who could suffer from the most extreme levels of hunger.

“We are alarmed as the lean season, when the harvest runs out, is expected to start this year much earlier than usual. Unless we can pre-position assistance rather than mount a more costly response during the rains, more families will struggle to survive,” said Adnan Khan, WFP Representative and Country Director.

“The situation is deteriorating with each year of conflict as more people lose the little they had,” he elaborated.

In January, nearly half the population struggling to find enough food each day were in “crisis” or “emergency” levels of food insecurity – according to an Integrated Food Security Phase Classification report released Monday.

This represents a 40 per cent increase in the number of severely food insecure people compared to January 2017.

The report comes one year after famine was declared in parts of South Sudan last February.

Despite improved access and a massive humanitarian response in containing and averting famine later last year, the food insecurity outlook has never been as dire as it is now.

“We are preparing for rates of severe malnutrition among children never before seen in this country,” said Mahimbo Mdoe, UNICEF’s Representative in South Sudan.

“Without an urgent response and access to those most in need, many children will die. We cannot allow that to happen,” he warned.

A growing tragedy

Protracted conflict, the result of a political dispute that erupted between South Sudanese leaders and their rival factions in 2013, has led to reduced food production and disrupted livelihoods, has caused hunger levels to rise.

This was further exacerbated by an economic collapse that rendered markets and trade unable to compensate for the local food production decrease.

Prolonged dry spells, flooding and continued pest infestation also had a damaging impact.

In areas like Unity, Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Central Equatoria, riddled by reoccurring outbreaks of violent conflict and displacement, the proportion of people suffering from extreme food insecurity ranges from 52 to 62 per cent – more than half the states’ combined population.

The number is expected to increase unless people find the means to receive, produce or buy their own food.

Projections for February-April reveal 6.3 million people in “crisis,” “emergency” or “catastrophe” levels of food insecurity, including 50,000 people in the latter.

The May-July forecast put 7.1 million in those same levels, including 155,000 people in “catastrophe.” Moreover, 1.3 million children under age five risk acute malnutrition.

Syrian refugee children in Jordan deprived of the most basic needs – UNICEF

Eighty five per cent of Syrian refugee children in Jordan are living below the poverty line and a staggering 94 per cent of those under five in “multidimensional” poverty, meaning that they are deprived of some of the most basic needs such as education, health or protection, an assessment by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has revealed.

“Seven years into [the Syria] crisis, [we need to collectively continue to do all that we can](#) to support vulnerable refugee children and their families that are struggling to meet their basic needs,” Robert Jenkins, the head of UNICEF programmes in Jordan, said in a news release Sunday.

Based on responses from the refugees, the assessment also showed that close to 65 per cent of Syrian refugee families are either food insecure or on the verge of becoming food insecure – meaning they do not have enough for an adequate diet.

UNICEF teams also reported parents stating that that they skip meals to allow their children to sufficiently eat.

Furthermore, nearly half the children in the 0-5 age group do not have access to proper health services including vaccinations and disability services, and 16 per cent do not have a birth certificate, exposing them to additional risks as they grow up.

In all 38 per cent of Syrian children are not in school; while for children aged 6-17 years, child labour and violence continue to be key challenges.

Responding to the crisis, UNICEF is working with the Government of Jordan as well as donors and partner organizations to provide targeted support and youth to positively engage in their communities and transition to meaningful employment, continuing education and training opportunities.

However, its efforts have been severely affected by a funding crunch. The UN agency currently faces a funding shortfall of \$145.7 million to meet the needs of all vulnerable children in Jordan this year.

“With the unparalleled massive scale of Syria crisis and its prolonged nature, Jordan needs continued support in order to manage the impact of this crisis and meet the needs of vulnerable children,” added Mr. Jenkins.

According to [estimates](#), there are about 660,000 Syrian refugees in the country. Slightly over half that number are children aged 17 or below.

[Impact of Afghanistan’s fourth consecutive year of war on civilians ‘far too high’ – UN report](#)

More than 10,000 civilians have lost their lives or suffered injuries during 2017, according to the latest report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan ([UNAMA](#)) documenting the impact of the armed conflict on civilians in Afghanistan.

“The human cost of this ugly war in Afghanistan – loss of life, destruction and immense suffering – is [far too high](#)” said the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto, during the launch of the latest annual report in Kabul.

The report detailed that in 2017, UNAMA and the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR) documented 10,453 civilian casualties – 3,438 killed and 7,015 injured.

The findings show that the majority of civilian casualties resulted from suicide attacks, improvised explosive device, ground engagements, targeted killings, explosive remnants of war and air strikes.

UN-backed forums

All sides in the Afghan conflict must do more to protect and respect the civilian population, said Afghans from different walks of life at a series of UN-backed forums around the country.

Representatives from government, women organizations, the Afghan Human Rights Commission, civil society and religious institutions are taking part in numerous events around Afghanistan to discuss the impact of the war on civilians.

Panelists taking part in a radio discussion in the eastern province of Nuristan demanded that both government forces and armed insurgents comply strictly with their obligations under international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law.

On a television roundtable in Jalalabad, participants shared concerns of the conflict's socio-economic impact on communities and families, particularly women and children. Most cannot access health services, education or engage in employment, subsequently marginalizing and pushing them deeper into poverty.

Several programmes, including television and radio discussions, are planned in different regions such as Herat, Kandahar and Kunduz, all of which have seen some of the highest number of civilian casualties.

Key recommendations from the report and across the events include stronger measures to protect civilians, and a call for dialogue between warring parties to end the conflict.

"We have to work for a peace agreement to end the conflict. Collective efforts must be redoubled to bring this conflict to an end" Mr. Yamamoto concluded.

[UN chief condemns Mogadishu attacks, reiterates support in fight against terrorism](#)

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemned the 23 February attacks in Mogadishu, Somalia, which claimed the lives of many civilians and injured numerous others, according to a statement by his spokesperson.

According to Spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, Mr. Guterres sends his "profound condolences to the families of the victims and to the people and Government of Somalia, and commends the response of the Somali security forces and AMISOM," the African Union Mission to Somalia.

"The Secretary-General reiterates the full support of the United Nations to the Somali authorities in their fight against terrorism and their pursuit of a peaceful and stable Somalia," Mr. Dujarric.