

UN rights chief 'deeply concerned' over Jehovah's Witness sentencing in Russia

The sentencing in Russia of a Danish Jehovah's Witness on Thursday to six years in prison on charges of "organising the activity of a banned extremist organisation" has been described as a "dangerous precedent" by the UN human rights chief.

[Michelle Bachelet](#), High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)), said that she was deeply concerned by the sentencing of Dennis Christensen, who was first detained in May 2017, a month after Russia's Supreme Court declared the Jehovah's Witnesses – a United States-headquartered Christian denomination – an extremist group.

According news reports, the group numbers around 170,000 followers in Russia, with around eight million adherents worldwide. They are known for proselytising their faith door-to-door, detailed bible study and among the rules of membership are a rejection of blood transfusions, however serious the medical need, an refusal to take part in military service.

The harsh sentence imposed...creates a dangerous precedent, and effectively criminalises the right to freedom of religion or belief, for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia – *UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet*

Christensen was accused of continuing to organize and work on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Oryol, several hundred miles south of Moscow, despite knowing that the group had been outlawed by the State.

"Criminal cases have since then been opened against more than 100 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, including at least 18 who are held in pre-trial detention," said Ms. Bachelet, [in a statement](#). "Others have been subjected to various measures of restraint, including house arrest and travel restrictions", she added.

The UN rights chief said that the "harsh sentence imposed on Christensen creates a dangerous precedent, and effectively criminalises the right to freedom of religion or belief, for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia – in contravention of the State's obligations under the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#)."

"Various UN human rights bodies, including the UN Human Rights Committee and a number of UN Special Rapporteurs, have raised similar concerns in recent years."

The Russian Supreme Court has ordered the Jehovah's Witnesses to disband nationwide, and his arrest and sentencing, sets a clear precedent for other adherents who are being held, and awaiting sentencing, according to news reports. Christiansen had pleaded his innocence, stating that he was exercising his freedom of religion, guaranteed under Russia's constitution.

"We urge the Government of Russia to revise the Federal Law on Combating Extremist Activity with a view to clarifying the vague and open-ended definition of 'extremist activity', and ensuring that the definition requires an element of violence or hatred", said Ms. Bachelet.

"We also call on the authorities to drop charges against and to release all those detained for exercising their rights to freedom of religion or belief, the freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association."

[Parliamentary bid to democratize Myanmar constitution a 'positive development' says UN rights expert](#)

A newly formed parliamentary committee to amend Myanmar's problematic constitution was welcomed as a positive move on Thursday by Yanghee Lee, United Nations [Special Rapporteur](#) on the situation of human rights in the country.

"The establishment of this committee is a positive development that I hope will aid Myanmar to truly transition to democracy," she said.

Noting that there was popular support for constitutional reform, Ms. Yanghee Lee encouraged the new joint committee to deliver accordingly. The ruling National League for Democracy party, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, pledged to amend the constitution during its 2015 national election campaign, which it won by a landslide.

The previous military government had drafted the 2008 constitution, which has been a stumbling block to a full democratic transition, as it reserves 25 per cent of parliamentary seats for the military, as well as designating military control of the Ministries of Home Affairs, Defense Services and Border Affairs.

"The current constitution is not democratic, and Myanmar cannot be considered a democracy without it being amended", underscored the Special Rapporteur.

The world must not turn away Rohingya refugees

Much of the international focus on Myanmar has stemmed from the flight of hundreds of thousands of mostly-Muslim Rohingya refugees across the northern border into Bangladesh since late August 2017, following a Government-sanctioned military-led campaign of brutal killings, sexual violence and multiple human rights abuses against the minority group, based in Rakhine state.

Visiting Bangladesh this week, Angelina Jolie, the UN Refugee Agency's ([UNHCR](#)) Special Envoy, underscored that the world must not turn away from the nearly one million Rohingya refugees who have fled Myanmar.

On Wednesday, Ms. Jolie met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen in the capital, Dhaka.

