

'You can still save lives'; UN aid chief urges Security Council action to halt violence in Syria's war-battered east Ghouta

The United Nations humanitarian chief on Thursday called for action by the Security Council to halt the appalling destruction of Syria's eastern Ghouta, where nearly 300 people have reportedly been killed in just the past few days, as "bombs and mortars have rained down on bakeries and medical facilities."

"What we need is a sustained cessation of hostilities and we need it desperately," UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock told the Council via video conference, adding: "Millions of battered and beleaguered children, women and men depend on meaningful action by this Council."

He told the gathering that as UN Member States, they are all aware that their obligations under international humanitarian law are just that; legally binding. "They are not favours to be traded in a game of death and destruction. Humanitarian access is not a 'nice-to-have.' It is a [legal requirement](#)."

Counter-terrorism efforts, Mr. Lowcock continued, cannot supersede the obligation to respect and protect civilians. "They do not justify the killing of civilians and the destruction of entire cities and neighborhoods."

"When an entire generation is robbed of its future, when hospital attacks have become the new normal, when sieges of entire cities and neighbourhoods have become a lasting reality for hundreds of thousands of people, the international community must take urgent and concrete action," he declared.

Reading out to the Council excerpts of thousands of text messages and social media posts received over the past three days by the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria in Geneva, from civilians in eastern Ghouta pleading for help, Mr. Lowcock said one aid worker had lamented:

Air raids have targeted residential buildings. Whole families have died under the rubble. Today, as the battles intensify I call on you [...] to act to stop the systematic operations against civilians and open the roads for humanitarian assistance— *ERC Lowcock, reading a message from an aid worker in east Ghouta*

"Most air raids have intentionally targeted civilian residential buildings. Whole families have died under the rubble. Today, as the battles intensify I call on you [...] to act to stop the systematic operations against civilians

and open the roads for humanitarian assistance.”

Mr. Lowcock recalled that the Council had been briefed “in minute detail – month after month – on the scale of the suffering of the Syrian people,” with endless reports on dead and injured children, women and men.

“Airstrikes, mortars, rockets, barrel bombs, cluster munitions, chemical weapons, thermite bombs, suicide bombs snipers, double-tap attacks on civilians and the essential infrastructure they depend on, including hospitals and school, rape, illegal detention, torture, child recruitment and sieges of entire cities reminiscent of medieval times,” he detailed the situation.

He updated the members that over the past 24 hours, heavy shelling and aerial bombardment on multiple communities in East Ghouta continued, killing at least 50 and wounding some 200 people adding that according to some sources, the death toll since 19 February is close to 300 people.

Mr. Lowcock, noting that half of Syria’s population has either fled the country or faced repeated internal displacement.

“Eastern Ghouta is a living example of an entirely known, predictable, and preventable humanitarian disaster unfolding before our eyes,” he said, enumerating that nearly 400,000 people have been besieged for more than four years, thousands upon thousands of children face acute malnutrition and 700 people are in need of urgent medical evacuation to hospitals – just miles away from Damascus.

He highlighted that as the “appalling violence” ensues, accessing people in hard-to-reach and besieged areas remain elusive.

“Access is not only limited on aid deliveries, but we are also seeing growing challenges to our ability to independently assess needs on the ground and to monitor aid delivery,” he explained.

“You can still save lives in eastern Ghouta – and elsewhere in Syria. I urge you to do so,” the Emergency Relief Coordinator said.

UN receives 40 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse in last quarter of 2017

The United Nations has received 40 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse across its entities and implementing partners for the last three months of 2017, including 15 reported from peacekeeping operations, UN Spokesman

Stéphane Dujarric announced on Thursday.

“Not all allegations have been fully verified, and many are in the preliminary assessment phase,” Mr. Dujarric told reporters at the regular briefing at UN Headquarters in New York.

The remaining 25 allegations were reported by UN agencies, funds and programmes, and include eight allegations relating to implementing partners.

Of the 40 allegations, 13 are categorized as sexual abuse, 24 as sexual exploitation, and three are of an unknown nature.

The allegations involve 54 victims; 30 are women and 16 are girls under the age of 18, and the ages of 8 others are unknown, with 12 of the 40 allegations occurred in 2017, seven in 2016, three in or before 2015, and the dates unknown for 18 of them.

