

South-eastern DR Congo at risk of humanitarian disaster of 'extraordinary proportions,' warns UN refugee agency

Cautioning that the Tanganyika region in south-eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo could be engulfed by a humanitarian disaster of “extraordinary proportions,” the United Nations refugee agency on Tuesday urged the Government to ensure protection of civilians.

“The violence spreading across Tanganyika, which is three times the size of Switzerland with a population of some three million, has now internally displaced over 630,000 people,” Andrej Mahecic, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [said](#) at the regular news briefing in Geneva, adding that this number is almost double the 370,000 who were displaced within Tanganyika in December 2016.

“People fleeing for their lives near the provincial capital Kalemie have shared stories of horrific violence during attacks against their villages, including killings, abductions and rape.”

[According](#) to UNHCR, fierce clashes between the Congolese armed forces and militias have continued since the end of January. At the same time, insecurity has increased due to violence by new armed groups and entrenched intercommunal conflict, fuelling mass displacement.

In the first two weeks of February alone, the UN agency’s partners have documented some 800 protection incidents.

Last year, more than 12,000 reports of human rights violations in Tanganyika and the nearby area of Pweto in the Haut Katanga province were documented, including violations to property rights, physical abuse, torture, murders, arbitrary arrests, forced labour, rape and forced marriages.

“Overall, already vulnerable displaced populations most often fell victim to the latest atrocities,” added the UNHCR spokesperson, noting that such acts were not only committed in the context of the ethnic conflict, but also by the soldiers deployed to fight the renegade militias and armed groups.

Less than \$1 per person in need received in 2017 – UNHCR

The UN agency together with its partners are responding to the crisis. But given the scale of the calamity, is appealing for increased assistance to help the population cope.

Last year, the agency received less than \$1 per person in need in donor

contributions for its programmes for the internally displaced in the country. This severe lack of funding left many Tanganyika receiving hardly any humanitarian aid.

“For 2018, [we are] appealing for \$368.7 million for the Congolese situation,” said Mr. Mahecic, noting that \$80 million is required to support the internally displaced populations inside the country.

“[We also] call on the Congolese authorities to ensure the protection of the civilian population, to effectively follow-up any reports of crimes attributed to the armed forces and to put an end to the perception of impunity related to human rights abuses,” he added.

[‘There is no plan B,’ says Guterres, reiterating UN’s commitment to two-state solution to Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#)

After over a century of hostilities including 50 years of continued military occupation, Israelis and Palestinians are still no closer to peace, a United Nations special envoy said on Tuesday, warning that even as many in the region have lost hope for positive change, the enemies of peace are growing more confident by the day.

UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process [Nikolay Mladenov](#) delivered his latest monthly briefing to the Security Council, noting that he was doing so at a time when “regional tensions are taking an [increasingly perilous turn.](#)”

His comments echoed remarks by UN Secretary-General António Guterres who opened the meeting by underscoring his commitment to achieving two democratic States living side-by-side in peace.

Mr. Guterres emphasized the Organization’s long-held support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stressing: “[There is no Plan B.](#)”

“This is a time for dialogue, for reconciliation, for reason,” the UN chief said, expressing concern that global consensus on the issue may be eroding.

Warning that “obstacles on the ground have the potential to create an irreversible one-state reality,” Mr. Guterres underscored however that: “It is simply impossible to square the circle of a one-state reality with the

legitimate national, historic and democratic aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians.”

“At this moment of grave consequence, I appeal for effective concerted action by all parties. It is more important than ever.”

Mr. Mladenov reported on developments such as the need to maintain support for the UN agency assisting Palestinian refugees across the region, [UNRWA](#), as it faces a substantial funding shortfall.

He also spoke of the violence affecting both sides, including the killing of seven Palestinians by the Israeli security forces and the stabbing death of an Israeli civilian by a Palestinian in the West Bank.

Mr. Mladenov also said it was time to “break the cycle” in Gaza, which has been under the control of Hamas for a decade and which currently is facing what he described as a “humanitarian, economic and ecological calamity.”

He called for Gaza to be returned to the control of the Palestinian Authority, adding that “there can be no Palestinian state without Palestinian unity.”

Mr. Mladenov also urged the international community to continue advocating for “substantial” Israeli policy changes related to the West Bank, including halting settlement construction there: something the UN considers illegal under international law.



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, briefs the Security Council.