The Special Envoy expressed [UNHCR's gratitude](#) to the Bangladeshi people and Government for receiving over 700,000 refugees since August 2017, saying: "I pray that generosity and that support continues for these wonderful families.

She also raised concerns that without an urgent expansion and strengthening of educational opportunities, a generation of Rohingya children would be at risk.

Ms. Jolie began her three-day visit on Monday in Chakmarkul and Kutupalong refugee camps, where she heard testimonies from Rohingya women, children and men who have endured a lifetime of persecution and discrimination. There she witnessed some of the remarkable humanitarian response efforts to date, including a joint Government-UNHCR led registration process providing refugees, for the first time, with a legal identity.

She also visited a transit centre for newly arrived refugees and a hospital giving much-needed care and support to women and girls.

On Tuesday at a press conference in Kutupalong, the world's largest and most densely populated refugee settlement, she said that until the Rohingya refugees can voluntarily return home to Myanmar, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that they can continue to live dignified lives in Bangladesh.

The Special Envoy's visit came just ahead of a new funding appeal, the 2019 Joint Response Plan, to be launched next week by UNHCR, along with other humanitarian agencies. It seeks to raise more than \$920 million to assist Rohingya refugees and affected local communities this year.

Rising landmine blast toll in Afghanistan highlights long-term care needs of survivors

The number of casualties in Afghanistan from landmines and other explosives has more than tripled since 2012, the UN said on Wednesday, in support of a call to provide more long-term support for survivors.

Latest data from [UNMAS](#), the UN Mine Action Service, shows that 1,415 Afghan civilians were killed or injured by mines and so-called explosive remnants of war (ERW) in 2018.

Children make up eight in 10 of ERW casualties, according to UNMAS, which is attending the 22nd Meeting of Mine Action National Directors and United Nations Advisers ([NDM-UN](#)) in Geneva this week.

The UN agency notes that since 1989, more than 18 million ERW items have been cleared, along with more than 730,000 anti-personnel mines including over 750 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and 30,145 anti-tank mines.

“We are still in the prevention business and we aren’t doing all that well,” said Patrick Fruchet, UNMAS Programme Manager, Afghanistan. “In 2012, we were down to about 36 casualties per month in Afghanistan – which is still enormous; those numbers jumped, those numbers jumped year on year. And in 2017, there were more than 150 casualties a month.”

This spike in casualty numbers is linked to “new contamination” by anti-personnel weapons in the country, linked to intensifying conflict between Government forces and Taliban extremists, after 2014.

“We are struggling to handle significant increases in the number of minefields in Afghanistan,” Mr. Fruchet said, noting that the work of the UN agency and its partners was complicated by the fact that the authorities control only around half the country.

“You have provinces where the provincial capitals are very friendly, under Government control, and the rural areas outside those capitals are not, and that is very often where we work,” he said.

Increased funding is critical to Afghanistan’s bid to be landmine-free by 2023, UNMAS says, noting that the Government’s \$85.1 million appeal for clearance activities is only around 50 per cent fulfilled.

In an appeal for increased international support and awareness, head of the Legacy of War Foundation and photographer, Giles Duley, described how important long-term care was to his recovery after he lost both legs and a forearm to a landmine in Afghanistan.

A fellow survivor he'd met in Cambodia had not been so lucky and was "living like a dog" because no-one had helped him to learn how to walk on his prosthetic legs, Mr. Duley explained.

We spend millions saving lives, we have to help them get their lives back – Giles Duley, head of the Legacy of War Foundation and photographer

"At his house – or his sister's house where he stayed – we sat there, we drank some tea and we chatted," he said "Eventually, he showed me the side of this house some beds where the dogs slept. And he pointed to one of the large dog baskets and he said, 'That is my bed.' Now his sister was a wonderful woman, she was doing what she could, but she lived in poverty, she had her own family, and so her brother was literally living like a dog."