Two allegations have been substantiated by an investigation; there were not substantiated; 15 are at various stages of investigation; 18 are under preliminary assessment; two are under review with limited information provided to the investigating entity, Mr. Dujarric said.

“With over 95,000 civilians and 90,000 uniformed personnel working for the UN, sexual exploitation and abuse are not reflective of the conduct of the majority of the dedicated women and men who serve the Organization,” he said, emphasizing however that “every allegation involving our personnel undermines our values and principles and the sacrifice of those who serve with pride and professionalism in some of the most dangerous places in the world.”

For this reason, Mr. Dujarric stressed, combating this scourge, and helping and empowering those who have been scarred by these egregious acts, continue to be key priorities for UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) in 2018.

Measures taken by the UN include:

- Developing an electronic tool for screening UN staff dismissed as a result of substantiated allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, or who resigned or were dismissed during an investigation.
- A mandatory e-learning module for personnel within the UN system, as well as implementing partners and contractors, on prevention and reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse.
- The distribution of the “no excuse cards” in the six official languages and other languages across the UN system on UN personnel’s responsibilities and obligations with respect to conduct, as well as preventing and reporting sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Mandated quarterly reporting from all relevant entities across the UN system.
- The Secretary-General is regularly liaising with Member States to improve their accountability and bring justice to victims.
- Strengthening complaint reception mechanisms on the ground to enable victims to come forward, and conducting outreach activities to inform communities on the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse and the

reporting mechanisms using various forms ranging from direct outreach, theatre, radio and TV programming, SMS-based and social media campaigns as well as specific outreach to local media.

- Improving reporting and data collection methods, including through the development of a system-wide incident reporting form.

[New UN report cites violations of rights to freedom of opinion and expression in South Sudan](#)

Undue restrictions on freedom of expression are having a “chilling effect” and “further shrinking the space for debate and dissent” in war-torn South Sudan, a new United Nations human rights report has revealed.

Co-authored by the UN Mission in the country ([UNMISS](#)) and the Organization’s human rights wing, [OHCHR](#), the report also warned that incitement to hatred continues to cause mistrust, fear and violence as well as of a growing climate of self-censorship in the world’s youngest country.

“[South Sudan’s] people have been denied the right to life, the right to justice, and, as this report details, the right to freedom of opinion and expression – [rights that are not luxuries but are essential to bring about peace](#) and development,” said the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, in a news release announcing the findings.

Across South Sudan, five years of ongoing conflict has uprooted more than four million people but peace efforts are under way both internationally and at grassroots level to end violence.

“It is vital that the voices of all the people of South Sudan are heard so that genuine, inclusive and durable peace can be achieved,” said the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of UNMISS, David Shearer.

“All parties to the conflict must respect people’s right to freedom of expression regardless of their ethnicity, beliefs or political views,” he stressed.

Rights are not luxuries but are essential to bring about peace and development – *High Commissioner Zeid*

The [report](#) identifies 60 verified incidents – including killing, arbitrary arrest and detention, closure, suspension or censorship of newspapers, and blocking of websites – in the period from July 2016 to December 2017.

It also found that Government security forces, including the National Security Service, Sudan People's Liberation Army, and the South Sudan National Police Service, were responsible for two-thirds of the verified cases of human rights violations.

However, many victims said they had not lodged formal complaints because of fear of reprisals by influential people and a lack of trust in institutions including law enforcement and the judiciary, notes the report.

To address the situation, the report urges amendment to legislation to decriminalize defamation and ensure that powers given to security forces do not infringe on the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression.

It also calls on all armed forces to guarantee the protection of journalists, civil society, and human rights defenders and respect their right to monitor and report on the armed conflict; as well as urges the Government to ensure that violations of the right to freedom of expression are promptly investigated and prosecuted.

In the news release, OHCHR also noted that the violations contained in the report include only those within the Government-controlled territory and not those in the opposition-held areas due to insecurity and access restrictions.

Lack of funding for aid operations means 'people will die' in Central African Republic – UN official

A senior United Nations relief official is urging the international community to boost support for humanitarian efforts in crisis-gripped Central African Republic (CAR), where nearly half the population requires assistance.

UN Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ursula Mueller made the appeal in the capital, Bangui, on Thursday at the end of a four-day visit to the country.

