

Intensified fighting across Syria having 'devastating' impact on civilians, warn UN agencies

17 January 2018 – Intensification in hostilities across Syria is having a devastating impact on civilians, United Nations agencies in the war-ravaged country has said, warning that the fighting is also severely limiting life-saving humanitarian operations.

In the last few weeks, increasing indiscriminate bombing, shelling and fighting forced tens of thousands of people to be uprooted, said the UN agencies in a [statement](#) Wednesday.

Accessing camps and other makeshift sites where internally displaced people are in dire need of aid is also urgently required. All affected civilians, wherever they are, must be protected, provided with assistance and accorded safe freedom of movement, they added.

The violence has severely affected almost all life-saving and economic sectors and medical and healthcare facilities throughout the country are operating at a fraction of the pre-crisis level.

At the same time, the little resources that internally displaced persons and affected communities had have been exhausted, noted the UN agencies, calling on all parties both inside and outside the country to prevent further violence and enable humanitarian organizations to assist people in need.

Agreement by all parties and their allies is needed to facilitate the immediate and safe delivery of UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoys to people in need across Syria including those in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, they underscored.

Of particular urgency is facilitating medical evacuation of critically ill people especially in eastern Ghouta, Foah and Kefraya, as well as other locations, read the statement.

The UN in Syria reminds all parties of their obligation under international humanitarian and human rights law to protect civilians, said the agencies, calling also for unrestricted humanitarian access to enable aid workers reach people in need with care, food and medical support.

Resolve differences peacefully, Security Council to DR Congo political actors

16 January 2018 – Voicing serious concern over the continued political impasse and violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the United Nations Security Council has called upon all political actors to exercise maximum restraint and to address their differences peacefully.

In a [statement](#) issued to the press on Tuesday, Council members reiterated that effective, swift and timely implementation of the 31 December 2016 Agreement and the recently adopted electoral timeline, are essential for a peaceful and credible electoral process, a democratic transition of power, and the peace and stability of the DRC, as well as in supporting the legitimacy of the transitional institutions.

In that context, the Council underscored the need “to do everything possible to ensure that the elections on 23 December 2018 are organized with the requisite conditions of transparency, credibility and inclusivity, including the full and equal participation of women at all stages, as well as the importance of youth engagement.”

Further in the statement, the Council underscored the need for the Government to swiftly and fully investigate the killing of the two members of the [Group of Experts](#) and bring those responsible to justice.

Experts Michael Sharp (United States) and Zaida Catalan (Sweden) were [abducted](#) in the DRC on 12 March. Their remains were recovered by peacekeepers from the UN Mission in the country (known by its French acronym, MONUSCO) on 27 March outside the city of Kananga in the Kasai-Central province.

Also in the statement, the members of the Security Council expressed concerns over the humanitarian situation in the DRC and noting that it had reached “catastrophic levels” in some parts of the country, called on UN Member States to scale up funding to urgently respond to the pressing humanitarian needs in the country.

The statement by the 15-member Council follows a briefing it heard by Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, last Tuesday on the political, human rights, security and humanitarian situation in the country.

Syria: Uptick in violence exacerbates already dire situation, says UN food relief agency

16 January 2018 – On top of the already-desperate conditions in Syria’s war-ravaged East Ghouta and north-west Idlib governorate, a violence upsurge is intensifying insecurity, the United Nations food relief agency said Tuesday.

“Since the end of last year, airstrikes have destroyed numerous civilian buildings, killing hundreds of people in both places and, in the case of Idlib, displacing some 100,000 people,” said UN World Food Programme (WFP) Senior Communications Officer Bettina Luescher at the regular press briefing in Geneva.

In Idlib, armed clashes between Government forces, their allies and opposition armed groups have intensified, with insecurity also spreading to parts of northeast Hama, western rural Aleppo and southern Idlib – forcing 100,000 people to abandon their homes near the frontline and move towards safer areas. Conditions in Idlib are dire, with many displaced people forced to stay out in the open during the winter period.