Mr Duley insisted that despite the vast amounts of money spent helping victims in the immediate aftermath of an attack, "a huge gap" is left in relation to their longer-term needs.

"And really that is what we are calling for," he said. "It's the opportunities for people injured in conflict through no choice of their own, often children who have a full life ahead, are given support to regain their dignity and to be able to support themselves and their families again. It's not that complicated, it's not that difficult. We spend millions saving lives, we have to help them get their lives back."

Without rehabilitation of war victims 'the country will fail'

Trauma surgeon Shehan Hettiaratchy, from Imperial College Healthcare in London, underlined the wider benefits of accurately assessing survivors' needs, both for individuals and their communities.

"What we're trying to do is characterise, what is that healthcare burden once the fighting stops," Mr Hettiaratchy told journalists. "How long does it go on for? What is it at year one? What's the healthcare intervention needed to maintain these people whose lives have been saved at high levels of function, so they can contribute back to the society? Because if we don't have that socio-economic rehabilitation of the victims of war, the country will fail."

In Afghanistan, landmine survivors make up a small fraction of the nearly three per cent of the population that is registered as having a disability, according to UNMAS.

Blast victim Dr. Mahpekay Sediqi, who works at Kabul Orthopedic Organisation in Afghanistan, echoed the importance of having the latest data to hand: "As of now, the donors don't have a real picture of the needs in Afghanistan," she said. "As we said before, the speakers mentioned 2.7 per cent of the population of Afghanistan have disability, but this number is from 2015."

In the nearly 30 years since UNMAS has been working in Afghanistan, 30,000 people have been either hurt or killed by explosive devices.

Guterres underlines climate action urgency, as UN weather agency confirms record global warming

In the wake of data released by the United Nations World Meteorological Organization (WMO), showing the past four years were officially the 'four warmest on record,' UN Secretary-General António Guterres [called](#) for urgent climate action and increased ambition, ahead of his [climate summit](#) in September.

His reaction on Wednesday came after WMO issued a report confirming that 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 were the four warmest years recorded to date. The analysis, based on the monitoring performed by five leading international organisations, also shows that the global average surface temperature in 2018 was approximately 1° Celsius above the pre-industrial (1850-1900) baseline.

"The long-term temperature trend is far more important than the ranking of individual years, and that trend is an upward one," said WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas. "The 20 warmest years on record have been in the past 22 years. The degree of warming during the past four years has been exceptional, both on land and in the ocean."

"Temperatures are only part of the story. Extreme and high impact weather affected many countries and millions of people, with devastating repercussions for economies and ecosystems in 2018," he said.

"Many of the extreme weather events are consistent with what we expect from a changing climate. This is a reality we need to face up to. Greenhouse gas emission reduction and climate adaptation measures should be a top global priority," said Mr. Taalas.

Noting "with concern" this data, which was first released in November 2018, UN Secretary-General Guterres said it confirms "the urgency of addressing climate action", and echoes the science presented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its October 2018 [special report](#) on the impacts of a global warming of 1.5°C.

The IPCC report that found that limiting global warming to 1.5°C will require "rapid and far-reaching transitions in land, energy, industry, buildings, transport, and cities" and that global net emissions of carbon dioxide, attributable to human activity, would need to fall by about 45 per cent from 2010 levels by 2030, reaching 'net zero' around 2050.

The Secretary-General stated that, "to make these transformations, we need to significantly increase the global level of climate action and ambition".

In order to mobilize political will, Mr. Guterres is convening a Climate Summit on 23 September this year, focusing on nine key areas:

1. Raised ambition on climate mitigation measures.
2. How to manage the transition to alternative energy sources.
3. Managing industrial transition.
4. Coming up with solutions through agriculture, oceans, forests and nature-related environments.
5. Focus on infrastructure, cities and through local action.
6. Issues of climate finance, notably carbon pricing.
7. Increased resilience and adaptation, especially for the most vulnerable.
8. A focus on social and political drivers.
9. Citizen and political mobilization.