["CAR is facing a large-scale humanitarian crisis,"](#) she said. "Violence is fast spreading across the country while urgent and critical needs are increasing and should be covered. Civilians continue to bear the brunt of violence and insecurity."

Clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian, plunged the country into civil conflict in 2013.

The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)) has described the CAR as “[a fragile country](#)” that has been devastated by years of conflict and faces both structural and economic challenges.

Ms. Mueller, the Office’s second-in-command, said protection will “remain central” to its action there in 2018.

The UN and its partners are seeking [\\$516 million](#) to meet the needs of nearly two million people in the CAR this year, or roughly half the population.

However, as Ms. Mueller pointed out, funding for humanitarian operations in the country has declined over the past three years. Meanwhile, the number of internally displaced people nearly doubled in 2017 to 694,000.

Ms. Mueller witnessed the human face of the humanitarian crisis when she visited the northern town of Paoua.

Clashes between armed groups have forced more than 65,000 people to flee there from surrounding villages.

“I have seen people who are hungry. I call on the international community to support the humanitarian response for Paoua. If we do not receive funding, people will die,” she stated.



OCHA

Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Ursula Mueller, meets with returnees in Boulata and Boeing, Central African Republic., by OCHA

Meanwhile, residents have also been affected.

The displaced people are living with local communities in Paoua which has depleted the limited resources available there.

Ms. Mueller also expressed appreciation to humanitarian workers in the town and across the CAR.

“They’re doing incredible work under very difficult conditions. Targeted attacks prevent them from delivering life-saving assistance. Fourteen humanitarian workers were killed last year alone. This is unacceptable,” she said.

While in Paoua, Ms. Mueller met with displaced women, and marvelled at their strength and dignity amid what she described as “incredible hardships.”

She said: “They want safety, peace, and schools. What any mother wants for their children.”

One of the women, Veronique, fled to Paoua with her six children after her husband was killed. Another woman, Esther, spoke about her struggle to access food, health care and education.

During her meeting with CAR President Faustin Archange Touadéra, Ms. Mueller underlined the need to ramp up efforts to protect civilians. She also shared concerns expressed by the displaced people in Paoua, namely the need for security to help them return to their homes.

The CAR is one of three countries that Ms. Mueller is [visiting](#) in West and Central Africa.

She will also visit Cameroon and Chad in a mission that will wrap up next Tuesday, 27 February.

[**Afghanistan: UN mission welcomes new penal code, urges measures to protect women against women**](#)

While welcoming the entry to force of a new Penal Code in Afghanistan as a having the “potential to trigger real change,” the United Nations mission in the country said on Thursday that it is concerned by the removal of the chapter penalizing violence against women.

The penal Code entered into force last week, placing the country, for the first time, into compliance with international treaty obligations in criminal justice, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan ([UNAMA](#)) said.

“Together with international partners and experts from UN agencies, UNAMA supported Afghan authorities in [drafting the code](#),” the UN Mission said.

“UNAMA will continue dialogue with stakeholders so that the application of the new code does not result in impunity gaps and in particular that there is a robust legal framework in place to protect women from violence,” it added.

The new Penal Code reinforces Afghanistan’s compliance with international human rights and criminal justice standards and incorporates all mandatory crimes under the UN Convention against Corruption, the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crimes (UNTOC) and its three protocols.

Moreover, it incorporates the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court – covering war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide – and establishes command responsibility for those who fail to prevent or punish subordinates who commit these crimes.

Reforming the sanctions regime, the new Penal Code introduces alternatives to imprisonment, which judges impose for imprisonment sentencing below five years, and are mandated to impose for incarcerations less than three months. The code also significantly reduces the number of crimes for which the death penalty applies.

“The coming into force of the Penal Code will bring significant positive developments and a real potential to trigger societal transformation,” UNAMA stated.

Women’s protection in jeopardy

However, removing the chapter penalizing violence against women causes concern over safeguarding the strongest possible legal protection of women.

Technical amendments to the Code will be essential to ensure that the criminal provisions of the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (the EVAW Law) still apply.

UNAMA noted that the current EVAW law remains in place and continues to provide overall legal protection for women, and remains committed to facilitating dialogue on ways to strengthen the criminalization of violence against women.

“UNAMA looks forward to the full implementation of the revised Penal Code, with a view to achieving accountability for those who violate national and international laws,” concluded the UN mission.