“In this chamber, we have often spoken of the need for leadership on both sides to reach a deal, a compromise, through negotiations that would allow Israelis and Palestinians to separate and be master of their own fate. But

these negotiations would not be negotiations between equals," he said.

"For one side is under military occupation. Its leadership has committed to a peaceful solution to the conflict through negotiation. I urge, in closing, the international community not to give up on support for the moderate Palestinian leadership or on building up the institutions that will increase the chances of success. Our window of opportunity is closing and, if we do not seize it quickly, the Israeli- Palestinian conflict will be engulfed in the whirlwind of religious radicalization that remains present in the region."

Also addressing the Council, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas addressed concerns surrounding the status of Jerusalem, considered holy by both Jews and Muslims as well as Christians.

He recalled the decision announced last December by United States President Donald Trump to recognize the city as Israel's capital.

"It did so ignoring that East Jerusalem is part of the Palestinian territory. It is occupied since 1967. And it is our capital open to all the faithful of the three monotheistic religions," he said.

Mr. Abbas described the situation of the Palestinian people as "no longer bearable," and he called for an international peace conference to be convened this year as a means to find a solution to the stalemate.

Israel's representative to the United Nations Danny Danon also touched on the issue of Jerusalem, observing that the Palestinian leader had left the room prior to his presentation.

"Let me be clear: for thousands of years, Jerusalem has been the heart and soul of our people. Jerusalem has been our capital since the days of King David and Jerusalem will remain the undivided capital of the State of Israel forever," he said.

"We will always insist on Israeli sovereignty but even fair-minded observers would agree that under any possible agreement, Jerusalem would be recognized internationally as our capital."

Prior to the start of Tuesday's meeting, ambassadors observed a moment of silence in honour of one of their former colleagues, Ambassador Vitaly Churkin of the Russian Federation, who died a year ago that day.

[Rohingya refugees face immense health](#)

needs; UN scales up support ahead of monsoon season

Critical health services must be scaled up for nearly 1.3 million people – Rohingyas and their surrounding host communities – in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, where vulnerable populations in crowded settlements and 'mega camps' are at risk of a host of waterborne diseases, the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) warned Tuesday.

"Commendable efforts have been made by the Government of Bangladesh and partner agencies to provide health services; prevent diseases such as cholera; and rapidly control outbreaks of measles and diphtheria. However, the challenges are huge, multiple and evolving," said Dr. Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director for ([WHO](#)) South-East Asia.

"The magnitude of the crisis requires continued efforts and generous contributions by all partners to scale up health services for the vulnerable population," she added.

One of the largest population movements in the shortest time span began 25 August when an estimated 688,000 Rohingyas crossed from Myanmar to Cox's Bazar – joining nearly 212,500 others who had arrived in earlier waves.

Health needs continue to be immense, particularly surrounding reproductive care. Some 60,000 children are expected to be born in the camps over the next year. Besides mothers, newborns and children, the elderly need basic health services, including for trauma and various non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and psychosocial support.

"Water and sanitation, and shelter continues to be far from optimum, increasing the risk of rapid spread of several communicable and water borne diseases," the Regional Director said, stressing the need to accelerate efforts to address the key determinants of health on a priority.

The upcoming rainy season increases the vulnerability to waterborne diseases, such as diarrhea and hepatitis, and vector borne diseases, including malaria, dengue and chikungunya.

When the crisis first began, WHO established the Early Warning and Response System (EWARS) for rapid detection and response to disease outbreaks to minimize death and disease, which along with risk assessments, prompted Bangladesh to carry out large scale vaccination campaigns for cholera, measles and rubella, polio and diphtheria.

"The health sector is grossly under-funded and grappling to meet the needs of the affected population," Dr. Khetrpal Singh said, appealing to international community to contribute generously and commit to support what clearly is set to be a protracted emergency.



UNHCR/Caroline Gluck

Rohingya refugees at Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Cox'z Bazar, Bangladesh, preparing for monsoon season., by UNHCR/Caroline Gluck

Living in 'no man's land'

At the same time, Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) warned on "the situation of several thousand Rohingya who have been living in a so-called ['no man's land'](#) near the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh" since end-August.

"We estimate there are some 1,300 families, approximately 5,300 men, women, boys and girls living in the area near Tombru canal," he stated, noting that some feared returning home and wished to seek safety in Bangladesh.