The Secretary-General is working closely with Member States and non-party stakeholders to enable outcomes in these areas to the Summit, in order to send “strong market and political signals that can inject momentum into the race” to meet the goals of the [2015 Paris Agreement](#), in which countries committed collectively to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

Informing the discussions at the Summit alongside other key scientific reports, WMO will issue the full 2018 State of the Climate report this coming March. It will provide a comprehensive overview of temperature variability and trends, high-impact events, and key indicators of long-term climate change such as increasing carbon dioxide concentrations; Arctic and Antarctic sea ice; sea level rise and ocean acidification.

It will be accompanied by UN-wide policy recommendations statement for decision-makers on the interplay between weather, climate and water supply, and the United Nations’ [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs).

Food choices today, impact health of both ‘people and planet’ tomorrow

Co-organized by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Permanent Mission of Norway, the head of the agency’s New York office, Satya Tripathi, noted that it was his home country of India, which had originated the aphorism that “you are what you eat”.

“And it not just about food, it’s about process, it’s about what it results in”, he continued, saying that this “age-old wisdom” has been “scientifically articulated in a very powerful manner” in the report, which pins down “the science, the numbers and the analytics of what you need to do to be healthy”.

Did you know?

- One-third of the world's croplands are used to grow feed for cows, rather than fruits, nuts, vegetables and whole grains which are needed for a healthy human diet.
- More than half of the world's population suffers from some form of malnutrition.
- Two billion people have insufficient access to nutrients while another two billion suffer from diseases related to over-consumption and obesity.
- Diet-related diseases including diabetes, cancer and heart diseases are among the leading causes of death worldwide – more than tobacco and drugs combined.

The report argues that there is an immense challenge facing humanity to “provide a growing world population with healthy diets from sustainable food systems”, noting that while calorie production has kept pace with population growth, more than 820 million people either lack sufficient food, consume low quality diets or simply eat too much.

“A radical transformation of the global food system is urgently needed”, the report stressed, without which the world not only risks failing to meet the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) and the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#), but leaves today's children dealing with environmental degradation and a population increasingly suffering from malnutrition and preventable disease.

Gunhild A. Stordalen, Founder and Executive Chair of the EAT Foundation, told the launch event that while food poses intrinsic challenges in nearly every part of the Sustainable Development [Agenda](#) leading up to 2030, it also has “super powers”.

“The power of food is all about connections” she stated, “the links between people and planet are everywhere, but nowhere are these connections more obvious or the synergies more numerous than on our plates and across the food system”.

Flagging that a healthy food supply will be a defining issue of the 21st Century, the report provides a scientific blue print for a healthy and sustainable future, spelling out that “if we change the way we produce, consume, transport and waste food we can feed everyone a healthy diet and improve the health of the planet”.

A 27-year-old Rwandan woman carries her 9-month-old baby on her back as she heads to the local market to sell avocados., by WorldBank/ A'Melody Lee

United States-based actor and activist Alec Baldwin, warned that humankind was “causing global climate change, which, if we do not act, will be our undoing”.

He urged everyone to look at “the mutually achievable goals” of food and environmental security, saying that we need to alter agricultural priorities to make better use of the land we already have and drastically reduce meat production.

“If we shift to plant-rich diets, we can help save the planet”, Mr. Baldwin asserted. Transforming the food system can also lower risks of cancer, strokes and diabetes and avoid 11 million adult deaths per year, the meeting heard.

To move to a healthy diet, the reports suggests that the world doubles its consumption of fruits, vegetables, legumes and nuts while reducing at least by half, red meat and food with added sugar.

“The greatest challenge we face is influencing human behavior, you cannot outlaw the consumption of meat...We can only shine a light” on cause and effect, concluded Mr. Baldwin.

EAT is a global non-profit established with partners to catalyze a food system transformation.

Below is a snippet of the EAT-Lancet Commission Report on Food, Planet, and Health launch . The Special Event in its entirety can be found [here](#).