“WFP had assisted a total of 70,000 displaced people in Idlib in December and January with ready-to-eat, five-day rations; [and] there were plans to distribute additional ready-to-eat rations in the coming days,” Ms. Luescher said, adding that WFP had prepositioned over 27,000 rations in Idlib and Aleppo, and that emergency supply shipments from Turkey were also ongoing.

WFP and partners are also conducting needs assessments there.

Fighting continues in the besieged enclave of Eastern Ghouta where nearly 400,000 people are living in dire conditions suffering severe food, fuel and drinking water shortages.

“A total of 417,000 people were currently living under siege in Syria, with the largest proportion of them in besieged areas of Eastern Ghouta, where almost 400,000 people lived,” Ms. Luescher continued, adding: “WFP access to Eastern Ghouta had been severely restricted for the past five years, allowing only a trickle of aid to reach families in need.”

In 2017, WFP had helped to deliver food assistance for 110,000 people in 13 parts of the enclave.

She called ending the seven-year conflict “the single greatest priority,” noting that it continues to push “ever-more people into hunger and misery.”

WFP appealed to all parties to protect civilians, respect humanitarian principles and allow the safe delivery of food to families in need, no matter where they were.

Preserving intangible culture for future generations

16 January 2018 – The traditional Assyk games of Kazakhstan and Italy’s culinary art of the Neapolitan ‘Pizzaiuolo’ are two of the newest elements inscribed on the United Nations Representative List of intangible contributions to preserve for future generations.

Late last year on Jeju Island in the Republic of Korea, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s ([UNESCO](#)) Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage deemed a host of new elements significant in protecting a way of life.

Ranging from songs and stories to activities and practices – each testifies to the diversity of intangible heritage and raise awareness of its importance.

India: Kumbh Mela

Kumbh Mela, the festival of the sacred Pitcher, is a peaceful congregation of pilgrims in which participants take a dip in a sacred river [see photo above]. The congregation includes ascetics, saints, sadhus, aspirants-kalpavasis and visitors. The tradition plays a central spiritual role in the country, encapsulating a diverse range of cultural customs.

Knowledge and skills relating to Kumbh Mela are mainly imparted through the teacher-student relationship, but transmission and safeguarding are also ensured through oral traditions and religious and historical texts.

Kazakhstan: Traditional Assyk Games



Children choosing a game to play (2015). Photo: Studio “Mergen,” Kazakhstan

Assyk Games are an ancient tradition in Kazakhstan, in which each player has their own set of Assyks, traditionally made out of sheep bone. While most practitioners are children between the ages of 4 and 18, young people and adults also participate.

The game is a good model for positive collaboration, social inclusiveness and a sense of friendship, and is primarily transmitted through observation from older children to younger ones.

Portugal: Craftmanship of Estremoz clay figures



Creating an Estremoz clay figure (2015). Photo: Municipio de Estremoz

The craftsmanship of Estremoz clay figures dates back to the 17th century and involves a process lasting several days. The figures are dressed in the regional attires of Alentejo or religious clothing and follow specific themes. Their characteristic aesthetic features make the figures identifiable, and the craft is strongly attached to the region.

Artisans ensure the viability and recognition of their craft through non-formal workshops and instructive initiatives, as well as through local, national and international fairs.

Germany: Organ craftsmanship and music



Constructing an organ in Germany (2006). Photo: Thomas Ehret

Organ craftsmanship and music have shaped Germany's musical landscape for centuries – with a diverse number of traditions surrounding the instrument's construction and playing. The highly specialized knowledge and skills of organ makers are significant markers of group identity and its music constitutes a universal language that fosters interreligious understanding.

Knowledge and skills related to the element are transmitted through a direct teacher-pupil experience as well as in vocational schools, universities, and organ construction workshops.

Greece: Rebetiko



Young boy learns to play the rebetiko (2016). Photo: Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports

Rebetiko is a musical and cultural expression directly linked to song and dance, which initially spread among urban working-class populations. Rebetiko songs are now a standardized repertoire in social occasions, containing invaluable references to the customs and traditions of a particular way of life.