He reiterated that everyone has the right to seek asylum, just as they also have the right to return home when they deem the time and circumstances right.

"People who have fled violence in their country must be guaranteed safety and protection, and must be consulted on their future," he underscored.

Meanwhile, ahead of the monsoon season, UNHCR and partners continue to step up preparations to protect refugees, including encouraging those most at risk of floods and landslides to relocate to other areas.

"UNHCR staff are facilitating community engagement in preparedness efforts, in particular on appropriate messaging to communities likely to be affected by landslides, floods or cyclones, and analyzing community coping mechanisms and preparedness plans," he concluded.

World is failing newborns; UNICEF says global mortality rates remain 'alarmingly high'

Newborns are dying at “alarmingly high” rates in countries that are poor, conflict-ridden or have weak institutions, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said Tuesday in a new report, which reveals that babies born in these places are 50 times more likely to die in the first month of life than those born in some wealthier nations.

“Every year, 2.6 million newborns around the world do not survive their first month of life. One million of them die the day they are born,” said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore.

“We know we can save the vast majority of these babies with affordable, quality health care solutions for every mother and every newborn. Just a few small steps from all of us can help ensure the first small steps of each of these young lives,” she added.



UNHCR

Newborn twin babies at Myanmar Refugee Camp in Bangladesh, born to their mother nine days ago after she fled her home in Myanmar.

According to the report, babies born in Japan, Iceland and Singapore have the best chance at survival, while newborns in Pakistan, the Central African Republic and Afghanistan face the worst odds.

In Japan, one in 1,111 newborn babies die in the first month of life while in Pakistan, the ratio is one in 22.

Globally, in low-income countries, the average newborn mortality rate is 27 deaths per 1,000 births, the report says. In high-income countries, that rate is 3 deaths per 1,000.

The report also notes that 8 of the 10 most dangerous places to be born are in sub-Saharan Africa, where pregnant women are much less likely to receive assistance during delivery due to poverty, conflict and weak institutions. If every country brought its newborn mortality rate down to the high-income average by 2030, 16 million lives could be saved.

More than 80 per cent of newborn deaths are due to prematurity, complications during birth or infections such as pneumonia and sepsis, the report says.

“Given that the majority of these deaths are preventable, clearly, we are failing the world’s poorest babies,” Ms. Fore said.

These deaths can be prevented with access to well-trained midwives, along with proven solutions like clean water, disinfectants, breastfeeding within the first hour, skin-to-skin contact and good nutrition.

However, a shortage of well-trained health workers and midwives means that thousands don’t receive the life-saving support they need to survive. For example, while in Norway there are 218 doctors, nurses and midwives to serve 10,000 people, that ratio is one per 10,000 in Somalia.

This month, UNICEF is launching Every Child ALIVE, a global campaign to demand and deliver solutions on behalf of the world’s newborns.

[Civilian situation in Syria’s east Ghouta ‘spiraling out of control,’ warns UN aid official](#)

The humanitarian situation of civilians in Syria’s east Ghouta is spiraling out of control, a senior United Nation aid official has warned in the wake of escalating conflict which resulted in more than 40 civilian deaths on Monday alone.

“I am [deeply alarmed](#) by the extreme escalation in hostilities in east Ghouta,” Panos Moutzsis, UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, said in a statement issued following clashes that killed over 40 civilians and injured more than 150 injuries in the besieged enclave.

Hundreds of civilians, many of them women and children, have lost their lives or been injured in airstrikes and shelling since November. There have been daily reports about civilians being killed and others being severely wounded, in addition to warehouses, hospitals and schools being damaged or destroyed.

The recent escalation of violence compounds an already precarious humanitarian situation for the 393,000 residents of east Ghouta, many of them internally displaced, and which account for 94 per cent of all Syrians living under besiegement today.

“The humanitarian situation of civilians in east Ghouta is spiraling out of control,” Mr. Moumtzis warned, noting that the lack of access to besieged areas has led to severe food shortages and a sharp rise in food prices, malnutrition rates have now reached unprecedented levels, and the number of people requiring medical evacuations continues to surge.

“We continue to call for unconditional, unimpeded and sustained access to close to 3 million people in besieged and hard-to-reach locations across Syria, including east Ghouta, and urge all parties to the conflict to strictly adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law to take all feasible measures to protect civilians from harm,” he said.