Rebetiko is transmitted orally, as well as by the media and in music schools, conservatories and universities, and musicians and enthusiasts continue to play a key role in keeping the practice alive.

Indonesia: Pinisi in South Sulawesi



The schooner is ready to sail (2015). Photo: Ministry of Education and Culture, Indonesia

Pinisi, or the art of boatbuilding in South Sulawesi, refers to the famed Sulawesi schooner and represents the epitome of the Archipelago's indigenous sailing craft. Today, boatbuilding centres are located at Tana Beru, Bira and Batu Licin – where shipbuilding and sailing are central to the community's social, economic and cultural fabric.

Knowledge and skills are transmitted from generation to generation both within and outside of the family circle, and local shipbuilders are engaged in active marketing initiatives to safeguard the practice.

Iran: Chogan



Chogan influence on miniature motifs (2016). Photo: Iranian cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization

Chogan is a horse-riding game traditionally played in royal courts and urban fields, which is accompanied by music and storytelling. In Chogan, two-rider teams use wooden sticks to pass a ball through the opposing team's goal post. It has a strong connection to the identity and history of its bearers and practitioners.

Chogan is transmitted informally within the family sphere, as well as by dedicated associations through training and support for local masters.

Ireland: Uilleann piping



Youngsters play the uilleann (2015). Photo: NPU

Uilleann piping is a musical practice in which an uilleann, also known as Irish or union, bagpipe is used to play traditional music. Bearers and practitioners include participants of all ages, dispersed throughout the world. Uilleann piping offers an important way of socializing, providing a sense of rootedness and connection to the past.

Knowledge and skills are transmitted using both long-established and modern practices, and the practice is primarily safeguarded through the efforts of the group Na Piorabairi Uilleann.

Italy: Art of Neapolitan 'Pizzaiuolo'



The second phase of creating a Neapolitan 'Pizzaiuolo' is a performing art in itself (2015). Photo: Sebilo

Creating the Neapolitan 'Pizzaiuolo' is a culinary practice consisting of four different phases relating to the preparation of the dough and its baking

in a wood-fired oven. The practice originated in Naples, where around 3,000 Pizzaiuoli now live and perform – and plays a key role in fostering social gatherings and intergenerational exchange.

Knowledge and skills related to the element are primarily transmitted in the 'bottega' of the Pizzaiuolo, where young apprentices can observe their master at work.

Kyrgyzstan: Kok boru



The players of the 'Dostuk' (Osh city) and 'Talas' (Talas city) teams (2016). Photo: National Kok-Boru Federation, Kyrgyzstan

The Kok boru game is played by two teams on horseback, who compete in trying to score points by putting as many 'ulaks' (goat's carcasses) – replaced by moulds of the animal in modern-day games – into their opponents' goal as possible. The horse game integrates traditional practices and performances. It is an expression of the cultural and historic tradition of its practitioners and unites communities, regardless of social status.

Related knowledge and skills are primarily transmitted through demonstration, as well as during festive and social events.

Malawi: Nsima



Photo depicts the steps for Nsima from drying the maize to preparing, serving and sharing the dish communally (2016). Photo: Malawi National Commission for UNESCO

Nsima is a compound name for the culinary and dietary tradition of Malawians as well as a form of thick porridge prepared with maize flour. It is prepared through an elaborate process requiring specific knowledge, and eating it is a communal tradition in families.

Communities safeguard the element through continued practice, publications, festivals and revitalization activities, and knowledge is transmitted both informally and through on-the-job training and education.

Warning that 'peace remains elusive,'

UN chief outlines priorities for action in 2018

16 January 2018 – Having taken office with a call for peace to be the watchword of 2017, United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres on Tuesday said the world instead had ‘gone in reverse,’ and that there are critical areas that need action in the New year, including climate change, the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, the Middle East conflict, and the Rohingya crisis.

“I took office last year calling for us to make 2017 a year for peace. One year later, we must recognize that [peace remains elusive](#),” the Secretary-General said in his informal briefing to the UN Member States on his top concerns for 2018.

He said that conflicts have deepened and new dangers have emerged, global anxieties about nuclear weapons are the highest since the Cold War, and climate change is moving faster than counter-measures.

Further, inequalities are growing, horrific violations of human rights are ongoing, and nationalism, racism and xenophobia are on the rise, he added, stressing the need for greater unity and courage to “set the world on track towards a better future.”

Noting that it is up to Member States to define the priorities of UN action, the Secretary-General went on to highlight some parts of the world requiring attention.

Everyone, everywhere, can do something to make our world more safe, sustainable and secure. Even in the face of headwinds and hatred, we must uphold the values of the United Nations Charter UN chief Guterres

On the Korean Peninsula, Mr. Guterres reiterated the need to avoid sleepwalking into calamity.

To that end, he welcomed the firm decisions the Security Council has taken in response to nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), while also welcoming the reopening of inter-Korean communication channels, especially military-to-military.

He said he was also encouraged by the decision of the DPRK to participate in the upcoming Winter Olympics in the Republic of Korea.

“We need to build on these small signs of hope, and expand diplomatic efforts to achieve the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in the context of regional security,” he said.

On the broader Middle East region, including Yemen, Syria and Iraq, he said the situation has become a Gordian knot, stressing the need for “disentangling the mess.”

“With so many inter-related flashpoints, the risk of an escalatory cycle is real,” he said.

As for the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, there is no alternative to a two-State solution, he stressed.

The UN chief also stressed to need for pushing back the dangerous tide of nationalism in Europe, and the need for revitalizing the relevant mediation initiatives for Eastern Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia and Transnistria.

A concerted effort is also urgently needed for solutions leading to long-term stability in the Western Balkans, he added.

Turning to the need to reverse the large-scale exodus of Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslims, Mr. Guterres called on the Government to ensure unfettered humanitarian access in Rakhine State, and appealed to the international community to support those who have fled to Bangladesh.

Mr. Guterres stressed the need for promoting a true new deal for fair globalization. “It is not by chance that eight people have as much wealth as the poorest half of humankind,” he said.

Uneven benefits of globalization

The workings of the global economy and international trade are the product of human choices. The [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development is a bold vision to build prosperous, peaceful societies for all, leaving no one behind. “This work depends crucially on financing,” he said.

The UN chief also underscored the need to greatly increase ambition in the fight against climate change.

“The year 2016 saw the first rise in CO2 emissions in three years. The past five years have been the hottest period on record,” he said, adding that he will convene a climate summit next year to build momentum among the international community for more ambitious reductions in emissions, as well as adaptation and the much-needed energy transition.

On migration, Mr. Guterres said that it is a positive global phenomenon, and therefore the adoption of the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) is an important task for this year.

Regarding technological advances, he said it is important to reap the benefits of the Fourth Industrial Revolution while guarding against the threats.

Technological advances can help provide answers to many of today’s most pressing challenges, but at the same time, technology can exacerbate inequality.

Mr. Guterres also underlined the needs to strengthen African Union-UN partnership, maintain a strong focus on counter-terrorism, strengthen UN peace operations, and overcome the false contradiction between human rights and national sovereignty.

“Human rights and national sovereignty go hand in hand. The achievement of human rights strengthens states and societies, thereby reinforcing sovereignty,” he said.

Empowerment of women – cross-cutting issue

One cross-cutting imperative, he said, is the empowerment of women.

He said he has launched a roadmap for achieving gender parity at all levels of the United Nations, now reaching full parity in the 44 member UN Senior Management Group.

He also explained how he is taking action on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse against women, and preventing and addressing sexual harassment.

“All our challenges – everything, everywhere, demand an investment of time, money, energy, political capital and more. Member States must assume their leadership,” Mr. Guterres said.

“But everyone, everywhere, can do something to make our world more safe, sustainable and secure,” he said.